DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Frequently Asked Questions: Why Statewide Test Results Matter

What are statewide tests?

Statewide tests are annual, summative measurements of student achievement that are used, along with many other school and classroom assessments, to evaluate student learning and skills. Specifically, the Minnesota statewide tests assess achievement of the Minnesota Academic Standards in mathematics, reading, and science and language proficiency development for English learners. Some forms of assessment occur on a daily basis, others occur at the end of a unit of instruction, and others at the end of a semester or course. Schools use objective, standardized assessments to validly measure students' learning against benchmarks of academic achievement. The Minnesota statewide tests function as one part of a comprehensive system for evaluating student learning.

How are statewide testing data used?

Information from statewide tests is used in a number of ways. The State uses the aggregated test scores to report to the public and the U.S. Department of Education how Minnesota students are performing in school. Statewide test data help the State evaluate the progress schools are making in reducing achievement gaps among student groups. Schools and districts use the assessment results to measure their progress in improving student learning over time. Educators use individual scores to gauge students' relative strengths and areas of need, and they use aggregated results to adjust curriculum and instruction. Parents use the scores in their decision-making process when choosing schools for their children. Parents, students, and educators may also use test results to determine whether or not students are on-track for success in future grade levels, college, and careers. For these reasons, ensuring the integrity of statewide testing data is an important and shared responsibility.

What is test score validity and why is it important?

Test score validity has both a technical and a common sense meaning. A set of professional guidelines accepted by the testing profession defines validity as "the degree to which evidence…support[s] the interpretations of test scores for proposed uses of tests" (p. 11).[1] In everyday terms, one might think of test score validity as answering the question, "Can I trust that this test score tells me what it claims to tell me?" Test scores are

[1] American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education (2014). *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: Author.

considered valid if it is possible to draw accurate conclusions about student achievement from them. For example, if students achieve a score on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) that indicates they "Meet the Standards," it is reasonable to conclude that students have mastered sufficient content and skills in grade level reading, mathematics, or science to be adequately prepared for content in the next grade level or for postsecondary college or careers. The knowledge and skills they have mastered can be accurately described, and students, parents, and educators can use the information to chart the next steps for academic progress. Valid test scores can help identify areas of relative strength and weakness for follow up by educators and parents.

What are examples of actions that threaten test score validity?

To use test results in meaningful ways, a test score must represent the individual, unassisted achievement of each student. Cheating threatens test score validity. A short list of ways people cheat or engage in misconduct includes:

- Students receive help or answers from other students.
- Students receive help or answers from educators or staff.
- Students view or practice actual test items prior to the test.
- Educators use actual test items for practice with students.
- Educators change students' answers or otherwise tamper with tests.
- Educators fail to secure materials or configure testing environments to prevent cheating.

What are the consequences of cheating?

There are consequences to reporting scores to students, families, and schools that do not represent individual achievement. Some of the most important consequences include:

- Students are misled about their learning.
- False results are reported to parents and others who use the test scores to make decisions.
- Students may be placed into academic programs for which they are not prepared and may miss opportunities to receive needed interventions.
- Achievement gaps may not be identified, and school resources may be inappropriately allocated.
- Inaccurate information is reported to the public about the quality of its schools.
- Public confidence in an assessment program's ability to accurately measure student achievement is eroded.

How can cheating be prevented?

Establishing and maintaining a culture of academic integrity within Minnesota schools is the key to preventing cheating. Definitions of academic integrity are often found in school or district codes of conduct or student handbooks and, although they may differ slightly, generally share a few key points:

- Academic integrity is honest and responsible scholarship.
- All academic work should result from an individual's own efforts.

Just as schools and districts require academic integrity from students in their coursework, they should also expect students to act with integrity when taking statewide or other standardized assessments. Districts can support academic and test score integrity by:

- Communicating how assessment data are used and why test score validity is important.
- Making expectations for integrity explicit.
- Ensuring that students and staff know the consequences for misconduct.
- Applying consequences for misconduct consistently.
- Requiring students and staff to sign assurances that they will honor test security policies.

Although agreeing to a code of conduct may not deter the small number of people who are determined to cheat, it is an effective method for communicating to students and educators the expectations for behavior and conduct that support academic integrity.

Policies and procedures for administering Minnesota's statewide assessments are included in the *Procedures Manual for the Minnesota Assessments*, test administration manuals, and in trainings and tutorials. Districts and schools must ensure that students, educators, and staff understand the requirements for test security. **Security protocol violations can occur simply because people do not know or understand the policies and procedures.** Educators can jeopardize test score integrity without intending to do so when their purpose may be to help or to take advantage of a "teachable moment." However, telling a student to take another look at an incorrectly answered test item or providing any other clues to the correct answer is misconduct and requires that the student's test score be invalidated and a report of the suspected misconduct be provided to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE).

What happens when educator misconduct on statewide tests is suspected or confirmed?

Allegations and evidence of educator misconduct must be reported to MDE, and MDE subsequently requires district administrators to determine the facts of the reported misconduct. If district administrators are implicated or if other circumstances so warrant, external investigators may be hired to conduct an independent investigation. Complaints of misconduct made to the Minnesota Board of Teaching or Board of School Administrators are referred to the Attorney General's office for evaluation and investigation. Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes, section 122A.20, subdivision 1a, the Board of Teaching or Board of School Administrators, whichever has jurisdiction, may conduct an inquiry to determine whether disciplinary action against a license is warranted for confirmed reports involving educator misconduct. Educators found to have engaged in misconduct are subject to sanctions that may include censure and their license placed on probationary status, suspended, or revoked. School districts that terminate the employment of an educator for a violation of the code of ethics are required to report the termination to the appropriate Board.

What is the process for reporting suspected violations of test security protocols?

The usual course of action is to report the violation of test security policies to the School Assessment Coordinator or District Assessment Coordinator who will then submit a Test Security Notification to MDE for appropriate action. Reports of violations can be reported directly and anonymously to MDE by providing information via the Test Security Tip Line on the MDE website (Go to MDE > Districts, Schools and Educators > Teaching and Learning > Statewide Testing).