Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science (WCAS) FAQ

This FAQ document is an update to and combination of previous FAQ's and webinar Q&As, including *WCAS Frequently Asked Questions (PDF)* (2019), *Teachers and Test Development FAQ (PDF)* (2019), and *WCAS Score Reports Q&A (PDF)* (2018).

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Washington Office of Superintendent of
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What grades and standards are tested by the WCAS?

The WCAS is aligned to the [Washington State 2013 K-12 Science Learning Standards](#), which are the [Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)](#). The WCAS assesses all three dimensions of the learning standards: Science and Engineering Practices; Disciplinary Core Ideas; and Crosscutting Concepts. Grade 5 is tested on the grades 3 through 5 band of the NGSS standards. Grade 8 is tested on the middle school band and grade 11 is tested on the high school band of the NGSS standards.

How can I find out what is on the WCAS?

The [Test Design and Item Specifications](#) documents are available on the science assessment webpage. The documents describe how the clusters (stimulus and item sets) and standalone items for the WCAS are developed. They include a technical description of the assessment that ensures the assessment will measure the science standards in a reliable manner. The documents also contain information for each performance expectation (PE) of the NGSS and provide examples of how the PEs could be assessed on the WCAS. The Test Design and Item Specifications documents are "living drafts" that are updated based on educator feedback. A modifications log that provides information on annual updates is included within the documents.

Training tests are available on the [Washington Comprehensive Assessment Program (WCAP) Portal](#). The training tests provide an opportunity for students understand how to work with items in the online testing system. They include a small sample of standalone items and item clusters; there is no full length WCAS practice test currently available. More training test resources can be found on the [WCAS Educator Resources](#) webpage.

Will there be release questions with student example responses at each performance level?

No, there are not enough questions available for testing to release any operational test questions with student responses this year. Note: The WCAS should not be used to guide instruction. For formative assessment resources that will support students with the NGSS, please see the links on the following page.

Will there be interim assessments for science?

No, there is no plan to develop interim assessments for science.

What are the test windows for this spring?

Please visit the [Testing Timelines/Calendar](#) webpage for information on Test Windows.

How much time is needed for the WCAS?

This information is for scheduling purposes only, as the tests are not timed. Most students complete the assessment in less time than listed here. Grade 5: 90 minutes. Grade 8: 105 minutes. Grade 11: 120 minutes.

Does the WCAS have to be completed in one session?

No. The WCAS may be given in multiple sessions like the Smarter Balanced ELA and Math assessments. One to three sessions are recommended.

What formative assessment resources are available that can help me and my student(s) measure progress toward learning with the NGSS?

Along with the Ambitious Science Teaching practices, the OpenSciEd materials, and the ClimeTime science learning resources, the STEM Teaching Tools website has tools that can help teach science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Some recommended tools include:
- Prompts for Integrating Crosscutting Concepts into Assessment and Instruction
- Integrating Science Practices into Assessment Tasks
- Equity Assessment Instruction Practices: *How can formative assessment support culturally responsive argumentation in a classroom community?*
- Assessment Practices: *How can assessments be designed to engage students in the range of science and engineering practices?*
- Steps to Designing a Three-Dimensional Assessment

How is the WCAS developed?

Items on the WCAS have been through a review process that involves several work groups. For each work group, experienced science educators are chosen to represent students from across the state. More information on test development and design can be found in the Test Design and Item Specifications documents.

How can I get involved in WCAS development?

Science educators throughout Washington are encouraged to Subscribe to GovDelivery for science assessment updates as well as apply to participate in work groups such as Item Cluster Writing, Content Review, Rangefinding, and Content Review with Data. Please consider applying for one or more annual science assessment work groups. Visit the Professional Development Opportunities webpage for more information on the work groups.

Why are teachers invited to be on test development work groups?

Teachers are experts in the content areas and grade-levels they teach. They are implementing the learning standards and know the instructional materials. They know how students think and react to questions. Therefore, teachers serve as our primary resource for test development.

Certificated staff who work as classroom teachers, instructional coaches, or have other instructional leadership roles are invited. Teachers who work with career and technical education (CTE) students, special education students, and English language learners are also needed in each work group.

How are teachers chosen?

All educators signed up for [Gov Delivery](#) receive an invite to apply for WCAS development work groups. If a teacher choses to apply, they fill out an online application. They provide details about their education, teaching experience, knowledge of the learning standards, and test development experience. The applications are evaluated by OSPI staff to see if they meet the selection criteria. Teachers are selected to form a group which represents the diversity of schools and students in our state. The groups include teachers from both small schools and large schools, from both eastern and western Washington, and from schools with a range of diversity. We also try to include experts in CTE, special education, and English language learning in each group.

How do teachers benefit from being in one of these work groups?

Teachers report that attending item development meetings for the WCAS deepens their understanding of the learning standards, helps focus their teaching, and improves the quality of the formative and summative assessments they use in their classrooms. Instructional coaches also report using the processes modeled in the work groups as the basis for professional development and for replicating the experience locally to improve the quality of school and district developed tests.

The teachers hear the latest information about testing from the assessment specialists. Then they learn about how their work fits into the assessment development cycle and are trained for the tasks specific to their work group. There is a steep learning curve, so time is needed for the work group to hit its stride.

Teachers can share all non-secure information from the initial training and any subsequent handouts. They can share the process used during the work group, including how they used resources like the standards and item specification documents. They can also share "aha" moments about how this information applies to their teaching practices. The work group members cannot share items or specific topics covered in items. For example, they cannot share the questions they wrote or specific topics of stimuli.

Does participating in a work group cost a school anything?

No. All costs are covered. All work group members are reimbursed for the cost of dinner, mileage, and other travel expenses. All other meals are provided during the meetings. All hotel rooms, if needed, are taken care of by OSPI or by a vendor.

If a teacher's absence is covered by a substitute, the teacher receives a form at the meeting to bring back to the school district. The school district completes the paperwork with a few pieces of information and sends it to the address on the form. The school district is then reimbursed for the cost of the substitute.

Where can I find student scores?

The Smarter Reporting System (SRS) is on the WCAP Portal. The Washington State Report Card can be used to see results by school, district, and state-wide, and also includes older data for schools to use. Students and families receive Score Reports from their school. We strongly suggest state test information be mailed or otherwise given directly to parents— at a back-to-school night, fall conferences, or similar event—and not given to students to take to their parents. Sample Score Reports are available on the Sample Score Reports webpage.

Where can I find information about what students know and can do?

The Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs) for the WCAS describe what students know and can do according to Washington educators, and are posted on the State Testing Achievement Level Descriptor webpage.

Why does the Score Report tell me what a level 3 student can do?

The level 3 range for each reporting area is provided to compare an individual student's performance in each area to students who scored a Level 3 on the test as a whole. Level 3 students have met the achievement standard on the test. Comparing an individual student's performance in each area to Level 3 students shows how well that student is doing in also meeting the achievement standard.

Are WCAS scores available 3 weeks after testing like Smarter Balanced scores are?

No, WCAS scores are not available that quickly. The WCAS is not an adaptive test, so it takes longer to finalize student scores. Scores from the spring WCAS will be available in late August.

How far will we be able to analyze the data? For example: will I be able to see if there are strengths with a Crosscutting Concept but challenges with a Science and Engineering Practice?

The NGSS are based on *A Framework for K-12 Science Education*. The framework "emphasizes that learning about science and engineering involves integration of the knowledge of scientific explanations (i.e., content knowledge) and the practices needed to engage in scientific inquiry and engineering design. Thus the framework seeks to illustrate how knowledge and practice must be intertwined in designing learning experiences in K–12 science education." Therefore, the reporting of results on the WCAS does not provide information at the Crosscutting Concepts (CCC) or Science and Engineering Practice (SEP) levels.

The reporting areas for the WCAS combine information about a student's understanding of the Science and Engineering Practices (SEP), the Disciplinary Core Ideas (DCI), and the Crosscutting Concepts (CCC) in each of the areas of Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, and Earth & Space Sciences. The reporting areas do not reflect only the SEP, DCI, or CCC as those should be integrated in instruction and are reported in an integrated way for the WCAS.

As one of multiple measures about student performance, results from the WCAS should be combined with classroom information to determine areas of improvement for instruction. Instruction should focus on the 3-dimensional nature of the standards. This is essential for achieving the vision of science instruction and learning described in the standards.

How can the reporting area percent be used to inform instructional practices?

The WCAS is designed to provide information about the students in Washington at large-scale. Similar to a check-engine light in a car, results from the WCAS should be used to inform decision making, but by themselves cannot be used to determine the cause of an issue or prescribe solutions. The WCAS was not designed to evaluate individual students.

One way to consider using the reporting area percent is to look at performance at the classroom, school, or district level. If you see that for a particular classroom there is a large amount of success in that reporting area, you might explore what good things are happening in that classroom.

Another way to use the reporting area percent is over time. For a school, if you notice that performance in an area is below the Level 3 range for multiple years, you might consider evaluating the materials used to deliver instruction to that area for improvements. In either way, improvements could focus on better alignment to the standards, including the intent of the standards to deliver instruction in a 3-dimensional, integrated way.

What is the science alternate assessment? How does it compare with the WCAS?

For science, alternate assessment refers to the Washington Access to Instruction and Measurement (WA-AIM). The WA-AIM is based on alternate achievement standards that are aligned to the NGSS so students with the most significant cognitive challenges can meaningfully participate in a science assessment for state and federal accountability.

What are plans for dealing with the high number of students not taking the 11th grade WCAS?

We are continuing to reach out to district and school staff to work with them to encourage students to participate in testing and to help them understand and communicate the importance of testing all students. Students who do not test are counted among the number of students who do not meet standard. This is reflected in the Accountability Index and the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF). Schools and districts that fall below a 95 percent participation rate on state tests are not eligible for any state or federal awards or recognitions. Additional resources are available on the State Testing Frequently Asked Questions webpage.

Sometimes students, families, or educators do not see value in 11th grade students taking the WCAS. However, test results can be used alongside other information:

- ... to help families know if their child's learning is on track or if extra help is needed.
- ... to help educators know if their instruction is aligned with the intent of the standards, especially the 3-dimensional nature of the standards that interconnects Disciplinary Core Ideas, Crosscutting Concepts, and Science and Engineering Practices.
- ... to help students know if they are prepared for post-secondary success.

Ready WA has a program called Opt In for Student Success. While designed to encourage parents and students to participate in Smarter Balanced assessments, the same ideas expressed for why a student should participate in those assessments also apply to the WCAS.

Can high school students taking dual credit classes like Running Start take the WCAS at the end of their sophomore year? Or be entirely excused from the WCAS?

No, students should test in 11th grade for the WCAS. We appreciate that the schedules of students taking Running Start classes will need to be considered to facilitate this testing. Arrangements should be made with the college and high school to accommodate the student who is taking the grade 11 WCAS. For additional information, see the Running Start FAQ (PDF) on OSPI's Course-Based Dual Credit webpage.