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 and math test given to elementary and middle school students every spring, usually in March. In 2007, the test will be given from March 12 through March 21.

Students in each grade take the test over four days—two days for reading and two days for math—and spend no more than 90 minutes in active testing each day. Testing sessions are broken into shorter time blocks for tests on specific skills.

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, every state is required to measure reading and math 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 in high school.

What does the MSA test?
The MSA covers content that your child should be learning in reading and math 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 (VSC Reading Toolkit and VSC Math Toolkit).

The reading MSA tests three topic areas: general reading processes, informational text comprehension, and literary text comprehension. The math MSA tests five topic areas: algebra/patterns, geometry/measurement, statistics/probability, number concepts/computation, and processes of mathematics.

Science MSA

In April, students in grades 5 and 8 will “field test” a science MSA in preparation for its full inclusion in the state testing program next year. The science MSA tests skills and processes, earth/space science, life science, chemistry, physics, and environmental science. A little less than half of all tested students will likely take the science MSA online, while the rest will take a traditional paper-and-pencil test.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that, by the 2007–08 school year, states annually test and report the science achievement of elementary, middle, and high school students. However, the law does not currently require science results to be factored into states’ accountability programs.

What does the MSA look like?
The test includes multiple-choice, short-answer, and (in grades 5–8) long-answer questions. Unfold this publication to see sample MSA test questions.


The Maryland School Assessment

• Is a reading and math test given statewide to students in grades 3–8. This year the test will be given from March 12–21.

• 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/instruction/assessments.html.

• Produces scores for students, schools, districts, and the state. Parents will receive their child’s score report in June. School, school system, and state scores are posted on www.MdReportCard.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. This year, the make-up days are March 22–27.

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. The highest possible score on each MSA is 650; the lowest possible score is 240.

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. (In 2003, Maryland teachers, principals, and school system officials set the cut-off scores for each performance level. The cut-off scores vary by subject and grade.)

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 MSA in seven 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.

When will I see my child’s results? You’ll receive your child’s scores from your local school system, most likely in June. The score report contains 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.

Look Inside to see sample MSA test questions and answers
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 2006–2007 Maryland Accommodations Manual at www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/.

Mod-MSA

The U.S. Department of Education has given states permission to develop modified tests for a small number of students with disabilities who are able to make progress toward grade-level standards, but not in the same timeframe as other students. The federal government will soon send final test design requirements to states, which means the Modified MSA (Mod-MSA) could be available by the 2008 test administration. The Mod-MSA will be based on a modified version of Maryland’s curriculum.

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 reading and math standards. For more information on the Alt-MSA, go to www.MarylandPublicSchools.org/MSDE/testing/alt_msa.

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/mspp/k_5/whattest.html  
Specific curricular skills and content tested by the MSA.

Sample Test Items

MdK12.org/mspp/k_5/looklike.html  
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.MdK12.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 2007 Alt-MSA Handbook.
Sample MSA Questions

The Maryland School Assessment contains a mix of multiple-choice, short-answer, and long-answer 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.