A Parent’s Guide to the MSA

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-grade students 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. However, in 2008, the tests will be given from April 1 through April 10, due to the dates of various religious holidays. The regular March testing schedule will resume in 2009. The science MSA will be given April 23 through May 13. Your child’s school system will choose the exact testing dates within these testing windows.

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 2, 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 school users either use 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, information text comprehension, and literary text comprehension. The math MSA tests algebra/patterns, geometry/measurement, statistics/probability, and processes of mathematics. The science MSA tests concepts/computation, and processes of science. The reading and math tests in six years’ time. 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 and math scores from your local school system, most likely over the summer. Science scores will be received by the following September. The score reports contain MSA results for your child, your child’s school and school system, and the state. See the back page for a sample math score report.

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. 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 in six years’ time. 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.)

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. This year, the reading and math tests will be given April 1–10. The science test will be given April 23–May 13.
- 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 reading and math score reports in the summer, and the science report in September. All school, school system, and state scores are posted on www.MdReportCard.org.

www.MarylandPublicSchools.org

Look Inside to see sample MSA test questions and answers

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 will be set in fall 2007. Cut-off scores vary by subject and grade.
**Reading, Grade 3**

**Sample Item Selected Response Item for Grade 3**

**Standard 5.0 Knowledge of Probability**

**Topic B. Theoretical Probability**

**Indicator 1.** Identify the probability of one simple event

**Objective a.** Describe the probability of an event using words

**Assessment limits:** Use probability terms of more (or most) likely, less (or least) likely, equally likely

Diane and Charlie are playing a game with a spinner. The spinner is shown below.

![Image of a spinner with colors and probability terms]

What can be said about the spinner?

- A. All of the colors are equally likely.
- B. Red is more likely than yellow.
- C. Yellow is more likely than red.
- D. Red is more likely than blue.

**Correct Answer**

A

**Done**

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**Math, Grade 3**

**Sample Item Selected Response Item for Grade 3**

**Standard 6.0 Knowledge of Number Relationships and Computation/Arithmetic**

**Topic C. Number Computation**

**Indicator 1.** Analyze number relations and compute

**Objective a.** Add and subtract fractions and mixed numbers and express answers in simplest form

**Assessment limits:** Use proper fractions and denominators as factors of 60 (0–20)

George is making two cakes using two different recipes. One recipe uses $\frac{1}{2}$ cups of flour and the other recipe uses $\frac{3}{4}$ cups of flour. What is the total amount of flour, in cups, needed for both recipes?

- A. $\frac{2}{3}$ cups
- B. $\frac{3}{4}$ cups
- C. $\frac{5}{12}$ cups
- D. $\frac{5}{4}$ cups

**Correct Answer**

C

**Done**

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**Reading, Grade 8**

**Sample Item Selected Response Item for Grade 8**

**Standard 3.0 Comprehension of Literary Text**

**Indicator 6.** Analyze and interpret important ideas and messages in literary text

**Objective a.** Analyze major and universal themes

**Assessment limits:** Literal versus interpretive meanings of a text or a portion of text

Read the story “The Scarlet Ibis” and answer the following question.

Which is the best expression to show your understanding of the story?

- A. The scarlet ibis is a symbol of pride.
- B. The scarlet ibis is a symbol of a struggle.
- C. The scarlet ibis is a symbol of a physical challenge.
- D. The scarlet ibis is a symbol of the color scarlet.

**Correct Answer**

B

**Done**

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**Math, Grade 8**

**Sample Item Selected Response Item for Grade 8**

**Standard 6.0 Knowledge of Number Relationships and Computation/Arithmetic**

**Topic C. Number Computation**

**Indicator 1.** Analyze number relations and compute

**Objective a.** Add and subtract fractions and mixed numbers and express answers in simplest form

**Assessment limits:** Use proper fractions and denominators as factors of 60 (0–20)

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- A. $\frac{2}{3}$ cups
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- C. $\frac{5}{12}$ cups
- D. $\frac{5}{4}$ cups

**Correct Answer**

C

**Done**
The Maryland School Assessment contains a mix of multiple-choice and written-response questions.

On this poster are examples of the types of questions students can expect on the MSA.

More can be found on the Web at MdK12.org.
Sample Score Report: Math MSA

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 2007-2008 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 federal government recently sent final test-design requirements to states, which means the Modified MSA (Mod-MSA) could be available by the 2008 or 2009 test administration.

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/.

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
School, district, 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 2007 Alt-MSA Handbook.