

Frequently asked questions about standardized testing

How will standardized tests be used to make decisions about my child?

The TerraNova will be used by the School District as one factor in determining whether a child is promoted to the next grade at the end of 3rd and 8th grades. Students' TerraNova results are also used in determining admission to special admission high schools and middle schools.

At the school level, principals and teachers may use TerraNova or PSSA scores to identify students in need of extra help in reading or in math. In addition, students scoring proficient or better in every subject area on the PSSA will be eligible to receive a special certificate from the state upon graduation, and in 2004, school districts will be required to place individual PSSA scores on students' transcripts.

How will tests be used to make decisions about my child's school?

The PSSA is used by the state to identify low-performing schools, such as the schools involved in the recent school reform efforts in Philadelphia. Schools' results on the PSSA and the TerraNova may also be used by the School District to determine whether a school requires special help, additional resources, or other support.

The School District is in the process of developing a school performance index that will likely incorporate scores on both the TerraNova and the PSSA, combined with other indicators such as student and teacher attendance. This index will track a school's progress and provide an opportunity to compare schools across the city.

It is likely that the PSSA will be used in combination with the TerraNova to assess the No Child Left Behind Act's requirement for "adequate yearly progress" by schools. Pennsylvania is in the process of determining a testing program that meets the federal government's requirements.

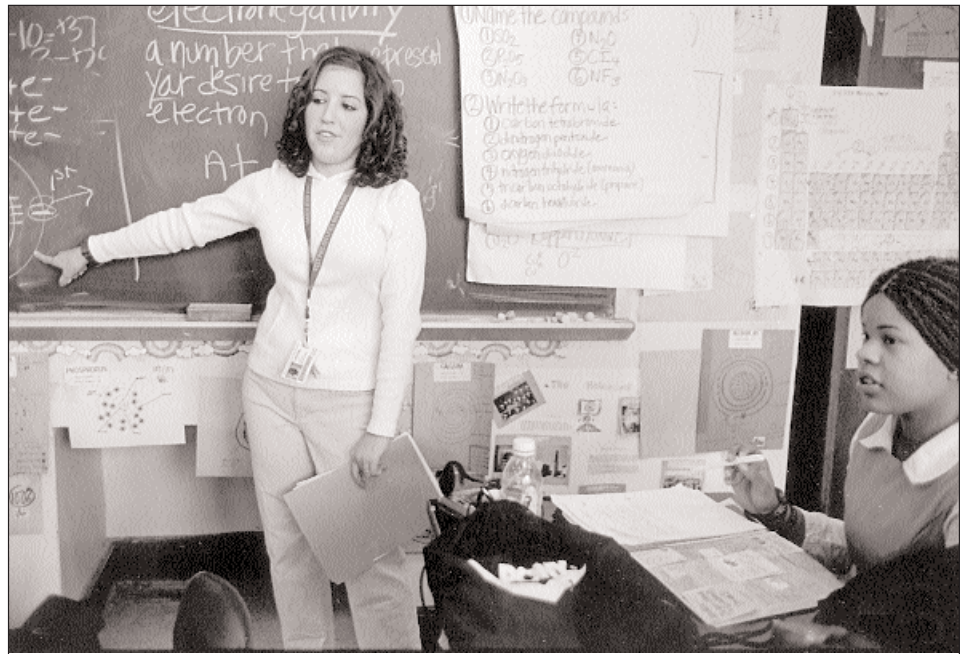


Photo: Harvey Finkle

Parents and students should not necessarily draw conclusions from the tests alone, but can work with teachers to identify areas in need of improvement based on tests and classroom work.

How will individual students' academic progress be evaluated from year to year?

The TerraNova, which is given on a yearly basis in grades 2-10, will be used to determine each student's academic progress at each grade level. This is in contrast to the PSSA, which is only given in selected grades and does not offer the opportunity to track individual student achievement gains over time.

The PSSA test allows the comparison of academic performance across schools at grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 from year to year. It offers a snapshot of academic achievement at key grade levels. A school's yearly variations in test results at a particular grade level may have more to do with the particular cohorts of students than the quality of instruction, especially in small schools.

Will English Language Learners and Special Education students be required to take the TerraNova and PSSA tests?

Yes, English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education students will be

required to take both the TerraNova and PSSA, with the following exceptions:

English Language Learners: The TerraNova has a Spanish language version (SUPERA) that will be used by children in Spanish bilingual classes. Other ELL students, based on English language proficiency levels yet to be determined, will be offered some accommodations on the TerraNova. The PSSA does not have a Spanish language version. Pennsylvania is in the process of finalizing the criteria for students who will be offered accommodations on the test or exempted from taking the test altogether.

Special Education students: Students with special needs that are documented on an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) will be able to have accommodations on both tests. Accommodations can include taking the test in Braille, taking extra time to complete the test, or using a computer to take the test. A very small percentage of students who have been designated "severely disabled" will be given an alternative version of the PSSA, the PASA, a Pennsylvania test that has been designed to assess the performance of Special Education students.

What are some of the concerns about using standardized tests for holding schools accountable?

Schools may not be equally able to produce “adequate yearly progress,” because of factors beyond the quality of instruction received by the students.

The capacity of a school to enhance the academic performance of its students may be affected by factors such as years of teacher experience, rate of teacher turnover, and resources, including per pupil expenditures, class size, curricula, and access to technology – all of which can vary significantly from school to school and district to district.

Also, student mobility from one school to another during an academic year makes it problematic to hold the school where a student was actually tested accountable for “adequate yearly progress.” Student mobility varies significantly among schools, with some Philadelphia schools reporting that over 30 percent of the student body either entered or left the school during a single year. If the scores of students who have entered a school sometime after the beginning of the academic year are not reported separately, or entirely removed, from the school average, a school with a high rate of student mobility may be penalized.

The scores of English Language Learners and Special Education students need to be reported separately by schools, but will be included in the overall determination of “adequate yearly progress” by a school. If a school has large proportions of English Language Learners, for example, the school may be penalized for failing to meet the goal of adequate yearly progress because its students lack English language proficiency.

Student performance on standardized tests typically rises in the first years of a test’s implementation due to a combination of factors. These include students’ familiarity with the test format; teachers preparing students for the content assessed by the particular test; and the school district’s allocation of resources, such as time and curricular materials, devoted to the subjects tested. Initial achievement gains on the particular tests used by a school district often have been found to level off after the first few years. The challenge of No Child Left Behind is to maintain increasing achievement gains, so that by 2013-14 all children will reach “proficiency” as defined by their state.

How can parents use the results of these tests to help their child?

Schools are required to send home test reports to parents. By reviewing these reports, parents can follow their child’s progress and compare it to the scores of other children in the state and in Philadelphia.

Parents should not necessarily draw conclusions from these tests alone, but rather, can work with their child’s teacher to identify areas in need of improvement based on the tests and on the student’s classroom work. After identifying areas of need, a parent may help their child set learning goals, monitor homework in a particular subject more closely, work with the school to arrange for special help through afterschool or extended day programs, or purchase (or borrow from the library) supplemental materials for use at home.

For elementary-aged children struggling in reading and math, Pennsylvania offers Classroom Plus – a program that offers parents grants of up to \$500 to purchase afterschool tutoring in reading and math for third through sixth-graders. For more information

about this program, call the *Classroom Plus* hotline at 1-800-219-9740.

– The information in this article was compiled by Eva Travers, (Swarthmore College, retired) and Andrew Sparks (Ph.D. Candidate, University of Pennsylvania) for Learning from Philadelphia’s School Reform, a research and public awareness project that responds to the need to assess the state takeover and the multiple provider model currently in place in Philadelphia’s public schools. Research for Action is the lead organization in this collaboration of area scholars dedicated to providing sound research on school improvement efforts and making findings accessible to a broad public. RFA has followed school reform in Philadelphia since 1992.

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Why test score gains often level off

Researchers have found that when a new test is introduced, student scores often show steady increases during the first years but then hit a plateau. That was the trend with Philadelphia’s SAT-9 scores between 1996 and 2001 – scores climbed and then leveled off.

Increasing familiarity with a standardized test can be a major factor accounting for initial improvement. Some other changes that produce gains are relatively easy, like increasing the amount of time students spend on writing or teaching new test-taking strategies. But the next steps are harder and require deeper changes in instruction.

Philadelphia Grade 4 SAT-9/Aprena Results • 1996 through 2001
% scoring Basic or above

