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Marco F. Pochintesta
Superintendent of Schools

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Dear Parents and Guardians:

With the annual testing period set to begin next week, I want to share with parents the information that we have from the New York State Education Department regarding the changes and improvements that have been put into place for the 2017 Grades 3-8 NYS ELA and Math Assessments. Two documents are attached to this letter that provide detail: What Parents Need to Know and Parents' Frequently Asked Questions. Please also keep in mind that the results of state testing will not be used for teacher or principal accountability. I understand that this has been a concern in the past and I want to address it specifically.

The District values the information that state testing yields because it can help to guide and inform our instructional practice. The test results help us to see how we are doing in terms of state learning standards. The results can direct our attention to areas that stand out as points of strength, or areas where we need to improve. In terms of student performance, a complete picture of how a student is doing is one that will include "multiple measures". These can be state test results, classroom performance, local test results, and a teacher's assessment and observations. Altogether these help us to best serve our students and accurately adjust our practices and/or resources. Understanding that making a decision to opt out of a state assessment, or not, is important to all, I ask that this year you take into consideration the positive changes that have been made and the way in which the results would be put to use.

I appreciate the thoughtful consideration you give to all aspects of your children's education and your support of the schools and I urge you to support your child's participation in this year's state assessments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Marco F. Pochintesta'.



The 2017 Grades 3-8 New York State Assessments: What Parents Need to Know

Every spring, the Grades 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics Tests are administered to students across New York State. These annual tests are designed to measure how well students are mastering the learning standards that guide classroom instruction and help to ensure that students are on track to graduate from high school with the critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning skills needed for success in college and the modern workplace. The tests also show how schools and districts are progressing with the learning standards. Below you will find information about the 2017 tests.

Untimed Testing

- The 2017 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests will be untimed so students who need more time to demonstrate what they know and can do will be able to work at their own pace. The 2016 tests were also untimed.
- In general, this means that as long as students are working productively, they will have as much time as they need to complete their tests, within the confines of the regular school day.

Fewer Test Questions

- The number of test questions on the 2017 tests will be the same as the 2016 tests.
- Each of the 2016 Grades 3-8 ELA Tests had one less reading passage and fewer questions than tests from previous years. The 2016 Math Tests also had fewer questions.

Greater Teacher Involvement

- Hundreds of New York State educators were involved in creating and reviewing the 2017 assessments.
- Beginning in fall 2015 and going forward, a greater number of New York State teachers has been—and will continue to be—involved in the review of all test questions and construction of test forms.
- Teachers from across the State gathered in Albany throughout the summer and fall of 2016 to evaluate and select questions for the 2017 tests.
- For the first time ever, New York State teachers will write the test questions for the Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests. These questions will first be used on the 2018 tests.

Faster Results for Teachers and Improved Resources for Parents

- Like last year, the State Education Department plans to have instructional reports returned to teachers by the end of the school year and release at least 75-percent of the test questions.
- Also like last year, the 2017 Score Reports for parents will feature the updated clearer design and more information about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. These will be ready over the summer.

Computer-Based Testing

- This spring, some districts will administer the 2017 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests on the computer. The computer-based test (CBT) will have the same questions as the paper version but students will take the test on a computer, tablet, or Chromebook. The State plans to have more districts use CBT next year.
- The State is helping districts transition to CBT. The long-term plan is to have all districts use CBT for annual state tests because CBT has the potential to make the assessments stronger instructional tools and will make it possible to get test results back sooner.

PARENTS' FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT NEW YORK STATE'S ANNUAL GRADES 3-8 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS & MATHEMATICS TESTS

1. Why do we have an annual statewide test?

- New York State's annual Grades 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics Tests are designed to measure how well students are mastering the learning standards that guide classroom instruction and help to ensure that students are on track to graduate from high school with the critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning skills needed for success in today's world.
- The federal Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 requires that students in Grades 3-8 are tested once a year in ELA and math. Additional tests in science are required once in elementary and once in middle school.
- For decades, New York State students have been taking State tests. Since higher learning standards were adopted in 2010, no additional required State tests have been introduced for students.

2. When will the 2017 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests be administered?

- In 2017, the ELA will be given March 28-30, and the Math May 2-4.
- The test dates may be slightly different for districts administering computer-based tests: the testing window will be March 27 – April 3 for ELA and May 1-8 for Math. Districts participating in CBT would choose a maximum of three days during these windows for testing.
- There are make-up test dates for students absent on test days.

3. What are Computer-Based Tests?

- Computer-based tests are tests administered on a computer, tablet, or Chromebook. In other words, students take the test on a computer instead of using a pencil and paper.
- The State Department of Education (the Department) is helping districts transition to computer-based testing (CBT). This spring, some districts chose to participate in CBT for the 2017 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests. *The computer tests and the paper tests are the same tests. The only difference is that students who take the tests on computers will click the answer bubble and type in their responses instead of using a pencil to fill in an answer bubble or handwrite a response.*
- The Department plans to have additional districts utilize CBT next year. The long-term plan is to have all districts using CBT for annual State tests.

4. What types of questions are asked on the tests?

- The paper and computer versions of the tests include both multiple choice and open-ended questions, which assess grade level learning standards. The questions require students to apply their knowledge and explain their reasoning. Students spend time reading complex texts, writing well-reasoned responses, and solving real-world word problems, all of which provide the foundation for necessary skills to practice and master to succeed in college and careers.
- Last spring, the Department released 75-percent of test questions from the 2016 tests – more questions than ever before for this testing program. You can view the [2016 questions](https://www.engageny.org/3-8) at EngageNY (<https://www.engageny.org/3-8>).
- The 2017 tests will have the same number of questions as the 2016 tests. Each 2016 test had fewer test questions in both ELA and math, as compared to previous years.

5. Why is it important for my child to take these tests?

- These tests provide teachers and schools with information that can be used to guide their instruction and class planning and help them to understand how well students are progressing in the skills and concepts being taught in the classroom.
- Results from the tests also help identify achievement gaps among different student populations. Without widespread participation in the tests, it is more difficult for school and district leaders to recognize these gaps and provide support and resources to the students who need them.

6. Do English Language Learners who are new to the United States take the Grades 3-8 ELA Tests?

- The Department's current policy, in accordance with federal law, is to exempt English Language Learners (including those from Puerto Rico) who, on March 27, 2017, will have been attending school in the United States for the first time for less than one year for the 2017 Grades 3-8 ELA Tests only.
- Schools may use the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) in place of the 2017 Grades 3–8 ELA Tests, to meet participation requirements only, for recently arrived English Language Learners who meet the criterion above.
- All other English Language Learners are expected to participate in the 2017 Grades 3–8 ELA Tests, as well as in the NYSESLAT.

7. Are there testing accommodations for students with disabilities?

- Yes, testing accommodations are changes made in the administration of the test in order to remove obstacles to the test-taking process that are presented by the student's disability without reducing expectations for learning. Specific testing accommodations are recommended for individual students by the Committee on Special Education (CSE) or Section 504 Committee based on the student's unique needs.
- Testing accommodations must be documented on students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Section 504 plans and could include: flexibility in scheduling/timing (e.g., extending the time of a test); flexibility in the test setting (e.g., testing in a separate location); changes in test presentation (e.g., enlarged print); and changes in the method of response (e.g., use of a scribe for written responses).
- Principals are responsible for ensuring that accommodations for students with disabilities are implemented on all State and local tests consistent with the recommendations in the IEP/Section 504 plan and in accordance with Department policy.

8. What will I learn from my child's score report?

- The results of the annual assessments give you information about your child's academic progress and achievement. You will be able to see how your child did in comparison to other students across the State. The score report will be ready over the summer.
- In addition to providing an overall scale score and performance level, both the ELA and math reports show how your child scored in specific skill and concept areas. For example, the ELA report provides scores for both reading and writing; the math report provides scores for the key math concepts for that grade level. This information helps your child's teacher(s) understand where your child is doing well and where he or she needs more support.
- The score reports for parents were redesigned in 2016 to be more useful and understandable.

9. How will my child's scores be used?

- You can use your child's scores to guide a discussion with your child's teacher(s) about additional supports that may be needed in class, as well as other ways you may be able to support your child's learning at home.
- Scores can also be used to see how well schools, districts, and the State are progressing with New York's learning standards.
- State law and regulations of the Commissioner of Education prohibit school districts from making promotion or placement decisions based solely or primarily on student performance on the Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests. Scores are not currently used to evaluate teachers in an official way.

10. What if my child did well on his or her report card but did not do as well on the State tests?

- The annual tests are only one of several measures that are used to gauge your child's academic performance and represent a snap shot in time.
- Report card grades are cumulative and based on many factors, including class participation, homework, attendance, quizzes, tests, and other instructional activities, all of which are important in determining a child's academic achievement but are not reflected in the annual State test results.

11. How long are the tests?

- The ELA and Math Tests are each given over a three-day period. It is estimated that students in Grades 3 and 4 will spend about 60-70 minutes on the test each day, while students in Grades 5-8 will spend about 80-90 minutes on the tests each day. In general, the tests take up less than 1-percent of the total time a student spends in class each year.
- However, since the 2017 tests will be untimed, exact test taking times will vary from student to student. The 2016 tests were also untimed.

12. How are New York State teachers involved in the test development process?

- NYS teachers review and approve every passage and question on the Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests.
- During test development, teachers from across the State gathered in Albany multiple times to evaluate and select questions for the 2017 tests. Every question on the 2017 tests was reviewed by at least 22 educators.
- Since 2016, New York State teachers have been engaged in writing future test questions. These questions will first appear on the 2018 tests.

13. What else is being done to improve the testing program?

- New York State teachers will continue to be highly involved in the development of future exams to ensure that they closely correspond with classroom activities and the State learning standards.
- The Department is helping more districts to transition to computer-based testing, which will eventually make results available more quickly.
- As in 2016, the Department will release 75-percent of the test questions and return instructional reports to teachers before the end of the school year.