

Getting Ready for the PSSA

Successful Strategies for English Language Learners

Teacher's Guide



PaELL Student Resource Materials for Teachers

There are two main areas of focus in these materials. The first is to provide students with an explanation of the purposes of the PSSA. Many students lack an understanding of the goals of the PSSA; these are defined in the video and handouts. The second focus is to provide test-taking strategies for the reading, mathematics, and writing assessments. Some of these strategies are specific to the assessments, and other strategies are broad and apply to multiple-choice tests in general. The strategies can provide a foundation for students who lack experience with these types of assessments, and they can also be useful for students who need a refresher course in test-taking strategies.

Included in the video are references to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's PSSA accommodations for ELLs. This was included to assist Pennsylvania school personnel and students in becoming aware of the accommodations that are most suitable for ELLs. While many schools provide setting and timing accommodations, these may not be the most appropriate choices for some ELLs. Remember, the accommodations for ELLs differ from those that are appropriate for students of special education. According to Menken (2000), accommodations such as repetition, explanation, and translation of instructions are better suited to meet the needs of ELLs.

As noted by the Pennsylvania State Department of Education, Division of Evaluation and Reports in the document titled *Testing Accommodations for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment*, accommodations for testing ideally reflect those used in the instructional setting. Accommodations for the PSSA should prevent students from having an unfair disadvantage, but also should not provide them with an unfair advantage. Following are just *some* of the accommodations permitted by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

- Use the student's native language for instructions
- Quietly repeat directions to individual students
- Simplify the language of the directions and use the student's native language
- Have the student demonstrate understanding of directions
- Accompany oral directions with written directions
- Cue the student to remain on task
- Read test items (for mathematics or writing prompts only, do not read the reading passages to the students)
- Check periodically to make sure the student is marking in correct spaces
- Highlight key words or phrases in directions
- Use colored stickers or highlighters for visual cues
- Allow students to mark responses in test booklet (Answers must be transferred into the regular answer booklet)
- Permit additional breaks or extended rest breaks for students during testing session
- Increase test time

- Provide flexible scheduling
- Test in separate room or in a small group to reduce distractions

The teacher may determine other appropriate accommodations. All accommodations used must be documented in the student's record. When considering accommodations, remember, the teacher's goal is to help students be successful on the PSSA, without compromising the integrity of the assessment. Contact the Division of Evaluation and Reports for a more thorough explanation of accommodations for the PSSA.

As you will notice, these materials do NOT include a review of the Pennsylvania Academic Standards. Naturally, your students depend on you and their other teachers for the classroom instruction, which has prepared them for the content of the assessment. The goal of this kit is to provide students with some tips for success, in order to prepare them to demonstrate their knowledge in the format of the PSSA. As such, students can be exposed to the video and handouts several weeks or even days prior to the assessment in order to gain the most value from these materials.

How to Best Utilize this Kit

It is likely that many of the suggested strategies are already part of your year-round instruction. If this is the case, your students have had the benefit of practicing these strategies. The more experience students have with reading, mathematics, and writing strategies as well as multiple choice strategies, the more able they will be to use those techniques in a test-taking situation. This kit can be *best* used as a review tool when you have already exposed your ELLs to learning and test-taking strategies throughout their education.

Take time to familiarize yourself with the materials before sharing the video and handouts with your students. While you view the video, you will be prompted several times to stop the tape. During the pauses you are encouraged to discuss the material presented in the preceding segment. The teacher and student handouts help to facilitate this. In addition, your students may practice some of the strategies during the pauses. The handouts include some practice items released by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Items are released by the state periodically, so be sure to update your handout materials accordingly. You may also find it useful to obtain additional PSSA practice tests from other resources and publishers. By discussing, reviewing, and practicing the strategies, they become more meaningful and your students will retain more of the information than they would by only viewing the video and taking the handouts.

Prior to sharing the video and handouts with your ELLs, it is recommended that you discuss with students your school's policy for administering the PSSA. Your students should be made aware of the schedule, setting, and any accommodations that will be available to them. Since teachers decide on appropriate accommodations for their ELLs, you may wish to explain these decisions to your students. If you have students who are exempted from taking the PSSA, this should be explained to all students to avoid possible misunderstandings.

A Note Regarding English Language Learners

While it is certainly important to avoid over-generalizing the needs of English Language Learners, it is necessary to mention a few issues with regard to ELLs and the PSSA. Some of these matters will also be true for many non-ELLs. An awareness of these issues will benefit you, your colleagues, and your ELLs, and can make the PSSA experience a better one for your students. Following are some considerations for ELLs, though it is not meant to be an exhaustive list: your local population will determine the considerations appropriate for the PSSA.

The results of the PSSA are intended to be only one source of information, or one measure among many of your students' abilities. The best practice is to provide ELLs with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways, according to your school and classroom policies. It is essential to caution you on the use of PSSA scores for decisions of placement and retention of ELLs, or any students for that matter. The PSSA is an indicator of what your students have been exposed to, and not necessarily an individual measure of knowledge, especially for students who are still learning English. Keep in mind that many ELLs are required to participate in the PSSA before mastering English reading and writing skills.

Following are a few suggestions with regard to helping ELLs prepare for the PSSA. When discussing any new strategies, including the techniques mentioned in this video, it will be most helpful for your ELLs if you (or another student) *model* the strategy. Having a visual image of the strategy, followed by opportunities to practice, will be especially beneficial for English Language Learners.

Another recommendation pertains to one of the suggested reading strategies included in this kit. Students are encouraged to *visualize* as they read, a technique that can assist students in reading passages of the PSSA as well as some mathematics word problems. However, culturally diverse students may activate different schema, or visualize a distinct representation based upon their background. The image may be one that does not reflect what the author intended, or what a non-ELLs might visualize. You may try to anticipate this and be prepared to assist your students with this particular strategy.

In addition, culturally diverse students may lack familiarity with the format of the PSSA, which is why this video and materials will be so helpful for your students. However, you must be aware of your own student population's needs for clarity. Some students may have little exposure to multiple choice questions. According to Jim Cummins (1996), language learning expert and instructor at the University of Toronto, students can become familiar with multiple choice tests and the use of distractors by sharing opportunities to create their own multiple choice tests in groups. These practices would benefit ELLs throughout the year and prepare them for the PSSA.

The ability of your ELLs to be successful on the PSSA may be affected by their own cultural ideas and experiences. Some of your students *may*:

- possess culturally influenced ideas of time - having a limited amount of test time on the PSSA could pose a new concept

- become stuck on one question, and unable to continue
- hold opinions about guessing - guessing may not be appropriate in their culture
- place higher value on cooperative learning - you may need to stress that the PSSA is to be done individually
- lack understanding of the value or relevance of the PSSA

ELL teachers should be aware of these and other cultural considerations in order to provide additional support to students as needed.

Video Format and Recommendations

To assist educators in using this video and handouts, we will provide an overview of their layout and some additional recommendations for their usage. The students portrayed in the video are English Language Learners, and the scenes are set inside a school. The students have casual discussions revolving around the PSSA and some test-taking strategies. There are two students who serve as hosts of the program, to bring out key points and help transition between the video segments. As a supplement to the video, the handouts provided for your students offer many more strategies that could not be included in the video. It is suggested that you go over the additional strategies with your students and practice them as well. Thus, the video can be best used as a tool to facilitate discussion and generate interest among your students.

The students in the video begin by discussing the purposes of the PSSA. It is recommended you clarify these purposes for your ELLs. Some districts may have students meet with counselors to explain scores, and some may have certificates or other incentives for high scoring students. Students should be made aware of these policies, and at the same time, students should understand that the PSSA is not used to make pass or fail decisions. The key is to find a balance between having over-worried or anxious students, and having young people that do not understand or care about the assessment.

The actors next discuss the reading assessment. They do not talk about the rubric, which is used to score the written or open-ended portion of the reading assessment. It is recommended that you take time to explain the rubric, and assist your ELLs in using it on a practice exercise. A copy of the current rubric is included in the student handouts, as well as some open-ended sample exercises. Students may use the rubric while they are taking the PSSA, but it will only assist them if it is familiar. The handouts also include some multiple choice practice exercises. **Please note: The answers to those questions are included in this Teacher's Guide.**

The next segment includes strategies for the mathematics assessment. One suggestion for educators is to prepare your students for the fact that calculators will be permitted on some, but not all, mathematics questions. Advise your students as to whether or not you will provide them with calculators. The video mentions that formulas are provided, and that students must know when and how to use the formulas. For elementary teachers, please clarify that your fifth graders are not provided with formulas. Their handouts explain which formulas they will need to know. In addition, it is recommended that teachers take time to practice open-ended problem solving, as the writing requirement can pose a challenge for your ELLs. Strategies for these exercises and a practice question are in the handouts.

Next, the students in the video discuss general test-taking strategies that apply to the different PSSA segments. Of great importance is to explain to your ELLs if they will have unlimited time to complete the test. If not, you may want to discuss time management, and offer suggestions for how to best utilize time (such as skipping harder questions and going back later, watching and budgeting the time, and maintaining concentration). Also, to help students avoid distractions and keep their place, you may demonstrate the use of an index card to cover distracting text. Finally, students should be prepared for the fill-in-the-circle format, as the answer sheets are computer-scored. If they do skip a question, they need to remember to stay on the correct question number on their answer sheet. Be sure to emphasize the need to answer all questions.

The last segment of the video covers the writing assessment. You may wish to show this segment to students in sixth, ninth, and eleventh grades in preparation for the PSSA Writing Assessment. In addition, some strategies mentioned may assist fifth- and eighth- grade students taking the Reading Assessment. You will have to clarify the difference, especially as the Writing Assessment uses the Domain Scoring Guide. A copy of the Domain Scoring Guide is provided in the student handouts. Again, with this assessment, students should be advised of the time limit or accommodation for test-taking time. They should be aware that they may not use a dictionary, and that they must complete all of the required essays.

Summary

The materials included in this kit are geared toward English Language Learners in Pennsylvania. The video and handouts are intended to help ELLs gain a better understanding of the PSSA. While you, the students' teachers, have prepared students for the content of the assessments, this kit aims to ready students for the format of the assessments. By viewing the video, engaging in discussion with classmates and teachers, and practicing the recommended test-taking strategies, ELLs will be more confident and prepared for the reading, mathematics, and writing assessments of the PSSA.

As their teacher, you may decide how to properly accommodate your ELLs for the PSSA. A brief description of some appropriate accommodations for English Language Learners has been provided. Support is also available to you from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. In addition, as the assessment is modified from one year to the next, it is your responsibility to keep informed of important changes as they affect your ELLs. Changes might include new policies on exempting ELLs from the PSSA, accommodating ELLs, and the use of a certificate or award program for high scores. However, the strategies provided in this preparation kit should continue to be useful throughout changes in the PSSA.

One of the most important ways to prepare your ELLs for the PSSA is to teach the Pennsylvania Academic Standards and use some of these suggested strategies year-round. Students who have good study habits and who have done some practice tests are more likely to be successful on the PSSA. It is especially important to help your students find a balance in which they view the PSSA as an important assessment and worthy of their best efforts, while not

becoming stressed and overly worried about it! With your assistance and these materials, they will be prepared.

For more information on the Pennsylvania English Language Learners Resource Kit, visit our website at <http://www.paell.com>

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**Answer Keys for
Multiple Choice
Practice Exercises
In Student Booklets**