



# A PSSA Guidebook for:

## **Educators**

## **Students**

## **Parents**

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This publication was supported with Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 Federal State Leadership Funds, administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Career and Technical Education and published by The Temple University Center for Professional Development in Career and Technical Education, June 2004

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## Sample Test Questions/Passages

## I. Introduction

This document serves as a PSSA Test Taking Support Guide to supplement the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment Reading Handbook. **Much of the information in this Guide pertains to 2004 PSSA testing and may change for 2005 testing. Due to the ever-changing policies related to the No Child Left Behind legislation, the PSSA test, and related information on testing will continue to evolve and change from year-to-year.**

The PSSA Reading Assessment Handbook and related material can be found at the Pennsylvania Department of Education website: [www.pde.state.pa.edu](http://www.pde.state.pa.edu). The following information applies to those students taking or who will soon take the 11<sup>th</sup> grade Reading Assessment. These students often see the test as a waste of time and do not put the effort they can into taking the test. This casual approach to testing affects not only their test scores but that of the school and the district as well. Students do not understand the impact of testing poorly and in many cases have not acquired the skills necessary to perform as well as they might otherwise. According to an article in Education Digest on Teen Reading Proficiency (p 28) only 40% of all high school students can read well enough to understand their textbooks.

The information provided in the Guide is organized in three major categories: Students, Teachers, and Schools. Each category will discuss ways to ultimately help students to increase their PSSA Reading Assessment scores. This handbook is designed as a support tool for students, teachers, and schools. It is important to note that this information may be valuable in academic as well as Career and Technical settings.

## II. Students

The Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, PSSA, assesses students in order to provide information concerning their achievement and that of the schools and districts. The PSSA Reading Assessment is an assessment of reading comprehension, according to the *PSSA Reading Assessment Handbook*. The following information about the PSSA will: help students know what to expect on the PSSA Reading Assessment; provide study and reading tips; provide test preparation strategies; offer ideas to keep motivated; and provide information for parents. Students must realize that the workforce after high school often requires a higher reading level and proficiency than college freshman. Reading requirements for jobs are often above where students can read. Even simple everyday items require knowledge beyond high school level comprehension, items such as manuals for cars, televisions and videocassette recorders, and information for filing taxes.

### A. PSSA Reading Assessment

#### 1. Test Expectations

The PSSA Reading Assessment is composed of two types of questions: selected response items and performance tasks.

**Selected Response Items**, also known as multiple choice, are the well-known four option, one correct answer item. The student receives one point for choosing the correct answer.

Students may not use a dictionary or thesaurus during the selected response section of the assessment.

**Performance Tasks**, also known as constructed-response items or open-ended items, ask the student to respond in writing to reflect what he has read, extend meaning, express ideas, and incorporate prior/background knowledge with text-based information.

Students may have the *Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric* (see Appendix 1), a thesaurus, and a dictionary when responding in written form to performance tasks. These tools will be most useful and meaningful to students who have used them previously in school.

The Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric describes a range of performance requirements at each level from minimal to very accomplished. The Reading Assessment for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students expects to determine the skills and knowledge students have acquired. The knowledge and skills involved in the assessment include the following:

- Read and understand text content and documents in all academic areas.
- Distinguish opinion from fact.
- Determine essential and nonessential information and identify references.
- Evaluate organization and content to determine purpose and effectiveness.

## 2. Test Accommodations

### a. All Students

All students have accommodations available to them. The following paragraphs identify some of the major PSSA Reading Assessment accommodations for all students. A complete list of accommodations is available at [www.pde.state.pa.com](http://www.pde.state.pa.com).

**Time:** Extended time is available to students who need more time to finish the test without rushing. This extended time may be scheduled or requested by the student.

**Place:** Testing may be done in a separate room apart from the larger group, to reduce distractions, if needed.

*Dictionaries and Thesauri:* Students are permitted to use dictionaries, thesauri, and spelling or grammar checkers for the open-ended questions of the Reading assessment only.

**At the writing of this document, 2004 is the last year this accommodation will be allowed.**

*Paper:* Students may use scratch paper but any markings on the scratch paper will not be scored. All answers must be marked in the answer booklet. Students may also use graph paper, large lined, or widely spaced paper, as well as highlighters, place markers, and templates. All responses must be marked in the PSSA Answer booklet.

b. Students with Students with IEP's, 504 Plans, and English Language Learners

In addition to the accommodations available to all students, students with IEP's, 504 plans, and English Language Learners have additional accommodations available to them. Not every student within these groups will require accommodations. The following items list some of the available accommodations. A complete list of accommodations is available under the teachers' section within this document or at [www.pde.state.pa.com](http://www.pde.state.pa.com).

*Bilingual Dictionary:* Word-to-word dictionaries that translate native language to English or English to native language are allowed on the open-ended section of the Reading test. **This accommodation is new for 2004.**

*Qualified Bilingual Interpreter:* Interpreters may translate directions and clarify instructions for the Reading assessment. Interpreters may only translate the directions on the reading test. They may not translate or define words or phrases in passages or questions.

*Qualified Interpreter Signs Directions:* The assistance of a qualified interpreter may be used to interpret and clarify directions for the reading assessment.

*Braille Edition:* A Braille edition of the assessment booklet may be used.

*Large Print Edition:* A large print edition of the assessment booklet may be used for students with visual impairment.

*Signed Version:* Students may answer Reading questions via sign language (including on videotape).

*Simplifying Directions:* The test administrator may simplify the language of the directions, repeat directions as necessary, read directions in English or the native language, and have students explain directions aloud to confirm understanding.

## B. Study/ Reading Skills

### 1. Organization

In order to study effectively students need to be organized. There are many things that can be done to accomplish and maintain organization. The following items contain ideas to help with organization to aid in students' studying. These guidelines will help students learn more effectively leading to better grades and better test scores.

- Students should create a place where they can study well, a study environment. This helps students prepare mentally to study.
- Students should make sure to have the supplies they need on hand when needed whether in class or at home.
- Student notebooks should have dividers in a loose-leaf binder with the dividers labeled for each class. Homework and class notes will go in the binder as well.
- Students should keep an assignment book to help them see what assignments, projects, and tests are coming up. This allows the students to see what needs to be done first and give them enough study time.
- Note-Taking – Keep notes logical and legible. Again, the best place to keep notes is in a loose-leaf notebook with dividers to separate different classes. Notes should be dated and kept in order.
- Homework—Know what the homework is and how the teacher wants it done. The assignment should be written on an assignment sheet so the student can easily see what needs to be done.

### 2. Study Strategies

Many students in school today cannot manage their time properly. Time management is an important element of effective study skills. A lot of students would do better in school and learn if they managed their time better and learned how to study. Effective techniques for studying will help students apply themselves thereby allowing the student to gain an understanding of material, prepare for tests, and, finally, learn. Students need to commit to becoming an involved and active learner.

The following study skills can help students budget their time more wisely.

- Students must develop a schedule and plan for studying so that their time can be allocated properly. A good schedule will help students from wandering off-course. Schedules need to account for every class, lecture, social event, laboratory work, and any other work. The schedule should focus on “free time” and how the student will use that time. In every 24-hour day the student should plan whatever hours are available after taking out time for classes and sleeping. This planning will allow the student to see what hours are available to study and do homework. The student will know ahead of time what a day/week looks like and can plan accordingly. Students should know that a schedule may be revised if needed. A study plan should devote one half hour to one hour of study time a day.
- Students can study anywhere but some places are better than others. The place chosen to study should be as free of distractions as possible, especially for students who get off-task easily.
- Focus on one objective at a time and do not delay any tasks. Waiting will not make difficult tasks easier or unlikable tasks more fun. Difficult tasks should be done first meeting the challenge head-on.
- Begin projects/papers early. Do not wait until the last minute to begin bigger projects. Starting early will allow students to break a project or paper down into smaller parts, making it more manageable.

Students who have effective study strategies will be able to process information easier and relay the information back to others more successfully. The following study strategies should help students study more effectively.

- The SQ3R Method (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) has been shown to improve and sharpen study skills.

*Survey* – Get an overall idea of what material is being covered before going into detail.

*Question* – Ask questions while surveying the material. Read questions at the end of chapters/sections so that there will be ideas to be aware of when reading the information.

*Read* – Read to answer the questions that were brought out in the survey. Any bold or italicized print should receive special attention since authors often intend this material to receive special emphasis. Be sure to read everything, including graphs, pictures, and any other visual aids or special features. Items other than the text can often add insight not always gained from text alone.

*Recite* – Ask questions about what was just read and try to summarize the information. Highlight key points just read. To make the information more meaningful, try to relate the information to things already known.

*Review* – A review is a survey of what information has been covered. Rereading is an important part of the review process. This is also a good time to review notes to help clarify points that may have been missed or unclear.

- **Reading** – Read with a purpose. Know what the purpose of the reading is before reading. Often a student will read an assignment 3 or 4 times, each time with a different purpose.
- **Outlining Textbooks** – Use a highlighter to emphasize main points or key words. Do not highlight everything. This will make it difficult to figure out what is really important. Highlighted words stand out and are more easily remembered.
- **Taking Lecture Notes** – Notes should be accurate and to the point. Focus on the main point of the lecture. Write the main points down and reorganize them later in your words to make sure they make sense. When studying from these notes, take time to review and revise them. Reviewing the material will strengthen memory and will help build confidence.
- **Review all study information** by reading key points and testing your knowledge of the key points. Use a highlighter to mark all key points and go over these points to keep them fresh in your mind.
- **Use index cards** to write out important points. Use these cards like flashcard to study from. The cards can be used anywhere/anytime there is a free moment. Often rewriting the information will help sort out the material, especially if the information is in your own words.
- **Become part of a study group** or find a study partner. Several people reviewing the same material can often help to clarify information as well as offer new points of view.

### 3. Reading Strategies

High achieving students use many strategic skills such as goal setting, planning, self-monitoring (checking answers), asking for help, using aids, and using memory strategies. High achievers do more to self regulate their own learning.

Students must become active readers. Active readers approach a text knowing that they will need to do some work to understand and appreciate what they are reading. The following reading strategies can be used to help with reading and studying. Many of these strategies may be used to improve study skills as well.

## -- Knowledge Chart

Before reading, students list the main topic of the reading and then briefly list the things they already know about the topic, writing down short phrases.

After reading, students write new facts they learned from the reading. (Also see K-W-L charts in the teachers' section and Appendix 4 Worksheet 2.)

## Example Knowledge Chart setup:

## Prior Knowledge New Knowledge

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

-- Herringbone Pattern

This strategy is used after pre-reading, or skimming, a chapter/section. Pre-reading is important for understanding what the reading is going to be about, the main ideas, key words, and a general idea of what the reading will discuss. The student should be able to answer the questions who, what, why, when, where, how after pre-reading.

### Example Herringbone Pattern setup:

Who / When / Why / Main

Idea

What \ Where \ How \

## -- Two-Column Notes

This is a great way for students to create organized notes that can be used to study later. This note-taking tool can be used for reading textbooks or for taking notes from a lecture. The paper will be folded so the right edge is lined up with the left margin. Key ideas are written on the left margin with explanations on the right. This setup allows the student to fold the paper so that only the key words are exposed, or just the explanations. Students can study from these notes alone by simply folding the paper differently, one way defining the terms and then checking the answers from the right, or look at the explanations and define key terms. As with any notes, two-column notes should contain a title and date, and should list main ideas, topics, and keywords. List information and/or subtopics on right and leave extra space to make more notes on later. Notes should stay neat and complete.

## Example Two-Column Notes:

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Key Word -- definition

Idea -- subtopic

-- Index Cards

Index cards are portable so they can be used to study anywhere. One part of a concept or idea goes on one side of a card while the other completes the thought. This is a great study guide that can be used for self-testing technique. Index cards make it easier to concentrate on one item at a time

Example of Index Cards:

Vocabulary (this is an easy one and can be used to memorize any terms, meanings, or translations)

|                 |            |
|-----------------|------------|
| Front Side      | Back Side  |
| Vocabulary Word | Definition |

-- Fact Sheets

This is similar to outlining for a chapter in a textbook or notes taken during a class lecture. This process is the next step in that process. Once all notes are taken, fact sheets can further consolidate the information to make it more manageable. To complete a fact sheet simply write the information in the form of phrases or sentences on a sheet of paper, key ideas or phrases should be the focus of these notes. These notes are the notes to use for intensive and ongoing study over a period of time. Main ideas, important detail, specific terms, words, dates, names, facts, or procedures can all be made into key words for the fact sheet. Another form of a fact sheet is a word list. The word list puts a key word along with page numbers or lecture date that the work refers to.

Example of Fact Sheet (Word List)

Geopolitics (pp 324-326)

This shows what pages of the textbook to find more information if the students cannot come up with enough information.

Democracy (10/21)

The parenthetical note here refers to a lecture date. The student can go back to his/her notes to find more information on this topic.

-- Rereading

Students look back at the text to find support for an answer/opinion/position, or to find examples to contradict another's opinion/position. Rereading is an effort to target or zero in on specific text for its importance in demonstrating key concepts or definition. Rereading can also be used to practice student's ability to quickly locate information by using bold italicized words, titles, headings etc.

-- Response Sheet

Students take notes of key statements on the left and personal responses to them on the right. This helps connect text to prior knowledge, and provides a meaningful study guide later.

-- Text Rendering

Students are expected to mark their text as they read to focus on a few types of connections. If the text cannot be marked, try to provide sticky notes as an alternative. A typical text rendering might focus on three types of student-interaction. Using a code to simplify the process, the student might be directed to place a check (✓) next a few statements with which he/she agrees; an exclamation point (!) next to text that appears to state the main idea and a question mark (?) next to ideas that seem confusing. The teacher may require different types of associations to be made, with suitable symbols. Some students may need only one type of connection until they become accustomed to the coding system and able to handle more than one. (A sample of this may be found in the school section under "Successes from Other Schools").

-- Think-Pair-Share

This is a cooperative learning tool used to focus interaction and uncover different perspectives and prior knowledge. Students write down thoughts on the topic, discuss these thoughts with a partner and share meaningful ideas with the class. Students may use this tool independently with a friend to share ideas and thoughts on new information or when studying to confirm comprehension and refresh information.

-- Pictures

Students look at pictures/text box/sidebar and predict what the text is about.

-- Pre-write Questions

Students survey the text and create questions they think the text was designed to answer. This sets a purpose for reading. As

students read, they look for information should attempt to answer their questions.

#### -- Reflection

Students write about new information or perspectives learned, and describe how the new learning relates to previous understanding and future actions. Students need time to reflect on what they have heard in order for new learning to go into memory.

Reflection activities usually ask students to write a few lines in a journal or other record, and often a prompt or given question will be used to target student reflection. The value of reflection is obvious when it brings about an awareness of new learning.

### C. Test Preparation

There are many things students can do to prepare for tests from how to take care of their bodies to pointers during testing to keeping motivated. This section will discuss ways in which students can be prepared for test taking. These items include diet and exercise, test-taking strategies, and motivation.

#### 1. Diet and Exercise

Many students do not realize how important their diet and exercise can impact their schoolwork, especially for taking tests and doing well. A well-rounded diet with a regular exercise program can greatly improve a student's ability to tackle tough exams and even standardized tests. A well-rounded diet will give students a healthy body that will help develop an active mind. The following items are all important aspects to help develop a healthy mind and body for students.

*Sleep* – Students need to get a good night sleep, especially the night before a test. Students who have had a good night sleep can pay better attention and handle the demands of a test.

*Exercise* – Any physical activity is exercise. Walking, running, biking, swimming are all good ways to get exercise. Regular exercise is important for general health. Exercise also increases the flow of oxygen to the brain, which helps people keep alert. Any kind of exercise helps but exercise that is enjoyable and that will continue will have the greatest result in helping students remain healthy. Exercise is said to sharpen the mind and is a great stress reliever.

*Food* – Students need to eat a balanced diet and should eat regularly. Certain foods help people learn. Carbohydrates produce serotonin in the brain, which helps keep a person calm. High-carb foods include pasta and bagels. Choline found in fish, egg yolks, Soy products, oatmeal, rice,

peanuts, and pecans, helps build acetylcholine, a brain transmitter, which aids in memory. Vitamin C helps protect brain nerve cells and can be found in whole-grain bread, cereal, and citrus fruits. Vitamins B-3 and B-6 aid in concentration and can be found in fish, wheat germ and bananas.

Students should eliminate or restrict caffeine in their diet. Caffeine can increase anxiety but it also stimulates the nervous system. It is important to consume caffeine in moderation, as with all food.

*Before big exams students should get at least 8 hours sleep, eat a healthy balanced breakfast, and relax.*

## 2. Test Strategies

Once students know what to expect on a test, like the PSSA Reading Assessment, know how to study, and have prepared their bodies with through diet and exercise, they will be more prepared to actually take the test. The following discusses test strategies that students can use while taking The PSSA Reading Assessment (this information will also be useful for students in taking all reading related tests).

### General Tips –

- Read the directions carefully.
- Do not panic.
- Read all questions very carefully.
- Answer the easy questions first.
- Write on the test booklet to sort out your thoughts and keep notes.
- Write answers in the answer booklet.

### Selected Response Items (Multiple Choice)—

- Read the directions carefully.
- Read the entire question before answering – Consider all the possible answers before making a choice.
- Read the questions carefully.
- Determine the “best” answer. For difficult questions, eliminate some of the choices and then make an educated guess.
- Mark answers carefully. Filling in the right circle matters – If you know the answer to a question, double check that you filled in the right circle.
- Read all answer options before answering.
- Eliminate highly unlikely answers.
- Do not linger too long on any one question.
- A first response is typically correct, do not chance an answer unless you are certain the new answer is correct.

Go back after finishing the test to review answers. If you finish early, confirm your answers, especially the difficult questions.

**Performance Tasks (Constructed-Response Items) –**

Read directions carefully.

Read the questions first then the passage, this will give you an idea of what you are expected to answer.

Think before writing. Jot down important information and work it into an outline. Do this on a scrap piece of paper or on the test booklet.

Organize the response.

Write concisely without using abbreviations or nonstandard language. Be clear, direct, accurate, and complete. Show supporting evidence using appropriate concepts and language.

Get right to the point.

Keep on track and explain all the points with supporting evidence where necessary from the reading.

Review the answer making sure the paragraph flows and includes all points needed to answer the question.

**Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric** – Students should have knowledge of the PA Rubric. The Performance Tasks are graded based on this rubric; therefore students need to have knowledge of the rubric and how to use it. A copy of the Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric may be found in Appendix 1.

**Reading Assessment Anchors:** Students should be familiar with the Reading Assessment Anchors. These Anchors will help students understand what is expected of them on the PSSA Reading Assessment. The Assessment Anchors for Reading will focus on the first three standards 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3. The following is a summary of the Reading Assessment Anchors for grade 11.

**Grade 11**

**R11.A.Comprehension and Reading Skills**

**R11.A.1** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret fiction text, novel excerpt, and poetry.

**R11.A.2** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret nonfiction text, including informational, i.e. textbooks, editorials, autobiographies, and essays appropriate to grade level.

**R11.A.3** Analyze how a writer's use of words creates mood and how choice of words advances the theme or purpose of a fictional passage.

**R11.B.Interpretation and Analysis of Literature**

**R11.B.1** Analyze the relationships and uses of literary elements.  
**R11.B.2** Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.

**Reading Academic Standards:** Students still need to use and know the Reading Academic Standard Categories 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.8. Standards express clear expectations for what all students should know and be able to do. The following information is taken from the Reading Assessment Handbook. A copy of the standards can be found in Appendix 2, as well as at the PDE website.

- 1.1 – Learning to Read Independently
  - Purposes for Reading
  - Word Recognition Skills
  - Vocabulary Development
  - Comprehension and Interpretation
  - Fluency
- 1.2 – Reading Critically in All Content Areas
  - Detail
  - Inferences
  - Fact from Opinion
  - Comparison
  - Analysis and Evaluation
- 1.3 – Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature
  - Literary Elements
  - Literary Devices
  - Poetry
  - Drama
- 1.7 – Characteristics and Function of the English Language
  - Word Origins
  - Variations
  - Application
- 1.8 – Research
  - Selection
  - Location of Information
  - Organization

### 3. Motivation

According to Robert J. Milrod, PhD, the definition of motivation is: having the energy, endurance, and desire to do one's best and correctly complete each task.

Students need to become intrinsically (internally) motivated in their education. This means that the reward of learning/studying happens from doing well on tests and the sense of accomplishment that comes from doing well. Students can begin taking responsibility for their learning by seeing their

teacher(s) when they need help with a task or do not understand an assignment. Students who take responsibility understand that it is all right to ask for help.

Students should take an active part in their education. Once students have taken responsibility for their education they will begin to feel more motivated to do well and succeed. Students who come to class prepared and with a positive, enthusiastic, and hopeful attitude will feel better about class and more motivated to succeed. Students will begin to understand the benefit of school and doing their best. Students need to understand that teachers, administrators, and parents all care about their success in school.

Students are also extrinsically (externally) motivated in their education. External motivation can come from parents, teachers, or the community, to name a few. Students can be motivated to do well simply knowing that others want them to do well and succeed.

#### A. Information for Parents

Parents can go to the PDE website to access a page called “Parent’s Guide to Understanding the PSSA”. This site will give parents information about understanding your child’s individual student report, how to use the scores, special needs student information, and much more.

There are many ways parents can help their child do well not only on the PSSA Reading Assessment but in everyday classes and tests. There are many ways parents can help their child perform better on standardized tests. Parents must remember that test preparation is an ongoing long-term activity that can become part of everyday life.

##### 1. Test Preparation

Learning must be made the highest priority in children’s lives; they have no future without it. Parents must act on the knowledge that the link between academic effort and learning is powerful. Teachers routinely use quizzes and exams to check on students’ learning. These tests and quizzes are the most common and frequent tests your child takes in school. In addition to classroom tests, your child may take one or more achievement tests which schools are required to give each year, such as the PSSA Reading Assessment. These tests are used to gauge how well schools educate students as well as provide a snapshot of what children know. When your child takes an achievement test that the state requires, your child’s performance is compared with the performance of other students within the school district as well as the entire state.

There are some basic daily activities to help your child prepare for tests. Review the Students section of this guide to understand what it is your child is expected to know and strategies to help them be better prepared. It may be useful for parents to know the school's policies and guidelines on standardized tests and the use of the scores. It may also be useful to find out whether your child's school gives practice tests or if the school uses other ways to incorporate the PSSA format in the classroom.

There are several everyday activities that can prepare a child to take a test.

- Encourage your child to make a commitment to set goals and do well in school. The parents need to support this commitment.
- Demonstrate an interest in your child's school and homework. and check that homework is complete.
- Discuss with your child his/her academic performance by asking how he is doing in school.
- Encourage your child to ask questions.
- Provide a comfortable and quiet place for your child to study.
- Communicate with your child's teachers to discuss his/her progress.
- Make sure your child attends school regularly.
- Provide your child with a well-rounded diet. A healthy body leads to a healthy active mind.
- Do not be too anxious about a child's test scores. Test scores are not a perfect measure of what a child can do.
- Do not put added pressure on your child. Too much emphasis on test scores may make a child more anxious, increasing the chances for mistakes.
- Do encourage children. Offer praise for things they do well.

Parents can help their child reduce test anxiety. It does not help to tell a child to relax, but there are ways to help reduce test-taking anxiety.

Encourage your child to do the following:

- Get a good night's sleep.
- Eat a healthy, balanced meal the night before the test as well as a nutritious breakfast the day of the test. Rest exercise, and eating well are important test-taking as well as everyday activities.
- Read directions carefully.
- If he does not know the answer to a question, skip it and go on. Mark that question so that it he knows it is unanswered and return to the question later if there is time.

## 2. Reading Tips

Parents can help kids perform better in school, especially reading, by reading to their children. Reading is a learned behavior, not just a basic skill. It is easier to accomplish this with young children than older children but if the child has that foundation before going into high school, he/she will perform better in school. Good reading skills are important for success in school and doing well on tests. If your child's reading skills are not at the level they should be, talk to your child's teacher about ways to increase interest in reading and build reading skills. The following tips provide parents ways to engage their child in reading. Some of these tips may need to be modified for the age of the child but the focus continues to be for high school age children.

1. Provide your child with magazines about his/her individual interests. Older children can even read about current events. Talk with your child about the magazine and articles he/she reads.
2. Visit the local library. Your child can find books of interest to them, do research, and read magazines.
3. Encourage your child to build his/her own library. Include visits to bookstores during shopping trips.
4. Read with your child. Try to read a book a month with your child and use it as a springboard for conversations.
5. At the high school level, parents are encouraged to share with their child the concept of flashcards or index cards. Parents should show their child how these cards may be used to learn and study.

### 3. Communication

Kids do better in school, when parents are involved in their children's education. The level of involvement that parents are able to offer varies greatly from parent to parent. Whatever the level of involvement, make sure the involvement is consistent and stick with it as this involvement will make an important difference in the life of your child.

Parents need to communicate with their child, their child's teachers, and the school in order to help improve their child's education. The following information discusses ways in which parents can communicate better with their child, his/her teachers, and the school.

#### Communicate with your child –

- Encourage children and let them know what you expect from their school performance. Let them know that you want them to do well and succeed.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and if you do not know the answer, work with your child to find the answer.
- Make sure you know when tests and papers are due and when they return so that you and your child can go over these items together. On items where your child had

difficulty, discuss together what went wrong and how to correct it.

Communicate with your child's teachers –

- Meet the teachers and ask how you can support your child's learning at home.
- Attend parent-teacher conferences to ask how your child is doing and review his/her work.
- Ask the teachers if your child is learning what he/she needs to know to meet the standards set for her grade.
- If you have any questions or concerns, contact your child's teacher or counselor.
- Understand that tests are only one of the tools within a child's life of learning. Teachers also include daily class work, observations of the completion of classroom assignments, and conversations with you about how well your child is learning and what you can do together to increase your child's success in school.

Communicate with your child's school –

- Join the PTA or other parent group and go to school events such as back-to-school night, to see how, as a group, you can help the school reach its goals.
- Stay up-to-date on school policies, schedules and rules.
- Check your child's website regularly. If your school does not have a website encourage them to work on creating one.
- Ask questions about testing, such as:
  - Does my child's performance on state-required achievement tests match his performance in the classroom?
  - How do the school and the teachers use the test results?
  - How much time does my child spend taking tests during the school year?
  - In what other ways does the school and the teachers measure how well my child is learning?

- **Awareness** -- Parents need to become aware of the PSSA Reading Assessment Rubric, as well as the Anchors and Standards. These items communicate to the parents' expectations for learning and provide a common language for talking about the processes of learning and teaching. Awareness and comprehension of these items allow the parents to become more effective partners in their children's education.

- *Parental Involvement* -- New reporting provisions offer parents importance insight into their children's education, the professional qualifications of their teachers, and the quality of the schools they attend. The new legislation, added by the NCLB Act (Title I, Part A), ensures that parents have the information they need to make well-informed decisions for their children, more effectively share responsibility with the schools, and help the schools create successful and effective academic programs. More information on this legislation may be found at:  
[www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/parentinvguid.doc](http://www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/parentinvguid.doc).

- Resources for Parents –
  - Ed.gov – for information, events and announcements about NCLB and other information. This site is also the site for No Child Left Behind. See the parents' section at the top  
<http://www.ed.gov/>
  - Pennsylvania Department of Education – for Parents Section located at the top right of the homepage  
<http://www.pde.state.pa.us>
  - See your child's school website for more information.

### III. Teachers

The Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, PSSA, assesses students in order to provide information concerning their achievement and that of the schools and districts. The PSSA Reading Assessment is an assessment of reading comprehension, according to the *PSSA Reading Assessment Handbook*. The following information about the PSSA will: help teachers understand the PSSA; give tips for helping students improve study skills; offer ideas to motivate students; and provide teachers with strategies for improving reading performance.

#### A. PSSA Reading Assessment

##### 1. Test Expectations

The PSSA Reading Assessment is composed of two types of questions: selected response items and performance tasks.

***Selected Response Items***, also known as multiple choice, are the well-known four-option, one correct answer item. The student receives one point for choosing the correct answer.

These items are designed to measure concepts such as how well students comprehended the overall meaning of a passage or can make basic inferences about it.

**Performance Tasks**, also known as constructed-response items or open-ended items, ask the student to respond in writing to reflect what he has read, extend meaning, express ideas, and incorporate prior/background knowledge with text-based information.

Students may have the *Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric* (see Appendix 1), a thesaurus, and a dictionary when responding in written form to performance tasks. (2004 will be the last year that dictionaries and thesauri will be allowed during the Reading Assessment). These tools will be most useful and meaningful to students who have used them previously in school. Teachers need to present students with these items at the start of the school year so students become familiar with them and will be able to use them independently in a testing situation.

**Reading Assessment Anchors:** According to the PDE, Assessment Anchors clarify the standards assessed on the PSSA and can be used by educators to help prepare students for the PSSA. The Assessment Anchors are intended to anchor the state assessment system and the curriculum/instructional practices in the schools. The Assessment Anchors aim to clarify a specific set of standards. They do not replace the standards already in place but attempt to clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA. Teachers should become focused on the essential skills and knowledge in Reading and Mathematics that must be taught across the curriculum. All teachers, regardless of area, need to understand what teachers other subject areas need students to know/learn. All information concerning Assessment Anchors can be found at the PDE website.

The Anchors were developed with the following criteria in mind: clear, focused, aligned, grade appropriate, organized to support a curricular flow, rigorous, and manageable. The anchors for 11th grade will be revised at some point in the future to reflect the requirements of both the workplace and post-secondary institutions.

Teachers should be familiar with the Reading Academic Standard Categories 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.8. These standards will help guide the teacher in what to teach based on what is expected of the students on the PSSA Reading Assessment. Standards 1.7 and 1.8 are not specific to reading and for the most part these standards are better assessed at the district level. Due to the shift to create a clearer, more focused test using the new Assessment Anchors, the 2005 PSSA will only assess the first three reading standards. In general, the Anchors target the same comprehension skills at each grade level although the depth of knowledge required to comprehend the text increases in complexity over the years.

The Anchor Assessments will have two reporting categories instead of five. The new reporting categories are as follows:

| Reporting Category                           | Standard   |
|--|--|
| A. Comprehension and Reading Skills          | 1.1 (Learning to Read Independently) and 1.2 (Reading Critically in All Content Areas) |
| B. Interpretation and Analysis of Literature | 1.3 (Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature)                                   |

Within each Reporting Category there are some basic elements that are consistent across all of the grade levels.

**A. Comprehension and Reading Skills**

Three basic elements

- A.1 Fiction
- A.2 Non Fiction
- A.3 Author's Purpose

**B. Interpretation and Analysis of Literature**

- B.1 Literary Elements (i.e. plot, setting, character and theme)
- B.2 Literary Devices (i.e. alliteration, metaphor, figurative language)

The Reading Assessment Anchors have a different look to them compared to the standards and teachers need to be able to distinguish one anchor from another. The Reading Assessment Anchors begin with "R". The number after the "R" is the grade level (R11 would be Reading at eleventh grade). The second letter is the Reporting Category (A or B). The last number in the label is the actual Assessment Anchor (1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc.). For Example: **R11.A.1.1**= Reading Assessment Anchor at 11th grade (**R11**)  
**Comprehension and Reading Skills Reporting Category (A)**  
**Assessment Anchor Number 1 (1.1)**

-- Overview of Reading Assessment Anchors for Grade 11. For in depth examples of the Assessment Anchors with definitions, descriptions, and related sample questions see Appendix 3 or the PDE website.

**Grade 11**

**R11.A.Comprehension and Reading Skills**

- R11.A.1** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret fiction text, novel excerpt, and poetry.
- R11.A.2** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret nonfiction text, including informational, i.e. textbooks, editorials, autobiographies, and essays appropriate to grade level.
- R11.A.3** Analyze how a writer's use of words creates mood and how choice of words advances the theme or purpose of a fictional passage.

**R11.B.Interpretation and Analysis of Literature**

**R11.B.1** Analyze the relationships and uses of literary elements.  
**R11.B.2** Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.

**Reading Academic Standards:** Teachers must be sure that they use the Reading Academic Standard Categories 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.8 and that students are learning the Standards as well. All teachers are required to teach all of the standards and use local assessments to measure student progress. The Assessment Anchors do not replace the Standards. Standards encourage teachers to design curriculum, instruction, and assessment around what is important to learn. Learning based around the standards becomes more purposeful and intentional than most other curriculum. The Anchors simply clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA. All of these Standards will be used in other assessment applications other than the Reading Assessment for the PSSA. The standards must be addressed in the classroom and in the curriculum. The following information is taken from the Reading Assessment Handbook. A copy of the Standards can be found in Appendix 2, as well as at the PDE website.

The following information is taken from the Reading Assessment Handbook. A copy of the standards can be found in Appendix 2, as well as at the PDE website.

- 1.1 – Learning to Read Independently
  - Purposes for Reading
  - Word Recognition Skills
  - Vocabulary Development
  - Comprehension and Interpretation
  - Fluency
- 1.2 – Reading Critically in All Content Areas
  - Detail
  - Inferences
  - Fact from Opinion
  - Comparison
  - Analysis and Evaluation
- 1.3 – Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature
  - Literary Elements
  - Literary Devices
  - Poetry
  - Drama
- 1.7 – Characteristics and Function of the English Language
  - Word Origins
  - Variations
  - Application
- 1.8 – Research
  - Selection

## Location of Information Organization

### 2. Preparing Students for the PSSA

Teachers have many opportunities available to them to incorporate the PSSA testing strategies into everyday teaching. Teachers' need to incorporate the use of performance tasks, the *Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric* (Appendix 1), test-taking activities, as well as using items listed in the standards for daily activities. Teachers need to add test questions and homework assignments set up in the same manner as PSSA questions.

#### *Performance Tasks*

Teachers need to create Performance Tasks for their students to use at any opportunity within the classroom. These tasks should be related to everyday curriculum. Using performance tasks not only prepares students for the PSSA but also gives the students opportunities to read, learn, and follow up this learning by writing a clear concise well constructed answer. *Performance Task* is the term used to describe student responses in written form. These tasks used in the PSSA include the following elements, according to the PSSA Reading Assessment Handbook:

- Purpose Statement
- Performance Task
- Reminder Statements

Performance Tasks are designed to focus on comprehension of text in ways that selected-response items cannot. A written response allows students to reflect on what they have read, integrate background/prior knowledge with text-based information, expand meaning, and convey their ideas. These tasks are scored using the four-point Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric. One way teachers can assess their students on a regular basis is to give bi-weekly quizzes in PSSA format on current material by using performance tasks and selected response questions. This gives teachers an understanding of what is being learned. Timed quizzes can give the students an opportunity to be tested with time limits so that when they do face a timed test they will be less likely to panic. Teachers should select instructional techniques that allow them to accomplish their goals, are appropriate for their students, and are best suited to the reading material.

#### *Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric* (Appendix 1)

It is important to use the Pennsylvania Reading Assessment Rubric for the following purposes: this is the rubric accepted by the Commonwealth of

Pennsylvania; and written responses are scored to this rubric. “This scoring rubric clearly describes a range of performance requirements at each level from minimal to very accomplished. Each task is carefully constructed to reflect the scoring rubric and to be text-dependent.” (Reading p35) The rubric describes a hierarchy of responses containing all of the following three elements: 1) Understanding of the text is demonstrated through a response that is both factual and text-based; 2) Level of comprehension of the text is demonstrated through levels of thinking, from critical to evaluative, literal or personal responses. The levels associated with this rubric range from Level 0 where the student is non-scorable or off-task to Level 4 where the student cites evidence and demonstrates an understanding of the text. The full descriptions of each level can be found within the Rubric found in Appendix 1. Teachers need to provide instruction on and frequently use the Rubric and make it a part of the students’ continuing progress related to reading.

Although the scores, based on this rubric, for the performance tasks will be reported, these scores should be considered as only one indicator of student performance. Other indicators may include daily classroom performance, teacher-created assessments, portfolios, and standardized tests.

#### *Test-Taking Tips*

The following items are general test-taking tips that teachers can pass on to students to help them to prepare to take a test, whether it is the PSSA or a classroom test.

#### General Tips –

- Read the directions carefully.
- Do not panic.
- Read all questions very carefully.
- Answer the easy questions first.
- Write on the test booklet to sort out your thoughts and keep notes.
- Write answers in the answer booklet.

#### Selected Response Items (Multiple Choice)—

- Read the directions carefully.
- Read the entire question before answering – Consider all the possible answers before making a choice.
- Read the questions carefully.
- Determine the “best” answer. For difficult questions, eliminate some of the choices and then make an educated guess.
- Mark answers carefully. Filling in the right circle matters – If you know the answer to a question, double check that you filled in the right circle.
- Read all answer options before answering.
- Eliminate highly unlikely answers.

Do not linger too long on any one question.  
A first response is typically correct, do not chance an answer unless you are certain the new answer is correct.  
Go back after finishing the test to review answers. If you finish early, confirm your answers, especially the difficult questions.

Performance Tasks (Constructed-Response Items) –  
Read directions carefully.  
Read the questions first then the passage, this will give you an idea of what you are expected to answer.  
Think before writing. Jot down important information and work it into an outline. Do this on a scrap piece of paper or on the test booklet.  
Organize the response.  
Write concisely without using abbreviations or nonstandard language. Be clear, direct, accurate, and complete. Show supporting evidence using appropriate concepts and language.  
Get right to the point.  
Keep on track and explain all the points with supporting evidence where necessary from the reading.  
Review the answer making sure the paragraph flows and includes all points needed to answer the question.

### 3. Accommodations

#### a. Accommodations Available to All Students

All students have accommodations available to them. The following paragraphs identify some of the major PSSA Reading Assessment accommodations for all students. A complete list of accommodations is available at the PDE website.

##### Changes in Test Environment:

*Time:* Extended time is available to students who need more time to finish the test without rushing. This extended time may be scheduled or requested by the student.

Test administrators may schedule opportunities for students to move around the room and/or take breaks. Students must be monitored during breaks to ensure test security.

*Place:* Testing may be done in a separate room apart from the larger group, to reduce distractions, if needed.

Classroom adaptations including preferential seating arrangements or adaptive/special furniture (i.e. table space for large print materials, study carrel) may be helpful for students.

Assistive Devices/Special Arrangements:

*Dictionaries and Thesauri:* Students are permitted to use dictionaries, thesauri, and spelling or grammar checkers for the open-ended questions of the Reading assessment only.

**At the writing of this document, 2004 is the last year this accommodation will be allowed.**

*Paper, Templates, and Highlighters:* Students may use scratch paper but any markings on the scratch paper will not be scored. All answers must be marked in the answer booklet. Students may also use graph paper, large lined, or widely spaced paper, as well as highlighters, place markers, and templates. All responses must be marked in the PSSA Answer booklet.

*Typewriter, Word Processor:* If students normally use a typewriter or word processor as a part of their regular classroom accommodations they may use it on the PSSA. A test administrator must transcribe the student's responses into his/her PSSA Answer Booklet.

Adapted Test Forms:

*Audiotape:* Directions may be provided on audiotape.

Other Accommodations:

*Student Marks In Test Book:* Students may mark answers in test booklet. Highlighters may be used. Responses must be transferred onto the PSSA Answer Booklet.

*Reading Aloud:* Directions for all assessments may be read aloud. Test administrators may not define words.

*Simplifying Directions:* The test administrator may simplify the language of the directions, repeat directions, read directions in English or the native language, and have students explain directions aloud to confirm understanding.

- b. Students with Students with IEP's, 504 Plans, and English Language Learners

In addition to the accommodations available to all students, students with IEP's, 504 plans, and English Language Learners have additional accommodations available to them. Not every student within these groups will require accommodations. The following items list some of the available accommodations. A complete list of accommodations is available at [www.pde.state.pa.com](http://www.pde.state.pa.com).

### Assistive Devices

*Bilingual Dictionary:* Word-to-word dictionaries that translate native language to English or English to native language are allowed on the open-ended section of the Reading test. **This accommodation is new for 2004.**

### Assistive Devices/Special Arrangements:

*Braillewriter:* Can be used on the PSSA if the student uses it as part of their regular program.

*Bilingual Dictionary:* Word-to-word dictionaries that translate native language to English or English to native language. Word definitions are not allowed. May be used on the open-ended section of the Reading test.

*Qualified Bilingual Interpreter:* Interpreters may translate directions and clarify instructions for the Reading assessment. Interpreters may only translate the directions on the reading test. They may not translate or define words or phrases in passages or questions.

*Qualified Interpreter Signs Directions:* The assistance of a qualified interpreter may be used to interpret and clarify directions for the Reading assessment.

### Adapted Test Forms:

*Braille Edition:* A Braille edition of the assessment booklet may be used.

*Large Print Edition:* A large print edition of the assessment booklet may be used for students with visual impairment.

*Signed Version:* Students may answer Reading questions via sign language (including on videotape).

## **B. Teaching Study Skills**

Teachers need to set clear goals and teach students the techniques of studying. Teachers also need to teach students how to learn. Teachers can help students with their studying by stressing the ability to take notes, write summaries, self-test, create study plans, and time management. Students need to learn study skills that will help them understand and retain information. They need reading strategies to help them in all aspects of their education. Good reading strategies are necessary in all classes' students take in school. Reading strategies will also help students study more effectively.

### *Knowledge Base*

Teachers need to teach students the process of using their knowledge base to solve for an answer. In order to do this, teachers need to let the student know the objective of the question and how to develop a problem-solving solution, using materials and content knowledge. Teachers need to approach their teaching so that students use higher order thinking skills. These skills are called process skills. Such skills would come from open-ended reading tasks, answering multiple choice reading questions which require student-text interaction, and solving problems that are more thinking problems (logic and trial and error).

### *Study Skills*

Students who have effective study strategies will be able to process information easier and relay the information back to others more successfully. Teachers can help students develop effective study skills using the following study strategies.

- *The SQ3R Method* (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) has been shown to improve and sharpen study skills.

*Survey* – Get an overall idea of what material is being covered before going into detail.

*Question* – Ask questions while surveying the material. Read questions at the end of chapters/sections so that there will be ideas to be aware of when reading the information.

*Read* – Read to answer the questions that were brought out in the survey. Any bold or italicized print should receive special attention since authors often intend this material to receive special emphasis. Be sure to read everything, including graphs, pictures, and any other visual aids or special features. Items other than the text can often add insight not always gained from text alone.

*Recite* – Ask questions about what was just read and try to summarize the information. Highlight key points just read. To make the

information more meaningful, try to relate the information to things already known.

*Review* – A review is a survey of what information has been covered. Rereading is an important part of the review process. This is also a good time to review notes to help clarify points that may have been missed or unclear.

- **Reading** – Teach students to read with a purpose and know what the purpose of the reading is before reading. Reading is a primary means for students to acquire information. Often a student will read an assignment 3 or 4 times, each time with a different purpose. Students need to know how to determine the author's main idea and then understand it in a way that makes sense for them. They must then determine the important details related to the main idea.
- **Outlining Textbooks** – Use a highlighter to emphasize main points or key words. Do not highlight everything. This will make it difficult to figure out what is really important. Highlighted words stand out and are more easily remembered.
- **Taking Lecture Notes** – Notes should be accurate and to the point. Focus on the main point of the lecture. Write the main points down and reorganize them later in your words to make sure they make sense. When studying from these notes, take time to review and revise them. Reviewing the material will strengthen memory and will help build confidence.
- **Review all study information** by reading key points and testing your knowledge of the key points. Use a highlighter to mark all key points and go over these points to keep them fresh in your mind.
- Use index cards to write out important points. Use these cards like flashcard to study from. The cards can be used anywhere/anytime there is a free moment. Often rewriting the information will help sort out the material, especially if the information is in your own words.
- Go over material with another student or a study group. Several people reviewing the same material can often help to clarify information as well as offer new points of view.

### **C. Motivating Students**

Teachers must help students stay motivated. At some point students should become internally (intrinsically) motivated and teachers should be able to keep the students motivated by keeping the lessons interesting and even relating material to what is going on or what will happen, in a student's life

(graduation, finals, looking at colleges). Not all students are internally motivated and teachers may need to help students with their motivation by offering incentive systems and realize that not all students need extrinsic motivation. The following information will cover some basic information on how to help motivate students intrinsically and extrinsically.

There are many activities teachers can use to motivate students. The following are just a few of many ways that teachers can instill motivation in their students.

*Activities* -- Activity-based, student-centered lessons intrigue and hold students interest. Presenting material through an assortment of sensory modalities – visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and so on – to reach the full range of learning styles represented in the classroom. Offering different views of the same material will leave students a deeper, more comprehensive, understanding of the material. Challenge students with higher order thinking activities. Use activities that stimulate curiosity.

*Attitude* -- Create a supportive and positive environment. Also model persistence, cooperation, encouragement, and problem solving. Show enthusiasm.

*Praise* -- Focus on what students are doing right and praise them for that. Praise genuine effort and good grades.

*Communicate* -- Communicate positive and challenging expectations to students. Use stories, anecdotes, examples, and metaphors to enhance understanding. Relate content to students: their daily lives and their interests. Help students associate efforts to outcomes. Stimulate students to develop their own motivation. Provide immediate feedback to student responses.

*Teach Actively* -- Effective teachers are involved. Clarify goal setting and self-management. Develop meaningful learning outcomes. Use cooperative learning to allow students a sense of responsibility and accountability toward their peers rather than just toward their teacher.

Good lessons often begin with motivation. The motivation catches the learners' interest and focuses their attention on the lesson. It is important to maintain students' motivation throughout the lesson. Motivations may be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to topics that students like or enjoy. Effective intrinsic motivations are based on the knowledge of what is interesting or popular to students of a particular age. For instance, a lesson on the French and Indian War may be introduced to older students by discussing the book and the movie *Last of the Mohicans*. Picking out patterns in children's clothes may help introduce the lesson of patterns to young children.

A discussion about the stock market might help introduce a lesson on fractions to middle school students. Individual work gives further opportunity to use intrinsic motivation. The interests and likes of the individual can be used to spark and maintain their motivation.

Extrinsic motivation focuses on external rewards for good work or goal attainment. Extrinsic rewards are often more successful when used with more routine work. Extrinsic motivations may offer a suitable reward for completing an assignment or other acceptable performance. Rewards should be established for activities that most students can achieve and unnecessary competition should be avoided. For example, you may grant free time to students who finish a routine but necessary assignment. You may offer a trip or party for the whole class if a project is successfully completed. Special education programs offer token reinforcement where students receive or lose points or tokens for appropriate or inappropriate activity.

The lesson should maintain motivation throughout. The following guidelines for teaching lessons will help the students remain motivated. Lessons will be more motivating if the objective is clear and unambiguous, give the students stimulating tasks at an appropriate level, and catch and hold the students' attention, and allow the students some choices. Students will be motivated if they believe that the lesson has to do with them, like the topic or activities, believe that they will succeed, and have a positive reaction to your efforts to motivate them.

Praise can be used effectively as the extrinsic motivation during a lesson. Praise must be given for a specific accomplishment (including effort) to be successful and it must focus on the student's behavior. Praise does not compare behavior with other students or establish competitive situations.

#### D. Reading Strategies

Teachers need to be aware that high achieving students use many strategic skills such as goal setting, planning, self-monitoring (checking answers), asking for help, using aids, and using memory strategies. High achievers do more to self regulate their own learning. This is also true in reading. High achieving students tend to use many reading strategies and self-regulate their reading. Lower achieving students often need more help incorporating reading strategies, as well as other strategies, so they may perform better in school.

Students must become active readers. Active readers approach a text knowing that they will need to do some work to understand and appreciate what they are reading. The following reading strategies can be used to help students with reading, as well as studying. The following strategies are especially helpful for students who struggle with reading and comprehension.

### -- Scaffolding Instruction -

Scaffolding is a temporary instructional support strategy used to assist a student during initial learning where by temporary use of prompts, graphic organizers, question cues and other techniques are used to help students bridge the gap between current abilities and a set goal. Scaffolding involves providing a child with more support in the early stages of learning and then decreasing the support as the child is able to do more with success. This may use clues, reminders, encouragement, breaking a problem down in to steps, using examples, or any other means to allow students to grow as an independent learner (Slavin 261). The following discussion will involve six scaffolding activities. Any activity that uses scaffolding for a reading passage assists struggling readers in gaining comprehension of the text. Once the skill the scaffold intended to help has been mastered, the scaffold should be withdrawn. Scaffolding a reading passage offers the teacher a flexible plan that takes into consideration: the particular group of students; the text they are reading; and the purpose for reading the text. Scaffolding a reading experience also provides methods to enhance student engagement with the text, allowing for deeper understanding of knowledge. The advantages of scaffolding allow the following:

- A temporary support structure to assist the student's comprehension of text.
- A support structure that allows students to complete tasks and gain knowledge.
- Activities, which can be used to self-monitor and internalize reading skills.
- Activities that provide ways for students to discuss and write about reading passages.

Scaffolding instruction offers: a plan to develop independent readers; a temporary support plan which should be removed when the learner reaches an independent reading level and can self-monitor their reading; and an instructional framework. The instructional framework of a scaffold involves three components: initiating students toward reading at independent levels, constructing meaning from the text, and utilizing text meanings to apply or act upon the meanings students have constructed. As with any reading activity teachers should explain the scaffold, clarify key ideas, model use of the scaffold, demonstrate, if necessary, and guide the student using the scaffold activity.

The scaffolding activities are grouped by pre-reading, during reading, and after reading activities.

#### **Pre-Reading Scaffolds:**

##### **■ Two Minute Preview:**

The Two Minute Preview provides students with an overview of the selection; helps students develop a plan

for reading a selection; previewing a reading passage can help students become active and engaged with the text. Often students jump into a reading assignment without preparing properly and then fail to remember or comprehend what they read. Previewing can help students become active readers. Teachers may use the Two Minute Preview by providing the class with a brief outline or a reprint of Worksheet #1 “The Two Minute Preview” found in Appendix 4. The guiding questions may vary depending on the type of material being read and the purpose of the reading.

In pairs, the students are given two minutes to preview the material and write down their answers to questions on the worksheet.

Then, the teacher leads a discussion in developing a strategic plan for reading the material. Teachers should prepare students to look for any of the following text structure or format ideas listed: Introduction or key themes/main ideas; Headings or sub heads; summary; Pictures and captions; Steps or procedures; Margin notes; Graphs, charts, maps, or tables; or Questions.

■ K-W-L Scaffold:

K-W-L is a widely used strategy to foster active reading. The three parts consist of:

K-What do I already know?

W-What do I want to find out?

L-What did I learn, and still need to learn?

K-W-L provides structure which: activates prior knowledge, builds upon prior knowledge, and elicits student input. This strategy is used when a new topic or reading selection is given. It is useful to get students brainstorming as a class and record the K column of the scaffold. While brainstorming, the teacher may decide to categorize and organize the information. This strategy can be used before, during and after the reading process.

Teachers should distribute a K-W-L worksheet to each student, see Appendix 4 Worksheet #2 “The K-W-L Worksheet” for a sample worksheet. Students then brainstorm individually, in pairs, or in small groups about what they already know about the given topic. This information is recorded under the **K** column and displayed for the class.

Next students generate a list of questions they want answered or what they want to learn from the reading selection. This information is recorded in the **W** column of the scaffold.

Students then read the selection with the purpose of discovering information to answer the questions they generated. This information is recorded in the L column of the scaffold and is displayed for the class.

Finally, teacher and students reflect on the entire experience.

### **During Reading Scaffolds:**

#### ■ Key Questions:

This scaffolding strategy is designed to help students process the basic elements (Who? What? When? Where? And How?) of what they read. Students use this scaffold to note and present information to a small group or the whole class. Key Questions is used when working with readers who have trouble comprehending at the literal level. This scaffold is also used to present the new information to help integrate it into existing schemata and when teachers need a quick informal assessment tool to judge student reading performance on a text passage.

The procedure for Key Questions follows:

1. Teacher models five key questions in a selection helping them process the basic elements of Who? What? When? Where? And How?
2. Students read and record information to answer the five key questions using the key questions worksheet. (See Appendix 4 Worksheet #3).
3. Students may design a flipchart of notes.
4. Students present the information orally to the class.

Students can work as individuals, pairs, small group or large group.

Key Questions Scaffold is excellent for identifying the main and supportive ideas, main idea note taking or for summarizing processes. This can also be used as an assessment tool.

#### ■ Note Taking Skills:

Effective note taking is one of the most important skills students can develop. Real value in note taking is revisiting the notes and organizing, reacting, and using them in some way. Revisiting notes and using them in classroom instruction leads to deeper understanding and integration into one's schema. There are many kinds of note taking systems but any note taking system should portray information in an

organized manner that can be adapted for visual and verbal presentations.

To perform note taking using the R3 System students should: Read the text Passage.

**Record** important notes.

**Respond** to the notes by writing questions and answering those questions.

**React** by writing a summary about what they are learning.

Teachers and students should work on this scaffold together. The real value in note taking comes from returning to the notes and reacting, organizing, and adding to the notes in some way. The teacher provides practice for students on the system of note taking. The teacher also provides students with useful experiences for students to use their notes, such as completing a project, solving a problem, or writing for a publication. (See Appendix 4 Worksheet #4 for a sample format of the R3 system.)

### After Reading Scaffolds

#### ■ Think Alouds:

This scaffold helps students understand the thinking required by a specific task. The teacher models the thinking process as he/she reads aloud. Students see how the teacher constructs meaning from new text content and unfamiliar vocabulary. The think aloud includes: reading aloud, developing questions, making predictions as you read, explaining how one connects new content with prior knowledge, and verbalizing thoughts.

Reading is a complex process that involves thinking and logic processing. Teachers should select a passage to read aloud to the class that contains points the students may find difficult to read. While you read, verbalize to the class your thoughts and questions you have developed, and the process you used to solve comprehension problems. Teachers may use Worksheet #5 provided in Appendix 4 to help students work their way through the think aloud strategy.

#### ■ The Last Word Strategy

The Last Word is a writing to learn activity used at the end of a reading or discussion. Students spend the last ten minutes of class completing the Last Word Writing Guide (Appendix 4 Worksheet #5). In the guide, students write the teacher a short letter about information they do not

understand, need clarified, or reviewed. Students also summarize key points they learned from the lesson. Besides revealing to students what they do not know, this writing task can inform the teacher about what information needs clarified or reviewed during the next lesson.

-- Reciprocal Teaching

Reciprocal Teaching refers to an instructional activity that takes place in the form of a dialogue between teachers and students regarding segments of text structured by four strategies. These strategies include predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing. The purpose of Reciprocal Teaching is to facilitate a group effort between teacher and students as well as among students in the task of bringing meaning to the text. In order for this teaching technique to work, teachers must devote time to explaining the four strategies so the students can apply them to the new material.

Students begin with *predicting* what the reading selection appears to be about after they have examined it. To do this they take into account subtitles boldfaced terms, pictures, and graphic information. New material often contains ideas and concepts that are not completely clear while students read them.

In *clarifying*, they concentrate on ideas, words, and even pronunciations that may need further clarification. Other students may offer help as well as the teacher. Once the students have read a portion of the selection, they are encouraged to ask *questions* at a variety of comprehension levels. Other members of the collaborative group may offer answers to these questions. When the questioning session is complete, students begin summarizing what they have read and discussed. Several options are available for the *summarizing* strategy including: asking students to create a written summary as a group, creating a semantic map, identifying the most important terms in the selection, or producing an informal outline.

Proficient readers use these strategies whenever they encounter new content material. Reciprocal teaching is a way to foster these strategies in all readers, proficient and struggling, in order to make the technique a beneficial mental habit.

Students must be prepared for reciprocal teaching. Palinesar and Brown (1986) suggested several steps for accomplishing this goal.

1. Instruction: carefully explain and define each of the four strategies (predicting, clarifying, questioning,

summarizing). These are abstract terms and it should not be assumed that students understand them.

2. **Modeling**: using selections familiar to students, illustrate how to apply the strategies. Encourage students to contribute to the teacher-led examples by generating questions and predictions of their own. Students should also contribute to the summaries.
3. **Guided Practice**: As new selections are introduced, progressively shift the responsibility for utilizing the strategies to the students.

The next step in reciprocal teaching is to conduct the reciprocal teaching lesson. Once the students have been properly exposed and experienced in applying the four strategies in a guided lesson, it is time to allow the students to take more responsibility with the lesson from beginning to end. Students should be assigned in groups of four to six without considering reading proficiency. The reading selection is introduced to the students much like other reading assignments as the teacher briefly introducing the topic and linking it to previous subject matter. The teacher does not introduce the material in great detail since the students will be assisting each other throughout questioning and clarifying. The teacher should post the strategies involved in reciprocal teaching so that students can reference them as needed.

During each reciprocal teaching session, one student acts as “teacher” to guide the group from one strategy to another and from one page to the next, and to keep the group on-task. The role of “teacher” will rotate within the group from one reciprocal teaching session to another. Unless the teacher feels the group needs changing, the reciprocal teaching groups remain stable over time.

The teacher can make expectations for a specific reciprocal teaching session by posting them on the board or displaying them on an overhead. The teacher’s role during the reciprocal teaching session is to monitor student activity by roaming among the groups. Teachers may need to ask questions, provide prompts, suggest clarifications, or take other actions to ensure the groups remain on task. The following is a sample of directions that could be given for a reciprocal teaching lesson followed by a sample of a listing of the four strategies.

**--Sample Directions for a Reciprocal Teaching Lesson**

1. Reciprocal teach the article on pages 23, 24, and 25.
2. As a group, design a poster that you, as business owners, would post to educate the public about recycling. Use your notebooks to gather your ideas

together and then have your “teacher” pick up markers and poster board from Mrs. K.  
 (Hint: Illustrate or list reasons for the business to recycle and what is being recycled. Remember, you are looking to retain customer loyalty.)

--Sample Display of the Four Strategies

Reciprocal Teaching—Four Strategies

*Predict*  
 Make an educated  
 guess about what  
 will happen in the  
 reading

*Question*  
 Ask a question about the reading

**READ**

*Clarify*  
 Define words that  
 are unclear or difficult

*Summarize*  
 Review what was read

Other ways to help with reading strategies:

- Include test questions and homework assignments prepared in the same format as PSSA questions.
- Devise writing prompts, especially those that require reading first, based in the content area.
- In classes that do not typically have assignments which require a written answer, such as math, have students determine answers in the normal way and then have them write out the steps needed to find the answer.
- Require written responses and multiple-choice questions with any reading materials.
- Teach students vocabulary prior to the lesson, help with pronunciations, and if students need definitions have them look the word up in the dictionary.
- Use Word Splash: Write new vocabulary on the board or on a handout and have the students use the words in 5-6 sentences. These pages will be collected so that the teacher can assess which words students do not know or understand fully and then the teacher will be able to emphasize these terms in future lessons.
- Use worksheets for all activities. Examples of some of these worksheets may be found in Appendix 4.

### Resources for Teachers:

- Teacher's text and supplements. In recent texts, publishers have included performance tasks or they can be purchased separately.
- PDE website –  
[www.pde.state.edu](http://www.pde.state.edu)
- Pennsylvania Literary Framework (PLF)
- Intermediate Units
- CTE Resource – Virginia based site for Career and Technical educators.  
[www.cterelsource.org](http://www.cterelsource.org)
- RubiStar – Free resource to help teachers make quality rubrics  
[www.rubistar.4teachers.org](http://www.rubistar.4teachers.org)
- USA Today – Website has instructional materials for use with their newspaper, includes math and reading.  
[www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm)
- What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) – Provides evidence of what works in education.  
[www.w-w-c.org](http://www.w-w-c.org)
- Education World – Website offers information on lesson planning, school issues, technology integration, and more.  
[www.educationworld.com](http://www.educationworld.com)

## IV. Schools

Few high schools have reading programs that teach students basic and advanced reading skills and strategies. Many high school students are expected to learn reading strategies independently when what they really need is explicit instruction before they master advanced reading strategies. Adolescents who lack basic literary skills need intensive, sustained, and focused instruction to help them catch up to their peers. Schools must realize the importance of a solid reading foundation for all students. Students who do not read well or comprehend what they are reading are at a distinct disadvantage compared to students who have acquired these skills.

The Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, PSSA, assesses students in order to provide information concerning their achievement and that of the schools and districts. The PSSA Reading Assessment is an assessment of reading comprehension, according to the *PSSA Reading Assessment Handbook*. The following information about the PSSA will: update schools about what to expect on the PSSA Reading Assessment and how to use the data results; provide information on ways to improve the learning environment; and offer ideas for improving school performance.

### A. PSSA Reading Assessment

1. Reading Assessment Anchors and Academic Reading Standards

Schools must be sure that teachers are trained concerning Assessment Anchors and Academic Reading Standards and hold teachers accountable for demonstrating their use within the classroom.

**Reading Assessment Anchors:** According to the PDE, Assessment Anchors clarify the standards assessed on the PSSA and can be used by educators to help prepare students for the PSSA. The Assessment Anchors are intended to anchor the state assessment system and the curriculum/instructional practices in the schools. The Assessment Anchors aim to clarify a specific set of standards. They do not replace the standards already in place but attempt to clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA. The Anchors should enable schools to become more focused on the essential skills and knowledge in Reading and Mathematics that must be taught across the curriculum. All information concerning Assessment Anchors can be found at the PDE website, or see Appendix 3 for information concerning Anchors (all information in Appendix 3 may be found at the PDE website: [www.pde.state.pa.us](http://www.pde.state.pa.us)).

The Anchors were developed with the following criteria in mind: clear, focused, aligned, grade appropriate, organized to support a curricular flow, rigorous, and manageable. The anchors for 11th grade will be revised at some point in the future to reflect the requirements of both the workplace and post-secondary institutions.

Schools must be familiar with the Reading Academic Standard Categories 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.8. These standards will help guide the school and teachers in what to teach based on what is expected of the students on the PSSA Reading Assessment. Standards 1.7 and 1.8 are not specific to reading and for the most part these standards are better assessed at the district level. Due to the shift to create a clearer, more focused test using the new Assessment Anchors, the 2005 PSSA will only assess the first three reading standards. In general, the Anchors target the same comprehension skills at each grade level although the depth of knowledge required to comprehend the text increases in complexity over the years.

The Anchor Assessments will have two reporting categories instead of five. The new reporting categories are as follows:

| Reporting Category                           | Standard   |
|--|--|
| A. Comprehension and Reading Skills          | 1.1 (Learning to Read Independently) and 1.2 (Reading Critically in All Content Areas) |
| B. Interpretation and Analysis of Literature | 1.3 (Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature)                                   |

Within each Reporting Category there are some basic elements that are consistent across all of the grade levels.

**A. Comprehension and Reading Skills**

Three basic elements

- A.1 Fiction
- A.2 Non Fiction
- A.3 Author's Purpose

**B. Interpretation and Analysis of Literature**

- B.1 Literary Elements (i.e. plot, setting, character and theme)
- B.2 Literary Devices (i.e. alliteration, metaphor, figurative language)

The Reading Assessment Anchors have a different look to them compared to the standards and teachers need to be able to distinguish one anchor from another. The Reading Assessment Anchors begin with "R". The number after the "R" is the grade level (R11 would be Reading at eleventh grade). The second letter is the Reporting Category (A or B). The last number in the label is the actual Assessment Anchor (1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc.). For Example: **R11.A.1.1**= Reading Assessment Anchor at 11th grade (**R11**)  
Comprehension and Reading Skills Reporting Category (**A**)  
Assessment Anchor Number 1 (**1.1**)

-- Overview of Reading Assessment Anchors for Grade 11. For in depth examples of the Assessment Anchors with definitions, descriptions, and related sample questions see Appendix 3 or the PDE website.

**Grade 11**

**R11.A.Comprehension and Reading Skills**

- R11.A.1** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret fiction text, novel excerpt, and poetry.
- R11.A.2** Demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret nonfiction text, including informational, i.e. textbooks, editorials, autobiographies, and essays appropriate to grade level.
- R11.A.3** Analyze how a writer's use of words creates mood and how choice of words advances the theme or purpose of a fictional passage.

**R11.B.Interpretation and Analysis of Literature**

- R11.B.1** Analyze the relationships and uses of literary elements.
- R11.B.2** Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.

**Reading Academic Standards:** Schools need to ensure that teachers and students still use the Reading Academic Standard Categories 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7 and 1.8. For all districts and schools, the standards provide a focus for developing new ways to organize curriculum content, assessment plans, and

instructional-delivery systems. The Assessment Anchors do not replace the Standards. All teachers are still required to teach all of the standards and use local assessments to measure student progress. The Anchors simply clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA. All of these Standards will be used in other assessment applications other than the Reading Assessment for the PSSA. The standards must be addressed in the classroom and in the curriculum. The following information is taken from the Reading Assessment Handbook. A copy of the standards can be found in Appendix 2, as well as at the PDE website.

1.1 – Learning to Read Independently

- Purposes for Reading
- Word Recognition Skills
- Vocabulary Development
- Comprehension and Interpretation
- Fluency

1.2 – Reading Critically in All Content Areas

- Detail
- Inferences
- Fact from Opinion
- Comparison
- Analysis and Evaluation

1.3 – Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature

- Literary Elements
- Literary Devices
- Poetry
- Drama

1.7 – Characteristics and Function of the English Language

- Word Origins
- Variations
- Application

1.8 – Research

- Selection
- Location of Information
- Organization

2. PSSA Data Results

The PSSA data results need to be scrutinized by schools and school districts in order to understand how the students within the school/school district are performing on the PSSA and what areas need improvement. Schools can look at the school as a whole, subgroups, or each individual student. Each year the data results will show how these groups compare to the state PSSA results as well as comparing school results to the performance from previous years. These comparisons become the basis

for understanding the performance levels within the school and the district.

The data results show: who took the test, how the school did (advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic), and what areas to focus on next. There are several websites available to provide this information to schools and school districts. The first website to consider is [www.schoolresults.com](http://www.schoolresults.com) where schools can compare themselves with other schools and see better performing schools. These comparisons may shed light best practices being used in other schools that could be adapted for schools needing change. The schools can also look at their own reports at this website to see how all the numbers break down as well as how they compare to the state average. The school results website offers information about the PSSA school information as well as school districts.

Once the selected school is located, they may then use four tools for gathering more information. The four tools available are as follows.

1. Quick Compare will show schools in alphabetical order. The user can check up to four other schools in order to compare the initial school. Once the four schools are selected and the quick compare option is clicked, the four schools will be shown in columns next to the initial school. The option is also available to click on the selected comparison schools to view their entire report as well.
2. JFTK Opportunity Gap shows how each school in the state performed compared to the highest performing schools with similar or more disadvantaged students. This tool offers:
  - Opportunity Gap Bars show the difference in proficiency levels between the selected school and the top comparable schools.
  - Top Comparable Schools shows the actual numbers and percentages used to compare the selected school and comparable schools.
  - Multi-Year Summary shows the performance growth or decline over multiple years as compared with the top comparable schools.
3. S&P Ramp Analyzer allows the school to choose what part of the data to look at (i.e. Grade 11 Reading Proficiency, All Students) as a graph that shows the current proficiency level as well as how the gap to 100% proficiency. This graph shows the size of the challenge the school/district faces in order to reach the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014.
4. Better Performers tool allows the school or district to compare themselves to better performers from their state or district using different measures, from attendance rate or

reading proficiency, to grade or student group, as well as many other measures. These choices will yield a list of schools to compare to the initial school.

Another option to review data is at [www.sp-ses.com](http://www.sp-ses.com), Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services. Information is available here under school, district, and state data analysis and provides information concerning academic, financial and socioeconomic indicators, benchmark comparisons, and trends. Schools may also find written reports from S&P District Observation as well as Administrator Commentary. The tools available at this site for comparing and improving schools include: *Better Performers*™ to find schools or districts achieving better results, *Quick Compare* to create side-by-side comparisons of schools and districts, and Return on Resources to understand the relationship between spending and achievement. Other options available in the future involve: customized data and reports for parents, homebuyers, taxpayers, and school leaders.

The information provided in these reports allows schools to identify other schools in the state, county, or district that are performing better on the PSSA Reading Assessment. These better performing schools may be able to provide information to help other schools learn what works to perform better as well. Schools and Districts need to gather data from tests, analyze the data in order to find gaps in scores (areas where students are not performing well), make sure that the curriculum covers these gaps and then finally share strategies within the school, the district as well as in the state.

Schools need to be aware that significant gains in performance are usually followed by periods of flat performance. The flat periods allow the teachers to consolidate and expand knowledge and practices taught in earlier stages. They also allow schools time to diagnose and pinpoint obstacles to the next stage of performance improvement. Flat periods, although expected and necessary, are often seen as failures until performance levels begin to increase. Performance expectations under NCLB are not entirely linear – states can hold performance standards for schools constant for up to 3 years as long as state targets rise to 100 percent proficiency by 2014.

### 3. Accommodations

#### a. Accommodations Available to All Students

All students have accommodations available to them. Schools must know and understand these accommodations and educate their teachers about them as well. The following paragraphs identify some of the

major PSSA Reading Assessment Accommodations available for all students. A complete list of accommodations is available at the PDE website.

Changes in Test Environment:

*Time:* Extended time is available to students who need more time to finish the test without rushing. This extended time may be scheduled or requested by the student.

Test administrators may schedule opportunities for students to move around the room and/or take breaks. Students must be monitored during breaks to ensure test security.

*Place:* Testing may be done in a separate room apart from the larger group, to reduce distractions, if needed.

Classroom adaptations including preferential seating arrangements or adaptive/special furniture (i.e. table space for large print materials, study carrel) may be helpful for students.

Assistive Devices/Special Arrangements:

*Dictionaries and Thesauri:* Students are permitted to use dictionaries, thesauri, and spelling or grammar checkers for the open-ended questions of the Reading assessment only.

**At the writing of this document, 2004 is the last year this accommodation will be allowed.**

*Paper, Templates, and Highlighters:* Students may use scratch paper but any markings on the scratch paper will not be scored. All answers must be marked in the answer booklet. Students may also use graph paper, large lined, or widely spaced paper, as well as highlighters, place markers, and templates. All responses must be marked in the PSSA Answer booklet.

*Typewriter, Word Processor:* If students normally use a typewriter or word processor as a part of their regular classroom accommodations they may use it on the PSSA. A test administrator must transcribe the student's responses into his/her PSSA Answer Booklet.

Adapted Test Forms:

*Audiotape:* Directions may be provided on audiotape.

Other Accommodations:

*Student Marks In Test Book:* Students may mark answers in test booklet. Highlighters may be used. Responses must be transferred onto the PSSA Answer Booklet.

*Reading Aloud:* Directions for all assessments may be read aloud. Test administrators may not define words.

*Simplifying Directions:* The test administrator may simplify the language of the directions, repeat directions, read directions in English or the native language, and have students explain directions aloud to confirm understanding.

b. Students with Students with IEP's, 504 Plans, and English Language Learners

In addition to the accommodations available to all students, students with IEP's, 504 plans, and English Language Learners have additional accommodations available to them. Not every student within these groups will require accommodations. The following items list some of the available accommodations. A complete list of accommodations is available at [www.pde.state.pa.com](http://www.pde.state.pa.com).

Assistive Devices

*Bilingual Dictionary:* Word-to-word dictionaries that translate native language to English or English to native language **are allowed** on the open-ended section of the Reading test. **This accommodation is new for 2004.**

Assistive Devices/Special Arrangements:

*Braillewriter:* Can be used on the PSSA if the student uses it as part of their regular program.

*Bilingual Dictionary:* Word-to-word dictionaries that translate native language to English or English to native language. Word definitions are not allowed. May be used on the open-ended section of the Reading test.

*Qualified Bilingual Interpreter:* Interpreters may translate directions and clarify instructions for the Reading assessment. Interpreters may only translate the directions on the reading test. They may not translate or define words or phrases in passages or questions.

*Qualified Interpreter Signs Directions:* The assistance of a qualified interpreter may be used to interpret and clarify directions for the Reading assessment.

Adapted Test Forms:

*Braille Edition:* A Braille edition of the assessment booklet may be used.

*Large Print Edition:* A large print edition of the assessment booklet may be used for students with visual impairment.

*Signed Version:* Students may answer Reading questions via sign language (including on videotape).

## B. Improving School Performance

There are many strategies available to schools and districts to improve the reading performance in the school, student by student. The first step in this improvement in terms of the PSSA Reading Assessment test is to understand and be familiar with PSSA testing. The best way to improve reading scores for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students is to begin the reading push in the middle school. This way students have reading strategies and test-taking skills embedded into their everyday schooling. It should also come from across the curriculum.

Improving students reading proficiency will help students in all aspects of their education. Students who read well do better. The following information contains strategies to help schools focus on student achievement.

1. Establish *high expectations* and clear standards that focus on results. The school, principal, teachers, and all staff must make it understood that the students are expected to do the work and expected to do it well. When students know that everyone in the school expects them to behave this way, they are more likely to succeed. Administrators must support and enforce this effort and ensure that ALL students know that there are high expectations in the school as a whole as well as in every classroom this creates a culture of achievement. Results become the focus, in this environment, for evaluation and development methods. A can-do attitude within a school will help students succeed.
2. *Curriculum becomes coordinated* both horizontally (with other teachers) and vertically (in line with school district and state standards). School curriculum needs to align with state and local assessments and standards as well. The school must facilitate discussions of teachers from different grades so that they may

understand better where the students have been and where they are headed. The administration needs to serve as a resource for the staff as well to help them understand the cross-curriculum development, how it works and why it is needed. Some math teachers, for instance, may not feel it that their math course should include reading on a consistent basis, but administrators can help them understand why it is so important and may also have the contacts to direct these teachers to other teachers who have already incorporated reading everyday into the math curriculum.

3. Schools should set up a *consistent reading program* school-wide. However the school decides to implement a reading program there are ways to help it succeed. Reading programs contain some of the following strategies.
  - Coherent reading programs should be implemented at every level.
  - Read aloud to students at all levels.
  - Focus on fluency and understanding.
  - Use writing for a variety of purposes in every classroom.
  - Develop vocabulary from every lesson whether planned experiences, projects, or daily work.
4. Teachers and students need to be monitored to make sure that what is measured is getting across to students in the classroom and that teachers are providing the necessary instruction. Schools may do this by: gathering teachers' lesson plans and reviewing them to see how they fit with what the students need to learn; Meeting with the teachers on a regular basis to review student progress and solve problems; Remain visible and visit classrooms on a regular basis; Place a high value on early detection and remediation of student learning problems; Encourage professional development so that staff may refine and update their knowledge and skills; Hold teachers accountable for improving student achievement; and make sure no child falls through the cracks.

Another step to improving school performance is to increase motivation within the school. Students need to remain engaged in learning during high school. Students can become more engaged in learning if they are offered more challenging course work as well as graduation projects. Students need to be challenged and provided with a more rigorous preparation for college or the workplace. Students going into the workplace right after high school are often expected to read at a higher level than many college freshman; therefore, all students need the challenge of a tougher, more demanding class/curriculum. Advanced Placement (AP) courses, independent study and portfolio projects work well as motivators for many high school students.

There are more techniques for improving student reading performance. Many of these techniques are featured later in this document under “Successes from Other Schools.”

### **C. Successes from Other Schools**

There are many ways to implement the information discussed above in order to improve PSSA Reading Assessment performance. It is often hard to pull all of the information and ideas together in a school and be confident that what you are doing will prove worth the added effort or resources. The following information discusses strategies that some other schools have used in order to integrate many ideas above and increase the overall reading proficiency on the PSSA. The sample schools are all high school level schools in Pennsylvania. The strategies used by the schools will be mentioned and any strategies not previously discussed will be discussed in more detail. The PSSA test scores will be identified where available.

#### **School A –**

School A has increased the PSSA Reading Assessment score by 50 points from the 2002 to 2003 test year. The main action taken by the school administration was to incorporate the “High Schools That Work” (HSTW) model to integrate academic and CTE courses. The teachers in this school have had in-service days on using and supporting literature in all areas. The HSTW model helps to keep the rigor in the curriculum. This model is also a work in progress at School A as they are not yet up to the level they would like to be, but have made progress.

The HSTW model has three major goals:

To raise students achievement; to provide all students with a traditional college-preparatory curriculum and high quality vocational and technical studies; and to support state and local policies and initiatives for continued school improvement.

To achieve these goals, HSTW promotes several key practices, including:

1. High expectations- set higher expectations and help more students meet them
2. Students actively engaged- get all students involved in rigorous and challenging learning
3. Guidance- involve each student and his or her parents
4. Vocational Studies- increase access to challenging studies
5. Academic Studies- increase access to studies that teach concepts that can be addressed in real-world projects and problems

6. Keeping Score- use student assessments and program evaluations to improve the school environment and to advance students learning

The HSTW initiative aims at high school students in the general-education track, those who have not chosen college-prep curriculum and are rarely exposed to or expected to meet the rigorous standards of the college-prep counterparts. HSTW estimates that 60-65% of high school students fit into this category. These students often plan to work, attend a community or technical college, a non-competitive four-year college or university, or join the military after high school. This model helps the school administration offer these students a stronger learning base regardless where they go after high school and can also help to increase standardized test scores.

School A has also incorporated many other strategies in order to help increase the school's PSSA Reading scores. The school is using a Perkins funded learning facilitator and a local funded instructional support teacher which are used to monitor CTE and non-CTE students academically on track. They also offer tutoring to students after school in the library. School A has developed a system for testing where students are in small group testing situations in classrooms with at least two teachers and not in a large group setting such as a cafeteria. Often the teachers who act as proctors will also provide snacks to students during test session breaks. These procedures help to minimize anxiety for the students.

The teachers in School A use the Reading Assessment Rubric and Standards in the classroom and have received training on their use. Academic teachers provide tips for success on the PSSA in their classroom. CTE teachers support this effort but do not provide specific instruction in the classroom. All teachers discuss with students the importance of doing their best on the PSSA and celebrating their learning. The teachers also stress to students the importance of them being able to demonstrate their skills and performance and that one way they can do that is on the PSSA.

The students at School A take advantage of the opportunities available to them inside and outside of the classroom, from their teachers, tutoring sessions, or time in the computer lab. The students are aware of the Standards and the Reading Rubric but are not yet up to the level that the school feels they should be; this is an on-going area of work. Students here understand the importance of doing well on the PSSA and many have expressed their anxiety about the testing. The school attempts to help the students understand that testing is an opportunity to demonstrate and celebrate what they have learned.

The goal at this school is to identify at-risk students in the ninth grade to determine if any corrective actions are needed. These actions could be anything from the tutoring mentioned above to sessions in the computer lab or library where there is software available for student use that contains self-directed materials to help prepare students for the PSSA.

### **School B –**

School B, with Reading scores 60 points above the state norm for 2002, has focused on the introduction of best practices in effective instructional strategies. These best practice strategies include: Literacy instruction across the curriculum, Introduction of a SSR program daily for 30 minutes involving all students for leisure reading, inclusion of state standards in daily lesson plans, all staff development days supporting goals of achievement, and participation in the Making Schools Work initiative. In addition to these strategies, School B also offers tutoring opportunities to students during two activity/remedial periods a week and after school support is provided through the 21 Century Program at the Middle School. Ongoing teacher training and development supports the continued goal of academic achievement and assessment. The following paragraphs will discuss the SSR program.

#### *SSR Program – “Silent Sustained Reading” Program*

-- This instructional strategy engages students in the practice of routine and frequent silent reading. The SSR Program is a program to promote reading achievement and life long reading habits. In this program the school or the teacher sets aside a block of time each day, usually ten to thirty minutes, for quiet reading. SSR can serve many purposes.

- It can be an opportunity for students to read material of their own choice, as opposed to reading that is assigned to them.
- Many students come to learn that they can use word skills to figure out new words on their own.
- SSR can build students' confidence in their abilities to work through reading trouble areas.
- SSR can actually motivate students to want to read more.
- Often students spend more time reading independently outside of school.
- SSR can help demonstrate the joy that reading can bring and help develop lifelong readers and learners.

SSR can take many forms. It may be set up by the classroom teacher or as a school-wide reading program. The program's main idea is to demonstrate to students that pleasure reading is something to be valued. Reading selection can also be handled in many ways, a predetermined list

of books, a book bin, or teachers allow students the freedom to read a book they think they will enjoy. Some teachers keep SSR as “private reading” where students do not have to report on what they have read. Other teachers have students have follow-up exercises with reading journals, or logs, and some teachers have discussions once a week to talk about what they have been reading. It is crucial that teachers participate in the program as role models. The teacher should be right there with the students reading and if there are follow-up activities the teacher should do them as well. No matter how the SSR program is set up the goal is the same, to get students to read and hope they will come to love reading and learning.

Teachers at School B contribute to new ideas in the school by attending outside conferences and workshops on an ongoing basis. The teachers share new ideas and effective strategies during monthly faculty meeting. Every teacher has been introduced to the PA Reading Rubric during staff development training days. The rubric is part of the evaluation of senior projects. Teachers actively engage students in learning and reading/writing activities are required in all content areas. Daily classroom instruction reinforces the importance of academic achievement. The teachers at School B use many different strategies to teach material to their students. These include, but are not limited to: two-column note taking, K-W-L chart, CLOZE, Think Aloud, interactive reading, Pair/Share reading, GIST, Jigsaw, anticipation guides, free writing, the Frayer Model, and the Socratic Seminar. The following paragraphs will discuss the Socratic Seminar, CLOZE exercise, the Frayer Model.

*Socratic Seminar* – The technique offers students the necessary skills to comprehend even difficult text. This is a highly motivating form of intellectual and scholarly discussion within the classroom. Socratic Seminars foster active learning as students explore and evaluate the ideas, issues and values in a particular text. Teachers should have taught any necessary background information prior to the Socratic Seminar so that students have the prior knowledge necessary to discuss the text. The method involves reading a short piece of writing, preferably less than one page, and then having one group of students discuss the passage while the other group observes. An opening question has no right or wrong answer but reflects genuine curiosity. The two student groups then take turns holding ten-minute discussions about the text. After the seminar, teachers can help students make personal connections based on the insights gained during the seminar and apply these connections to their own lives through activities such as journal writing or self-assessment narratives, for example.

*Cloze Exercise* – This exercise is used to help students understand the semantics of sentences. Students are asked to pick words that would fit within a sentence that the teacher has taken out key words. A cloze exercise is a

variation in format of a fill-in exercise. The cloze exercise is in paragraph form. The student reads the paragraph with the key words or random words removed and then make guesses about what words would work in the blank spaces within the paragraph. Some teachers provide a word list for the students to use to fit into the paragraph. Either way students need to determine what words work in a sentence to make the sentence as well as the paragraph complete and understandable. The example below shows a simplified version of a cloze exercise using a word list.

Example of a cloze exercise:

Word List: people, aid, good.

It is time for all \_\_\_\_\_ countrymen to come to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_.

*The Frayer Model* – The Frayer Model is an adaptation of a concept map. The framework includes: the key word, the definition, characteristics of the concept word, examples of the concept word, and non-examples of the concept word. The examples and non-examples are important so that students are able to identify what the key word is and is not. The teacher first assigns the key word being studied and then talks about the steps required to complete the chart.

An example of the Frayer Model below shows how the chart is set up and what items belong in the boxes. This example uses the key word crystals and the information relate to crystals.

The Frayer Model Map on Crystals:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| DEFINITION:<br>A solid made of atoms<br>arranged in an ordered pattern. | CHARACTERISTICS:<br>Glassy<br>Clear colored<br>Brightly colored<br>Evenly shaped<br>Patterned<br>Glimmer or sparkle |
| CONCEPT WORD: <b>CRYSTALS</b>   |   |
| EXAMPLES:<br>Metals<br>Rocks<br>Snowflakes<br>Salt                      | NON-EXAMPLES:<br>Coal<br>Pepper<br>Lava<br>Obsidian   |

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| Sugar |  |
|-------|--|

Students at School B are actively involved in daily instruction supporting the achievement of the state standards. The PSSA should become a non-event. The students are aware of and use the PA Reading Rubric as it is used in all content areas. The daily preparation removes the panic mode of the PSSA assessments for these students. The format of the PSSA is familiar to students, as they see it often not just once a year. Students at School B feel comfortable in the testing environment.

### **School C –**

School C had an increase in the Reading scores of 30 points from 2002 to 2003. This is 90 point above the state norm. School C uses many different strategies to support these increases. The curriculum is set up to work to Standards. The teachers use Reading Standards in the classroom. The Standards and Rubrics are posted in the classroom, are mentioned to students, and given to them on handouts. The HSTW program is a part of this school program as well using a \$300,000 grant. Best practices helps focus on instruction so that all teachers teach language arts. All teachers are responsible for teaching reading/writing.

Students at School C are reading and writing across the curriculum. The focus for these students is on the middle school to have skills developed early. Students are taught to read for content. They do this by using a sheet (or a poster for the wall) that lists reactions they should be aware of while they read. The sheet may look something like this:

| <u>If an idea:</u>   | <u>Put this Notation</u> |
|--|--------------------------|
| Confirms what you thought<br>("I knew that")               | ✓ = I agree              |
| Contradicts what you thought<br>("I thought differently")  | X = I disagree           |
| Is new to you and is interesting<br>("I didn't know that") | + = That is new          |
| Intrigues you  | ! = WOW!                 |
| Puzzles you  | ? = I wonder             |
| Confuses you   | ?? = I don't understand  |

Strikes you as very important \* = That is important

Who Cares

w/c = Who Cares

In order to create a strong reading/writing environment in this school, the principal speaks to the students once a week and gives them a Reading prompt. Some of the prompts have come from the book “Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul.” Other activities that support these efforts involve reading and writing for every class. There are response sheets for numerous activities. These sheets are included in Appendix 5. Individual Reading Response Sheets are handouts for summarizing and explaining information articles that the students have read. Video Response Sheet for summary and explanation of what was seen on the video. Field Trip Response Sheet for explanations about a field trip and what information was learned. Web Site Review to explain a web site: the topic, ease in navigation, and key points. All of these items require well-written explanations of the event and are all graded by rubric (included with some of the sheets.).

All of the strategies used by these schools can be incorporated at other schools. These strategies are ones that have been shown to work in these schools and have helped to improve the PSSA Reading scores.

#### Resources for Schools:

- Pennsylvania Department of Education –  
[www.pde.state.pa.us](http://www.pde.state.pa.us)
- School Results –  
[www.schoolresults.org](http://www.schoolresults.org)
- School Evaluation Services – shows performance, spending, written reports for school districts, and better performers. Resource for schools/districts to compare with other schools.  
[www.sp-ses.com](http://www.sp-ses.com)
- USA Today – Website has instructional materials for use with their newspaper, includes math and reading.  
[www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/educate/home.htm)
- What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) – Provides evidence of what works in education.  
[www.w-w-c.org](http://www.w-w-c.org)
- Education World – Website offers information on lesson planning, school issues, technology integration, and more.  
[www.educationworld.com](http://www.educationworld.com)

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