

Why Do We Test?

By Dr. Jim Hess, Superintendent of Schools

Each spring in Minnesota standardized tests are administered in public schools. As a parent you may wonder, “Why do we test?” I’ve drawn on information from the Minnesota Department of Education, the United States Department of Education, and our Bemidji Area Schools Leadership Team Members for the answer to this question.

Minnesota gives the MCAs (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments) in Reading and Math to all students in grades 3-8, students in grade 10 are given Reading MCA, and students in grade 11 are given Math MCA. The Science MCA is given to students in grades 5, 8, and in high school when they take a life science or biology course. With very few exceptions, all public school students in the above grades take the MCAs. These tests are administered online and each student receives a score that falls into one of four achievement levels: Does Not Meet the Standards, Partially Meets the Standards, Meets the Standards, or Exceeds the Standards.

We use data from the MCAs to see how well our schools have aligned the curriculum and taught students in the Minnesota Academic Standards in Math, Reading, and Science. The Mathematics and Reading tests are also used in federal school accountability measurements.

The information we receive from the tests helps us improve teaching and learning. Teachers and administrators look for areas where students do well and strengthen the ways they teach these skills. They also look for areas that need improvement so they can adjust instructional strategies to improve student or school performance.

- Bemidji schools have shown great improvement over time when compared to other districts and our past performance.
- We receive data by subgroups including Free and Reduced Lunch Students, American Indian Students, and Special Education Students, and we can carefully monitor their progress and adjust instruction to better reach these students.
- We look at MCA data for tracking growth over time.
- Testing has helped us bring more focus to student learning.
- Knowledge of test results has helped us reteach important concepts so students have better understanding.
- Testing has allowed us to schedule new classes to better prepare students with increased skills and engagement.
- Because of the MCAs, we can see how all student groups achieve compared to the state.
- Our students are growing in their understanding of the Standards and we can show that through the MCAs.
- Testing has allowed for better teaming between the high school and middle school to provide better transitions for eighth graders moving to Bemidji High School.
- Testing has become an integral part of the American education landscape. It can open doors for students for scholarships or admission to post-secondary opportunities (ACT, SAT, GRE, LSAT, etc.).

Please encourage your students to do their best, get plenty of rest, and remember testing is just a snapshot of their achievements. Only when we combine attendance, levels of participation, completion of assignments or daily work, unit and chapter tests, effort, citizenship, leadership, and service in addition to standardized testing do we see the full picture of a student's performance.

James A. Hess, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Bemidji Area Schools
218 333 3100 ext 31120