



Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students (PAWS)

September 2009

PAWS Testing Overview

In spring, all Wyoming public school students in grades three through eight and grade eleven are assessed in reading, writing and mathematics. Students in grades four, eight and eleven are assessed in science. Adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations are made using the data received from the reading, writing and mathematics spring assessment results.

Grade 10: Students in grade ten are allowed to take advantage of an early testing opportunity. Students may “bank” their mathematics and/or reading and writing scores during their tenth grade year. AYP will be determined only for students in grade eleven using their “banked” grade 10 scores or scores achieved during their grade 11 year, whichever is higher. In order to bank an English Language Arts (ELA) score, students must complete the reading and writing tests during the same assessment year.

Purpose of Assessment Descriptions

As stated above, the intent of the PAWS assessment is not only to meet the accountability requirements of NCLB, but also to inform instructional decision-making by Wyoming classroom teachers to address the specific academic needs of students. Therefore, PAWS was conceptually constructed around an instructionally supportive design to include clear targets for instruction, and informative reporting categories.

The Wyoming Content and Performance Standards are organized by academic content area standards followed by benchmark statements. Benchmarks are derived from the given content standards and specify skills within that content standard that students are expected to be able to demonstrate at the end of each grade level. NCLB makes the State assessment system central to holding schools and districts accountable for student achievement. Content standards and benchmarks are not immediately useful for the interpretation of results due to the wide variety of information and the varying levels of specificity they encompass.

To render the *results* of PAWS assessments more instructionally useful to Wyoming teachers for addressing specific academic needs of students, a delineation of more specific elements of knowledge and skills within each content standard at each grade level was needed. To this end, the Wyoming Assessment Descriptions were developed, drawing on the full range of the Wyoming Content and Performance Standards. These provide skill level descriptions or topics which rely on the structure of the discipline in order to *organize instruction*. A skill can be defined as somewhere between the breadth of a content standard and the specificity of a benchmark and have the following characteristics.

- Skills organize the information in the standards into categories of knowledge that are highly related in terms of their use; and
- Lend themselves to a variety of instructional strategies by Wyoming teachers.

While teachers need to break apart big ideas (standards) in order to teach some of the foundational concepts, they and their students gain a depth of understanding by developing a sense of the organizing framework of the discipline. The concepts and skills can be more readily called upon for later use. Designing assessments that measure integrated concepts and skills is more demanding but such assessments can better promote student learning of challenging academic content.

Thus, the PAWS serves two major purposes. First it provides information about student attainment of Wyoming Content and Performance Standards in reading, writing, mathematics and science over time. Second, and equally important, it provides additional skill-level reporting categories aligned to the Wyoming Content and Performance Standards as organized by the Wyoming Assessment Descriptions to assist teachers in interpreting and addressing specific academic needs of students.

Traffic Signal Reports

Following each spring administration, the WDE empanels groups of experienced Wyoming teachers to engage in a systematic review of the item level performance within each skill reporting category. The purpose of this review is to formulate “peer to peer” instructional needs recommendations related to the tested content standards. Titled the “Traffic Signal Report”, the guidance at the skill reporting category is simplified to three color-coded levels: Green, no additional instruction on this skill category seems needed; Yellow, additional instruction on this skill category may be needed; and Red, additional instruction on this skill category definitely seems needed. This skill-based reporting of student performance is to be interpreted independently of the proficiency and scale scores. Each year, the Traffic Signal Report applies only to the specific set of items within that year’s skill category.

Application of Results

Instructionally supportive assessments are assessments intended to promote more effective classroom instruction. Teachers receive results per skill for each of their students in each content area tested. These results can be utilized by the classroom teachers to determine what elements of their instructional activities, if any, need to be altered in the future.

PAWS results are intended to help educators make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction. Since PAWS is aligned to academic content and student performance standards, its results can reveal weaknesses and strengths in curricula or instructional methodology. Thus, it can also help educators target specific areas necessary for school and district improvement. The use of assessment results to support informed decision-making for improved teaching and learning in Wyoming schools is an expectation of the PAWS design approach.

(Source: Wyoming Department of Education)

Parents and students may wish to visit the Wyoming Department of Education website at <http://www.k12.wy.us/SAA/Paws/index.aspx> for *much* more additional information about the PAWS assessments as well as resources for preparing for the test.

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