

High-Stakes Testing Q & A

What are high-stakes tests?

Tests that have consequences attached, such as graduation, promotion, teacher and administrative effectiveness, school performance.

What standardized tests are required in Pennsylvania public schools?

PSSA (Pennsylvania State System Assessment) tests in reading and math in every grade from third through eighth. PSSA test in writing in grades 5, 8, and 11. PSSA test in science in 4 and 8. Keystone Exams in Algebra I, Literature, and Biology in high school.

Who mandates standardized tests?

U.S. Department of Education requires the tests listed above based on PA's waiver from No Child Left Behind.

PA Department of Education requires the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement.

Are standardized tests required in charter schools?

Yes, charter schools are public schools, and the same tests are required.

How are standardized tests used in Pennsylvania?

PSSAs used to track individual children's progress in reading, math, writing, and science

To hold schools accountable for children's achievement

To partially determine teacher and administrator effectiveness

Keystone Exams used as a graduation requirement

What are the reasons for standardized tests?

To make sure children are on track to meet PA Core standards

To make sure that schools are providing a good quality education for ALL children

To make sure that a Pennsylvania diploma means that students have the skills they need for college and career readiness.

What are concerns about standardized tests in Pennsylvania?

Curriculum is narrowed to include only subjects that are tested.

Test administration and preparation take up too much instructional time.

Test administration, remediation, and project supervision require substantive personnel and financial resources by the school district.

Stress for many students.

Using test scores to evaluate teachers and administrators is fraught with problems because of so many factors beyond their control.

Keystone Exams used as graduation requirements puts too much emphasis on a single assessment.

Keystone Exams used as graduation requirement are likely to increase the dropout rate, especially among poorer districts.

With the wide variation in per-student expenditures in Pennsylvania (e. g. \$28,000 per student vs. \$9,000 per student), poorer districts are less able to provide remediation.

Can parents opt out of having their students take the standardized tests?

Yes, parents may opt out for “religious” reasons. They must file with their district claiming a religious exemption, examine the exam, and agree not to divulge the contents.

It is not clear whether opting out of the test also opts the students out of test preparation.

What are some of the legal ramifications of standardized testing in Pennsylvania?

There may be legal challenges for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP). These are legal documents, and the IEP team decides what constitutes an appropriate graduation plan.

District administrators have the right to waive Keystone Exams for up to 10% of the graduating class (students with IEPs not included in this figure). Although PDE provides a list of possible reasons for the waivers, it is up to the administrators to decide. This could result in legal challenges.

Students who maintain high grade-point averages but do not test well may have graduation threatened and resort to the courts.

Students whose parents have exercised the opt-out option may find that they still have to participate in test preparation or that they receive no instruction at all when their classrooms are working on test preparation.