



Common Core Tests Have Created Challenging Results

The results of the 2015 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams have been released and they are causing quite a commotion. The exams, given to students in grades three through eight, contained the new Common Core standards as recommended by the Federal Department of Education. 11th graders are not examined by Common Core based PSSA exams because the state replaced the PSSA with the Keystone exams for high school students.

The statewide average for the math test for all tested students, grades three through eight, shows a sharp drop from 73.3 percent proficient or advanced in 2014 to 39.7 percent proficient or advanced in 2015. For the language arts exam the number scoring proficient or advanced fell from 69.2 percent in 2014 to 60 percent in 2015. Clearly, the Common Core based math test is more demanding than the old PSSA while the language arts test is more difficult and was expanded to include writing as well as reading. Similar results have been reported by other states after they adopted Common Core. Not only were the tests made more demanding but higher percentages of correct responses are now required to rank proficient or advanced.

What else can we learn from these dramatic scoring changes in Pennsylvania?

First of all, we can determine if there are major variations in how the different grades were affected by the new tests. Second, we can explore how math testing was changed compared to the language arts exam. Third we can ascertain how poorly performing schools were affected compared to how strongly performing schools were affected by the more rigorous testing. To carry out this analysis, nine school districts from Allegheny County and one from Washington County were selected. The sample contains five districts that are considered academically weak performers: Clairton, Pittsburgh, Sto-Rox, Wilksburg, and Woodland Hills. Five districts are considered to be strong performers: Hampton, Mt. Lebanon, North Allegheny, Peters (Washington County), and Pine-Richland. Test results for fifth and eighth grades were used in the analysis.

As it happens, the results on the new language arts test for the fifth grade students appear to have little impact. For the districts that are considered low performing there were no really worrisome changes from 2014 to 2015. Indeed, while the five district average for those scoring advanced declined by less than two percentage points (7.1 to 5.3), the

average scoring proficient rose two percentage points (26.9 to 28.9). A somewhat encouraging change was the decline in the percentage scoring below basic (40 to 31) with most apparently moving into the basic group which climbed from 26 percent to 34 percent in 2015.

For the poor performing districts the language arts test was either not made much more difficult –perhaps even easier with the addition of the writing component—or the students were somewhat better prepared in 2015 than 2014.

For the five strong performance school districts, the effect of the shift to Common Core on language arts test results for fifth grades was generally positive in terms of the students scoring higher than in 2014. Their district averages for the percentages reaching advanced and proficient actually rose: advanced (44.7 to 46) and proficient (41.6 to 44.5). At the same time the already low percentages of basic and below basic percentages dropped a couple of points: basic (9.2 to 7.4) and below basic (4.5 to 2). Although on average the gains were modest, Hampton had a nice jump with the combined percentage of advanced or proficient up significantly from 84 in 2014 to 94 percent in 2015.

In brief, the Common Core based fifth grade language arts test has not presented any significant difficulties beyond those already posed by the old PSSA exam.

Meanwhile, the performance on the Common Core test for fifth grade math was a much different story with scoring decidedly weaker than in 2014. All ten districts in the sample experienced decreases in the percentage scoring advanced/proficient. For the weaker five districts the average percentage scoring at the advanced level fell sharply from 24 to four percent, the average for proficient scorers dropped from 21 to 16 percent. At the same time, the average percentage posting scores at the basic level jumped from 24 to 38 while the below basic percentage climbed from 31 to 42 percent.

For the stronger districts, the fifth grade math results also showed major problems with the Common Core test compared to the old PSSA. The five district average percentage of students scoring at the advanced level plunged from 67 to 36 percent. Much of that decline showed up in the percentage scoring proficient which rose from 21 to 37 percent. However, that was the only non-negative news for the test results as the percentage scoring at both the basic level (up from eight to 20) and the below basic level (up from 4.5 to 10) rose significantly. Numbers like these for basic and below basic have not troubled the strongly performing districts for a long time.

Clearly, the new PSSA math test for fifth grades was much more difficult for both the poorly performing and stronger academic districts than the old PSSA test.

What's more, the eighth grade scores depict a very dramatic challenge being posed by the Common Core based PSSA exams.

On the language arts test the five poorly performing districts saw their eighth graders average percentage reaching the advanced level slide from 20.7 in 2014 to 3.4 in 2015,

nearly eliminating all the high scores. Indeed, none reached the advanced ranking in Wilkinsburg. At the same time the average percentage of eighth graders scoring proficient slipped from 28.1 to 22.8 and those were undoubtedly the result of students who would have been at the advanced level on the old test moving even further down the achievement scale on the new test. This is a reasonable conclusion because of the fact that the number of students at the basic level jumped from 20.8 percent to 45.7 percent on the new test, almost certainly due to students slipping who would have been advanced or proficient on the old exam. Below basic scorers held fairly steady declining from 30.6 to 28.1 percent.

Meanwhile, the stronger five districts suffered a major shock in terms of the massive drop in the number of students scoring at the advanced level on the new language arts test. The five district average percentage advanced tumbled from 81.3 in 2014 to 35.3 in 2015. Evidently most of the expected advanced students fell into the proficient category as the average percentage in that grouping shot up from 14.5 percent to 52.8 percent on the Common Core test in 2015. The number of basic level scorers also moved up rising from 2.8 percent to 10.9 percent meaning that many expected proficient scorers slipped into the basic group. In something of an anomaly the below basic scorers held fairly steady falling slightly from 1.5 to 1.0 percent.

Clearly, the eighth grade Common Core language arts test difficulty was ratcheted up substantially in difficulty from the old PSSA.

If the eighth grade language arts results were bad news, the math results must be considered truly dreadful. For the five poorly performing districts the average percentage of students reaching the advanced level fell from 22 in 2014 to 1.9 in 2015 on the Common Core based test. Wilkinsburg and Sto-Rox had no one at the advanced level on the new test. Furthermore, the average percentage reaching proficient also fell sharply from 24.7 in 2014 to 8.4 percent in 2015. At the same time, the averages for these five districts showed the percentage at the basic level held steady in moving from 19 to 20.1 in 2015. The largest change was in the below basic category where the percentage climbed abruptly from 34.2 to 69.6 on the new test. Thus, the percentage basic and below basic jumped from 53 before Common Core to 90 percent after, with proficient and advanced combined dipping to just 10 percent.

And the story is not all that different for the historically strong performing district results. The average percentage scoring at the advanced level plunged from 80.1 in 2014 to 20.7 in 2015 on the new test. Some of that was captured by a rise in percentage proficient from 12.7 in 2014 to 37.5 on the Common Core based test. The gap in the drop in advanced and the rise in proficient is captured by the big increase in the percentage scoring basic which rose from 4.2 to 31.2 percent and a smaller but still significant rise in the below basic from 3.1 to 10.6 percent. Thus, from 93 percent advanced/ proficient and 7 percent basic/below basic, these traditionally strong schools are now at 58 percent advanced/proficient and 42 percent basic/below basic in math. Those scoring results a year ago would have been comparable to some of the poor performers used in our sample.

To put it mildly, the new math test is far harder than the test used through 2014 and has brought even the best schools down several notches on the scoring scale.

This new exam is causing a lot of hand-wringing among administrators, teachers, school boards, and state education officials. Indeed, what useful information has been learned from this experiment? That top ranked schools that were believed to be sterling academic performers, have been brought down a few pegs? Or that poorly performing schools are truly terrible? One must ask how much more the traditionally strong districts can do to raise average scores. Their SATs are very good; the students are above state levels by a wide margin and ahead of national levels as well. And for the poorly performing schools will the new tests that make them look even worse than before do anything to motivate educators to improve beyond what they are already doing? Could the impact be just the opposite of what was hoped for by the Common Core proponents by destroying any hope that most students will reach proficiency under the new standards?

On the other hand, will these results be used to argue that education funding in Pennsylvania must be boosted by 30 or 40 percent to a state average of \$20,000 per pupil and districts such as Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg to \$30,000 per pupil?

Not a good outcome either way.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President

Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Sr. Research Assoc.

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:
www.alleghenyinstitute.org*

<p>Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</p>
