

Surviving standardized tests

What types of standardized tests do Minnesota students take?

Minnesota students take four primary types of standardized tests:

1. Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs): Students take the MCAs once a year in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school. They also take the MCAs in science in fifth grade, eighth grade and once in high school.
2. District mandated assessments: Many school districts will use internal testing to measure student growth and progress toward grade level standards. Some districts use these exams to help students prepare for the MCAs.
3. Career and college readiness exams: Secondary students also take entrance exams for college and career applications. State law mandates that districts allow all Minnesota students in grades 11 and 12 one day to participate in a college entrance exam (the ACT or SAT). Some students may take Advance Placement (AP) exams to earn college credit. Others may opt to take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) if they wish to pursue a career in the U.S. military.
4. English language proficiency exams: Minnesota's English language learners take the ACCESS and Alternate ACCESS to measure growth toward English language proficiency.

Are all students required to take standardized tests?

Yes, all public school students are required to participate in the MCAs unless their guardians choose to opt out of the tests. Districts might also mandate additional testing.

Students with an individualized education program (IEP), with a 504 or with severe cognitive disabilities may qualify to take the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS) instead of the MCA. The Minnesota Department of Education's website contains a list of eligibility requirements for the MTAS.

Minnesota parents have the statutory right to exempt their students from participating in MCA testing. Parents can find the opt-out form on MDE's website as well as your district's website.

Why do we administer standardized tests?

State laws requires school districts to administer or provide access to certain standardized tests. Districts use the MCAs/MTAS/ACCESS to measure a student's progress toward achieving grade-level standards. Districts also report their average student scores to MDE as required by state and federal law. MDE reports statewide numbers to the U.S. Department of Education as mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

What is my role in the testing process?

Your role in testing will vary based on your district and position. Most teachers in grades 3-8 will help proctor the MCAs, as do many high school teachers. Some districts hire test administrators to help with the process.

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The MCAs process is highly regulated and monitored. It is important that you follow all directions given by your administrators. You should also ask questions and clarify any confusion you have about your individual role.

How can I prepare my students for standardized testing?

Some students can experience test anxiety. You can help students prepare for testing by answering questions and talking about process before the testing day. Encourage students to eat breakfast on testing day. You might also give them some breathing tips to help them reduce stress on exam day.

What if something goes wrong with the testing process? What if I witness unethical behavior?

You should immediately alert your administrator or testing coordinator if there is a technical malfunction or other issue with the test. You should also alert your supervisors if you witness cheating or other unethical behavior. MDE has created the Minnesota Statewide Test Security Tip Line for you to report any problematic behavior during statewide testing.