

What can you do to help your children with standardized tests?

Rules of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).



(Learn more at http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t/site/default.asp?g=0&a_and_tNav=|630|&k12Nav=|1141|.)

NOTE: Pennsylvania's main test is the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment).

Action #1 – Find out when the PSSA will be given.

- Pennsylvania gives the PSSA to students in different grades in October, February, and April.
- Parents can ask the teachers, the school counselor, or the principal for information about the PSSA subjects and dates.
 - *Are your children taking the PSSA this year?*
 - *What subjects will be tested?*
 - *What are the testing dates?*

Action #2 – Find out how teachers are preparing your children for the PSSA.

- Teachers can best prepare students for the PSSA by following the state content standards for each subject. Teachers should have high expectations that all children can learn the required information. See http://www.pde.state.pa.us/stateboard_ed/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=76716&stateboard_edNav=|5467|.
- It takes a full year to prepare students for each test. Teachers should not rely only on “drilling” students for a week or two before the PSSA is given. Students also should not leave their core academic classes to practice test-taking skills. Many students can benefit from a regular emphasis on test taking skills in their normal classes.
 - *How are the teachers preparing your children for the PSSA?*
 - *Are your children learning the same knowledge and skills as others in the school?*
 - *Are the teachers following state content guidelines for their subjects?*
 - *Are your children being academically challenged with high expectations?*
 - *Are teachers planning to drill their students before the test? (This is not good.)*

Action #3 – Ask the school to give your children extra help.

- Teachers should send home regular progress reports about your children's achievement.
- If your children are struggling in their classes, you can ask the school for extra help.
- Teachers can give your children review assignments. Schools may offer tutoring programs.
- Do these things early in the school year, when the extra help can improve your children's PSSA scores.
 - *You may need to schedule meetings with teachers, the school counselor, or the principal. Ask them to explain why your child is falling behind. Ask the school to give extra help to your children.*

See the other side for more information.

Education Law Center/Penna. School Reform Network – ELC/PSRN

Offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh

215-238-6970 www.elc-pa.org 412-391-5225

ELC/PSRN works with many parents and groups. Please call us for assistance with individual school problems or more general problems with the education system. We look forward to speaking with your group. If your child's rights are violated under any law, ask for legal assistance. ELC operates a HelpLine at the numbers above. The ELC website (www.elc-pa.org) contains fact sheets and information about other organizations and sources of help.

Action #4 – Protect your children’s right to take the PSSA.

See http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t/cwp/view.asp?a=108&Q=45132&a_and_tNav=|678|&a_and_tNav=|.

RIGHT TO TAKE THE TEST. NCLB requires schools to offer all students a chance to take the PSSA, with only a few, very limited exceptions.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES. Schools must offer all students with disabilities a chance to take standardized tests. Federal law requires schools to give reasonable accommodations on the PSSA and other tests. Schools must give students the same kind of accommodations they normally receive on other kinds of homework, class work, and tests. Special education laws give parents strong appeal rights if schools violate these simple rules. In addition, Pennsylvania provides an alternative assessment (the PASA) for children with severe cognitive disabilities.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL). Schools must offer all ELL students a chance to take standardized tests. Federal law requires schools to give reasonable accommodations for ELL students on the PSSA and other tests. Schools may even give these students the PSSA in their native language for up to five years. The PSSA scores for ELL students in their first year of education in U.S. schools may not count for school accountability purposes. In addition, Federal law requires schools to test the English language skills of students who are learning English.

STUDENTS MOVING INTO THE DISTRICT. Federal law requires schools to offer the PSSA to students who have not attended that school or district for a full academic year. The student scores may not count for school accountability purposes.

RELIGIOUS OBJECTIONS. Parents can file a written request to excuse their children from taking the state tests for religious reasons. Schools must not push parents into using this excuse.

- *Is the school improperly excluding your children from taking the PSSA? Is the school giving your children appropriate accommodations or alternatives for the PSSA?*
- *If you are having these problems, ask for a meeting with the school counselor and the principal. Parents of children in special education can ask for an IEP meeting to address these issues. Parents of English language learners can ask for a team meeting of teachers to address these issues.*

Action #5 – Get the written PSSA score reports for your children.

- Parents have a right to get a written report about the PSSA scores of their children.
- The report must help you to understand your children’s academic strengths and weaknesses.
- The report must be in the parent’s language, if possible.
 - *The school should send PSSA reports to parents each year. If you want to get the PSSA report for your child, call the principal or the counselor at your child’s school.*

Action #6 – Understand the PSSA score reports for your children.

- Which achievement levels have your children reached on the PSSA – Advanced, Proficient, Basic, or Below Basic?
 - *If your child is at the Basic or Below Basic level, has the school explained how he or she can make better progress? Has the school offered tutoring or extra assistance?*
 - *If your child is at the Proficient level, has the school explained his or her strengths and weaknesses? What does your child need to do to stay at this level?*
 - *If your child is at the Advanced level, has the school explained how to maintain this success? What extra work will truly challenge your child?*

Action #7 – Discuss the PSSA score reports with your children’s teachers.

- Parents have a right to meet with their children’s teachers to discuss the reports.
- Teachers must use the reports to address each child’s specific academic needs.
 - *If you want to meet with a teacher to better understand the PSSA report, call the teacher to schedule a meeting. You may want several teachers to attend the meeting.*
 - *Ask the teachers to explain the PSSA reports. Ask the teachers to identify specific academic areas where they can help your child to improve.*
 - *Make an agreement with the teachers about what they will do to help your child learn more and improve on the next PSSA.*
 - *If your child has a disability, ask the IEP Team to write these plans into the IEP document.*

Action #8 – Protect other student rights on standardized tests.

STUDENT PRIVACY RIGHTS. Schools must not use the PSSA in ways that violate the privacy rights of students. Schools cannot release individual student scores to the public. A school cannot publish the average scores of its students by race or ethnicity, when this would reveal the identity of certain students.

STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS. Some schools have adopted a policy placing PSSA scores on all student transcripts and report cards. Parents can usually object and request an exception to the policy for their children.

RULES FOR PROMOTION AND GRADUATION. Pennsylvania law does not stop students with failing PSSA scores from being promoted to the next grade level. NCLB lets local school districts make their own decisions about using tests for promotion decisions. In order to graduate, state law does require students to either pass the 11th grade PSSA or to pass an alternative local assessment. Seniors can take the PSSA again if they failed on their first try.

GET INVOLVED TODAY. YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

How can you get more information?

- Read the ELC fact sheet, “How do standardized tests affect students and public schools?”
- See other ELC fact sheets about NCLB and many other education issues. Visit our website or call our offices. *Contact information is on the first page.*
- Go to school and read the documents in your child’s permanent file. Ask the school to make copies for you.
- Talk with other parents in your neighborhood.
- Talk with teachers, administrators, and school board members.
- Call ELC for help with individual school problems for your children.
- Ask ELC to come speak with your community group or church.