

Six Things Stakeholders Should Know About Participation and Testing in Montana

The purpose of this document is to ensure that readers are aware of the significant value to stakeholders (e.g., students, parents/guardians, teachers, school leaders, and others) of the information derived from participating in state-level tests.

I. Why Assess?

The statewide assessments provide a valuable picture of what skills and knowledge are needed at particular grade levels for a child to remain on course to be college and career ready at the time of graduation. Teachers use these assessments as one of several important tools to help identify and meet the needs of children in the classroom. It is a real disadvantage for parents and students to be unaware of their access to this important information. Assessment is a hot topic of conversation, with many diverse opinions on how, when, amount of time, what tests, and for what purpose we assess students. Here are important points all stakeholders should know about testing:

- State and federal laws require schools to assess student learning every year in specific grade levels and subjects.
- Statewide assessments serve as an evaluation tool to track progress toward education goals based on grade and content area standards.
- Assessment data enable us to put Montana students first through four key initiatives: [Montana Hope](#), [Montana Teach](#), [Montana Learn](#), and [Montana Ready](#).

II. Why Should Taxpayers Care?

Assessments are important, as they are a key indicator of whether state and federal monies for educational programs are being used effectively. Annual statewide assessments are the same for all Montana students, and they provide information about how students are progressing over time. This information assists the state with targeting supports and resources to the students and schools that need them most. The six required statewide assessments provide valuable information on how students are performing academically by grade and content area to help identify areas of success from which others can learn.

- Montana taxpayers provide a free public education to approximately 150,000 Montana students each year, and these assessments ensure all students are equitably receiving resources across the state.
- The assessment data are used to evaluate programs by providing annual snapshots of student progress toward learning Montana's Content Standards at the state-, district-, school-, and classroom-levels.
- Statewide assessments provide only one measure of student learning, but when combined with grades, classroom activities and assessments, unit quizzes and tests, and district-level assessments, the annual statewide tests can provide a complete picture of a child's abilities and path toward academic success based on Montana's Content Standards.

III. What Is Statewide Testing?

Montana mandates six statewide assessments to meet the federal law known as the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Students in grades 4–12 are required to have a minimum of 1,080 hours of instruction. In the instance of state required testing, the average grade 5 student is estimated to spend 1–2 hours taking the MAST assessments and to spend 1–2 hours taking the Montana Science Assessment. In other words, the average child will spend 2–4 hours total, or less than one percent of instructional time, on the statewide assessments. All other assessments administered to students are determined at the school district and building level.

1. **Montana Aligned to Standards Through-Year** is the general math and reading/language arts assessment for academic achievement reporting in Grades 3–8.
2. **ACT with Writing** is the general math, reading/language arts, and science assessment for academic achievement reporting in Grade 11.
3. **Multi-State Alternate Assessment** is the alternate math and reading/language arts assessment for academic achievement reporting in Grades 3–8 and 11 for students with significant cognitive disabilities.
4. **Montana Science Assessment** is the general science assessment for academic achievement reporting in Grades 5 and 8.
5. **Alternate Montana Science Assessment** is the alternate science assessment for academic achievement reporting in Grades 5, 8, and 11 for students with significant cognitive disabilities.
6. **ACCESS for ELLs** is the English Language Proficiency assessment for academic achievement reporting for English Learners (EL) in Grades K–12.

IV. Why Is Participation Important?

Students, families, and educators rely on valid test scores to make decisions about student academic success. Participation rates provide validity, which is imperative to make accurate inferences about students' knowledge, skills, and abilities.

- Participation is one key indicator of student success within the Montana state accountability system, and high participation rates are essential for meaningful and accurate school score reports.
- Strong participation rates ensure accurate and reliable test scores that educators, students, parents, school boards, legislators, researchers, and the public use for informing programs and local decision-making efforts.

V. What Participation Is Required?

Participation is necessary to ensure the data are representative and reflective of the population. When participation rates fall below the state and federal requirements, bias can be introduced into the student knowledge, skill, and ability estimates, thus reducing the overall confidence we have in the data and ultimately interfering with the inferences that can be made about the data.

- In Montana, there is no “opt out” law, and both state law and accreditation rules require all students in public and accredited non-public schools to participate in statewide testing.
- The OPI recognizes there are circumstances beyond the control of the school that may result in non-participation. In those rare cases, the district must report the reason for non-participation to the OPI using the [MontCAS Application](#).
- School districts, school staff, parents, and students are critical partners for ensuring statewide testing is meaningful for the purposes of setting education policy, examining school and group performance, and making local decisions about curriculum and instruction.
- For the state and federal required subject areas and grade levels, schools must have:
 - 95 percent or more student participation in the statewide assessments either overall for all students or for any student subgroup consisting of 10 or more students.
 - 1.0 percent or less of all students with the most significant cognitive disabilities taking the alternate assessment based on alternative achievement standards.
- **Figure 1** below illustrates the calculation the OPI uses to determine the participation rates for testing that are displayed on the [Montana ESSA Report Card](#) and within the accountability differentiation process.
 - Per the OPI's policies and federal reporting, only students with “medical exemptions” can be removed from the denominator, meaning all other instances of non-participation (or absence) impact the school's participation rate.
 - The testing windows span from the second week of October to the third week of May; therefore, all students enrolled after the testing count date should be included to the fullest extent possible per [Chapter 56 Assessment](#) rules.

Figure 1

$$\text{Participation Rate} = \frac{\# \text{ Tested Students During the Testing Windows and } \# \text{ Students Enrolled on the Test Window Count Dates}}{\# \text{ Students Enrolled on Test Window Count Dates and } \# \text{ Tested Students During the Testing Windows and } \# \text{ Students Absent on Test Window Count Dates}}$$

MontCAS Six Things Stakeholders Should Know About Participation

VI. What Funding and Programs Rely on Statewide Testing?

The following programs rely on assessment results to make determinations on schools and in some cases to allocate funding to provide equitable services to students. Schools not meeting the required participation rates may have sanctions applied to one or more of the following programs:

1. Title Assurances
2. Accreditation
3. Special Education
4. ESSA Accountability
5. Federal Reporting

Where Do I Find More Information or Ask Additional Questions?

You can explore historical participation rates for your school on the state longitudinal data system ([GEMS](#)). For any technical questions about the calculations for participation rates included in the data warehouse, contact the GEMS Help Desk. You can also explore annual participation rates for your school using the [Montana Report Card](#). For technical questions about participation rates shown in the Montana Report Card, contact the GEMS Help Desk at (406) 444-5222 or e-mail them at opigemshelpdesk@mt.gov.

Questions about the policies for participation in statewide assessments or reporting non-participation in the [MontCAS Application](#) should be directed to the OPI Assessment Help Desk at 1.844.867.2569, or e-mail us at OPIAssessmentHelpDesk@mt.gov.