

Understanding Philadelphia's tests

Last summer, the School District of Philadelphia announced that it would be using a new standardized test to judge students' academic performance starting in the fall. The new test, the TerraNova, replaced the District's previous test, the SAT-9, which was retired by the testing company. The TerraNova is being given in the fall and spring this school year (and will be only in the spring in future years).

In addition to the TerraNova, students in Philadelphia public schools continue to take the state's standardized test, the PSSA

(Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), in selected grades. While these two standardized tests share some similarities, they differ in how they are designed, in what grade levels they are administered, in how scores are reported, and in how their results may be used to evaluate students and schools.

This guide is designed to help you compare the tests, learn more about some useful testing terms, and consider some of the pressing questions about standardized testing.

– The information in this article was compiled by Andrew Sparks, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Pennsylvania and Eva Travers - (Swarthmore College, retired) as part of the Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform project, a research and public awareness effort lead by Research for Action

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Comparing the two tests: PSSA and TerraNova

	PSSA	TerraNova
Test type	Criterion-Referenced*	Norm-Referenced*
Purpose	To measure the extent to which students are meeting the Pennsylvania standards at key grade levels.	To gather annual performance data on Philadelphia student achievement in grades 2-10.
How scores are reported	Students' raw scores converted to "scaled scores" (which usually fall in the range from 1000-1600) and to one of four performance levels (Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic). Scores can also be reported as percentiles. Levels are determined by the Department of Education with input from parents, educators, community and business leaders.	Students' raw scores converted to percentiles based on a normed national sample of students. Scores can also be reported as performance levels.
Subjects/Grades tested	Reading: 3, 5, 8, 11 Mathematics: 3, 5, 8, 11 Writing: 6, 9, 11 Science (pilot test): 4, 7, 10	Reading/Language Arts: 2-10 Mathematics: 2-10 Science: 2-10
Format	Mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions** Reading: 9-13% open-ended*** Mathematics: 8% open-ended	Mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions** Reading: 21-29% open-ended Lang. Arts: 37-45% open-ended Math: 38-54% open-ended Science: 38-44% open-ended
Who wrote the tests?	Educators, administrators and other education experts design the test based on Pennsylvania's standards. A new version of the test is developed each year.	National education and testing experts hired by CTB/McGraw-Hill, the company that develops and sells the test.
Where else is the test given?	The PSSA is administered in all 501 Pennsylvania school districts, but is not given anywhere outside of the state.	The TerraNova is used by districts across the country, including more than 300 Pennsylvania school districts and the schools in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.
Languages	English only	English and Spanish
Length of test	The math and reading portions take approximately 8 hours total and are taken over the course of multiple days. The writing section takes 3 hours.	The test takes about 5 hours and is usually taken over the course of multiple days.

* See Glossary for definition of terms

** The percentage of open-ended items varies depending on grade level

*** Percentage decreases with increasing grade level

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/Aprenda Results • 1996 through 2001 % scoring Basic or above

