



Parents with High Expectations

A Parents' Guide to School Testing: What You Need to Know

Students take many tests in school. Two of the “big” tests are the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) and the ACCESS for English language learners (ELLs). Here is why they are important and how you can help your child do well on them.

Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA)

These are reading, math, and science tests. Minnesota public schools give the reading and math tests every year to students in grades 3-8 and once in high school; science tests are given in grades 5 and 8 and once in high school. These tests measure how well students are meeting state academic standards.

Schools give the tests to see how well students have learned concepts and skills. After your child takes one of these tests, your school gives you a report that explains your child’s progress. The report:

- Gives you information on your child’s reading, math, and science skills
- Shows how well your child is doing compared to other students in the state

Students do not pass or fail the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. Instead, parents and schools gain information on how students perform on reading, math, and science. Parents can use the information to review the progress of your child. Schools can use the information to guide decisions about teaching and learning by looking for areas that need improvement.

Help prepare your child for these important tests

There’s a lot you can do to help your child do his or her best on a test.

General

- Encourage your child to practice good study habits. Students should set aside time every day for homework. If you are unable to help with homework, you can still set a specific amount of time for homework while you observe.
- Familiarize your child with the test directions and the format. You can ask your school for a sample of a test or go online to the Minnesota Department of Education website for tutorials and item samplers at education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/test/index.htm.
- Encourage your child to participate in practice sessions at school and home. Tests are completed on a computer. Make sure your child knows how to participate in online testing.
- Make sure your child has a good night’s sleep and a nutritious breakfast before taking a test.
- Remind your child that the tests are not timed, so do not rush.

Reading

- Read to your child and encourage him or her to read to you.

- Encourage your child to try crossword puzzles and news quizzes in your local newspaper.
- Watch captioned programs on television and help your child read the words on the screen.

Math

- Encourage your child to use math every day. Have your child practice by creating a grocery budget, explaining charts and graphs from newspaper articles, and measuring a recipe.
- Play games that involve numbers or computation.

Science

- Read science articles in newspapers, magazines, or online to help your child understand that science is an active process.
- Spend time at nature centers, zoos, and science museums so your child can explore science outside of the classroom.
- Increase your child's knowledge by watching and discussing what was learned on television programs, such as those produced by National Geographic or Public Television.

ACCESS for English language learners (ELLs)

Students who are English language learners in grades K–12 in public schools are required to participate annually in an English language proficiency assessment: ACCESS for ELLs. Students do not need to study or prepare for these tests.

The ACCESS for ELLs is an English language assessment that looks at an English learner's progress as he or she develops academic language skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Test scores provide valuable information about English language development to families and schools.

- Families can use their child's current scores and descriptions to understand the progress he or she is making and to engage with schools to support their child's learning.
- Teachers and schools can use the scores to monitor student progress in acquiring English, plan instruction, and evaluate their language development programs. Schools also use these scores to determine if a student is ready to exit an English language program.

Most students take the ACCESS for ELLs on a computer, but there are exceptions depending upon grade and the area being tested. Students do not pass or fail the ACCESS for ELLs. Since the tests measure an English learner's ability to understand and produce English language, each student receives a language proficiency score from 1–6.

Questions?

Do you have questions about school testing? You can talk to your child's principal or teacher. You also can call PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 and ask to speak with PACER staff who work on the **Parents with High Expectations Project**.

PACER is a Minnesota nonprofit organization. It supports the educational rights of children with and without disabilities. It offers workshops, individual assistance, written information, and more.