

A Parent's Guide to the MSA

Maryland Classroom
Vol. 13, No. 1 revised July 2009

A Publication from the Maryland State Department of Education

If your child attends a Maryland public school, you may already be aware that he or she will take a test called the Maryland School Assessment—MSA for short.

But what is the Maryland School Assessment, and how can you help your child prepare for it? What subjects will the test cover, and what do the questions look like? This publication answers these questions and points you toward more MSA information on the Web.

What is the Maryland School Assessment?

The MSA is a reading, math, and science test given to elementary and middle school students every spring. The reading and math tests are taken by students in grades 3–8, while the science test is taken by 5th and 8th graders only. Students in each grade take each test over two days—that is, two days for reading, two for math, and two for science. The amount of time students spend in testing varies by subject and grade, but all testing sessions are broken into shorter time blocks for tests of specific skills.

When is the MSA given?

The reading and math tests are usually administered in March. The science test is given in April or early May. *Your child's school system will choose the exact testing dates within the testing window designated by the State.*

Why is the MSA given?

The MSA measures how well children are learning so that parents and educators can be sure every child has the opportunity to succeed. Along with other measures (such as homework, classwork, quizzes, and projects), the MSA provides information about students' academic progress—information that can help teachers and parents better support students' school work.

Also, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), every state must measure reading, math, and science achievement at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Maryland fulfills this requirement with the MSA in elementary and middle school and with the High School Assessments (English, algebra/data analysis, and biology) in high school. *While NCLB requires that reading and math results be factored into states' accountability programs, no such requirement currently exists for science.*

What does the MSA test?

The MSA covers content that your child should be learning in reading, math, and science classes. The content is from Maryland's Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC). All public schools use either the VSC or a curriculum that includes it. You can see the VSC—along with tools and resources that help teachers teach it—on Mdk12.org.

The reading MSA tests three topic areas: general reading processes, informational text comprehension, and literary text comprehension. The math MSA tests algebra/patterns, geometry/measurement, statistics/probability, number concepts/computation, and processes of mathematics. The science MSA tests skills and processes, earth/space science, life science, chemistry, physics, and environmental science.

What does the MSA look like?

The tests include multiple-choice and written-response questions. For sample questions, go to Mdk12.org.

What if my child is absent during testing?

Students absent during regular testing must take the MSA on one of the scheduled make-up days.



The Maryland School Assessment...

- **Is a reading and math test given statewide to students in grades 3–8 and a science test given to students in grades 5 and 8.**
- **Is required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** While schools and school systems are accountable for making adequate progress each year toward NCLB's student achievement goals, students' scores do not appear on their report cards, nor are they factored into their course grades.
- **Includes multiple-choice, short-answer, and long-answer questions.** Parents can see sample questions at Mdk12.org.
- **Measures how well students have learned the curriculum.** Parents can see Maryland's Voluntary State Curriculum on Mdk12.org.
- **Produces scores for students, schools, districts, and the state.** Parents will receive their child's scores. All school, school system, and state scores are posted on www.MdReportCard.org

Are students with special needs tested?

Yes. Federal law requires that all students—even those with special needs—be included in state tests. And since Maryland is committed to improving achievement for every student, measuring the progress of students with disabilities and those learning English is very important.

Accommodations

But just as students have a legal right to be included to the fullest extent possible in all statewide tests and to have their test results be a part of Maryland's accountability system, students also have a legal right to instructional and testing accommodations that will help them succeed on those tests. Your child's teacher can explain the accommodations to which your child is entitled. Additional information is available in the *Maryland Accommodations Manual* at www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/.

Mod-MSA

The U.S. Department of Education has given states permission to develop special tests for a small number of students with disabilities who may need the format of the test questions modified in order to meet grade-level standards. The Modified MSA (Mod-MSA) is now available for grades 6–8 and high school.

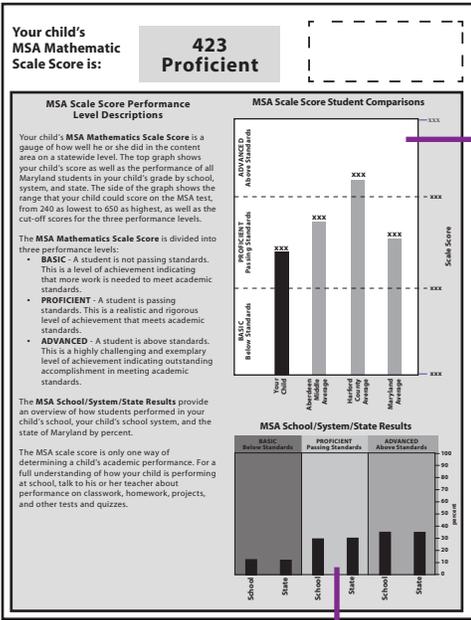
Alt-MSA

Students with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot take the MSA, even with accommodations, take the Alternate MSA (Alt-MSA). The Alt-MSA is a portfolio assessment that measures students' progress on indicators and objectives individually selected from the state's curricular standards. For more information on the Alt-MSA, go to www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/alt_msa/.

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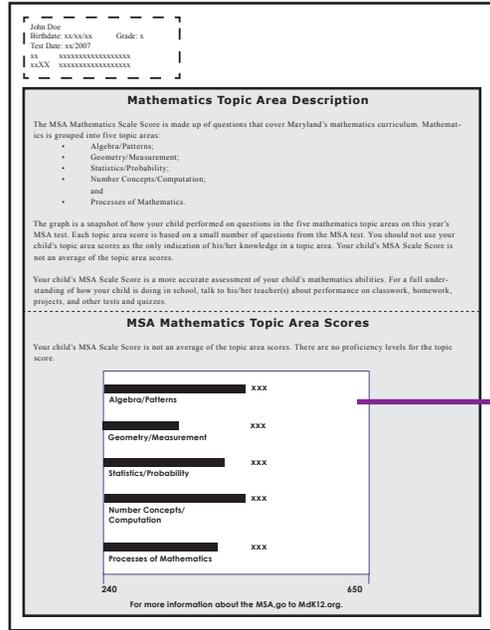
Sample Score Report: Math MSA



This graph shows your child's scale (numerical) score and where it falls in the range of basic, proficient, and advanced performance. It also shows the average score of students in the school, the school system, and the state.

Maryland uses these scores for state and federal accountability.

This graph shows the percent of students in the school, school system, and state at each performance level.



This graph shows how your child performed on various topic areas within the math curriculum.

Because each topic area consists of a very small number of questions, your child's scale score is a better indicator of his or her math performance than topic area scores.

Your child's scale score is NOT an average of the topic area scores.

How is the MSA scored?

The MSA's multiple-choice questions are scored by machine; the short- and long-answer questions are scored by at least two trained scorers, based on criteria set by Maryland educators.

MSA scores are reported in terms of basic, proficient, and advanced performance.¹ **Basic** indicates that a student is not passing standards and that more work is needed to meet grade-level expectations. **Proficient** indicates that a student is passing standards. Proficient is considered a realistic and rigorous level of achievement. **Advanced** indicates that a student is performing above standards. Advanced is considered a highly challenging and exemplary level of achievement.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that all students reach grade-level proficiency in reading/language arts and math by 2013-14, which means that all Maryland students should score at the proficient or advanced level on the reading and math tests by 2013-14. Each year, schools and school systems must make a certain amount of progress toward the 100% proficiency goal to avoid intervention or sanctions. (The federal law requires states to annually test and report students' science achievement; however, there is currently no mandate that all students reach science proficiency.)

When will I see my child's results?

You'll receive your child's reading, math, and science scores from your local school system, most likely over the summer. The score reports contain MSA results for your child, your child's school and school system, and the state.

¹ In 2003, Maryland teachers, principals, and school system officials set performance-level cut-off scores for the reading and math MSAs. Cut-off scores for the science MSA were set in fall 2007. Cut-off scores vary by subject and grade.

How can I help prepare my child for the MSA?

There are many ways to encourage your child to achieve. The best preparation takes place throughout the school year.

- Talk with your child's teachers regularly about your child's progress and what you can do to help him or her improve.
- Set high expectations for your child. Make it clear that school should be priority #1.
- Dedicate at least 15 minutes each day to talking with your child and reading with him or her.
- Provide a quiet place for your child to study.
- Help your child with homework.
- Show interest in what your child is doing in school.
- Limit the amount of television your child watches and discuss what he or she sees on TV.
- Monitor the time your child spends playing video games and is on the Internet.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced breakfast.

For more information

Visit these Web sites to learn more about the MSA. You can also contact your child's school, or call the Maryland State Department of Education at 1.888.246.0016.

General MSA Information

www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/msa/

Basic facts and links to more in-depth information, such as sample test items, sample score reports, and technical reports.

MSA Content

Mdk12.org

Specific curricular skills and content tested by the MSA.

Sample Test Items

Mdk12.org

Sample MSA questions with sample or actual student responses, scoring information, and question-by-question links to the portion of the curriculum tested.

School, District, and State Scores

www.MdReportCard.org

School, school system, and state results for the MSA, Alt-MSA, and other Maryland tests, broken down by students' race, gender, and special services received.

Alt-MSA Information

www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/alt_msa/

Alt-MSA participation guidelines and links to resources like the *Alt-MSA Handbook*.

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James H. DeGraffenreid, Jr., President, State Board of Education

Nancy S. Grasmick, State Superintendent of Schools

Martin O'Malley, Governor