

The Georgia Student Assessment Program and When Students Do Not Participate Due to Parent/Guardian Refusal

Frequently Asked Questions

In recent years, the use of assessments in the state education system has become a topic of concern for parents/guardians, educators, and students. It is important to understand the role that high-quality assessments play in providing parents/guardians, educators, school and district leaders, and policymakers with valuable information about student growth and achievement. It is also important that, when a parent/guardian refuses to allow their child to participate, schools provide appropriate alternate learning opportunities for those students during testing.

What is the purpose of the Georgia Student Assessment Program?

The purpose of the Georgia Student Assessment Program is to measure student achievement of the state-adopted academic content standards and to use assessment results to improve teaching and learning. Results from the assessment program are utilized to identify the extent to which students have mastered the state's academic content standards, to provide teachers with feedback about instructional practice, and to assist school districts in identifying strengths and weaknesses to establish priorities in planning educational programs.

The Georgia Student Assessment Program includes a set of both formative and summative assessments that work together to provide insights to improve teaching and student learning. Formative assessment is assessment *for* learning. It takes place while instruction is still occurring to gather immediate feedback that identifies students' academic strengths and areas for growth, to plan differentiated instruction, and to support student learning. Summative assessment is assessment *of* learning. It takes place at the end of an instructional period and measures student achievement, or mastery of intended learning outcomes. Statewide summative assessment data is typically used to assess instructional programs, support school and district improvement efforts, and inform policy decisions.

Different stakeholders need different data – the right data – to meet their needs. For example, classroom teachers need detailed, real-time data to inform their work with students, while leaders and policymakers need aggregated, high-level data to inform decisions about appropriate student services and supports, policy, and instructional programs. This balanced approach to assessment provides data for a variety of stakeholders to inform decisions, whether at a policy, district, school, or classroom level to support the improvement of Georgia's education system and overall learning of students.

What is the purpose of Georgia Milestones and the Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA) 2.0?

Georgia Milestones and the GAA 2.0 are the state's summative assessments designed to meet state and federal testing requirements. Their purpose is to measure student achievement of the state academic content standards and to inform efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Results of the assessments are utilized to identify students failing to achieve mastery of the state content standards; to provide educators with feedback about instructional practices; to determine appropriate student services and supports; to assist school districts in identifying strengths and weaknesses to establish priorities in planning educational programs; and to assist policymakers in developing policies and allocating resources to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn and excel.

The results from these assessments provide the public with consistent, statewide information about how all students are performing. Student test scores are the foundation of Georgia's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) and district/school report cards, which are designed to show parents/guardians, school and district leaders, communities, and policymakers how well students are achieving. Allowing for comparisons between districts and schools is important in understanding and improving efforts to support Georgia's public education system.

Neither the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) nor the local district or school has the authority to waive the student assessment requirement mandated by federal and state law (O.C.G.A. § 20-2-281).

Who develops and owns Georgia Milestones and the GAA 2.0?

Georgia Milestones and the GAA 2.0 are developed and owned by the state of Georgia. The development and implementation of these assessments are led by GaDOE's Office of Assessment and Accountability. GaDOE's team of assessment specialists contract with an external assessment company in order to utilize their expertise in the design, development, administration, scoring, and reporting of Georgia's assessments. The company selected to assist GaDOE is selected through a competitive bid process monitored by the Georgia Department of Administrative Services (DOAS). All materials associated with Georgia's assessments (test blueprints, test questions, reports, guides, and manuals, etc.) are specifically developed for and owned by the state of Georgia. All work completed by the external company is done in accordance with the GaDOE-defined Statement of Work and is approved by GaDOE's assessment specialists.

Most importantly, the design, development, implementation, scoring, and reporting of Georgia's assessments are guided by Georgia educators. Each year, hundreds of Georgia educators (i.e., teachers, school and district leaders, special education and English learner specialists, higher education and workforce development representatives) assist GaDOE's assessment specialists in guiding the state's assessment efforts.

- **Georgia educators** inform the design of the assessments (what gets tested and how it is measured),
- **Georgia educators** recommend expectations for student performance (what students should know and be able to do at each level of achievement, and what level of performance is needed to be considered proficient),
- **Georgia educators** review test questions (to ensure they align to the state's content standards, align to how the standards are taught in the classroom, and are free of bias and sensitivity issues), and
- **Georgia educators** set guidelines for how constructed response questions are scored (what students should demonstrate to achieve each score point).

What are the federal requirements for testing?

Federal law, specifically the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requires annual testing of all students in grades 3 through 8 and at least once in high school in English language arts and mathematics, and at least once in science in each grade span (3-5, 6-9, 10-12). Federal law (ESSA) also requires a 95% participation rate in state assessments among all students and all student subgroups. According to ESSA, the 95% participation rate requirement must be an element of the state's school accountability system, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI), essentially treating students who do not participate as "not proficient" in accountability calculations.

Student participation and performance in Georgia Milestones and the GAA 2.0 is the basis for the state's school accountability system, CCRPI. When students do not participate, the school's accountability scores may not accurately reflect the performance of all students, which has implications for the school's improvement efforts and statewide policy efforts to support the education system.

Are there consequences for students not taking Georgia Milestones or the GAA 2.0?

There are requirements in both Georgia law (O.C.G.A §20-2-282 - §20-2-285) and State Board of Education (SBOE) Rule that, if not met, carry direct consequences for students.

Students are required to meet certain performance expectations in reading and mathematics to be promoted to the next grade in grades 3, 5, and 8. However, districts with state flexibility contracts (Charter Systems or Strategic Waiver School Systems) may have differing policies related to promotion, placement, and retention in accordance with their contract. Districts should follow their local board policies regarding any local policies impacted, including any pertaining to grades 4, 6, and 7.

Designated high school courses (Algebra/Coordinate Algebra, American Literature and Composition, Biology, U.S. History) require that the Georgia Milestones End of Course (EOC) measures serve as the final exam and comprise 20% of students' final course grades. In the absence of an EOC score, the school would be compelled to calculate students' final course grades with a 0% for this requirement.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities pursuing an Alternate Diploma are required to participate in the GAA 2.0 in middle and high school as a requirement for earning the diploma.

What are the options for students whose parents/guardians have refused their participation in Georgia Milestones or the GAA 2.0?

If a parent/guardian refuses for their student to participate in Georgia Milestones or the GAA 2.0, the student should never be told to stay home, as compulsory attendance laws apply during testing as they would on any other school day. Students whose parents/guardians have refused participation in Georgia Milestones or the GAA 2.0 must not be placed in the testing environment. GaDOE recommends that students not participating in testing be allowed an appropriate learning opportunity in a different location. Districts should follow GaDOE guidance regarding maintenance of documentation and coding of students whose parents/guardians have refused testing.

What can parents/guardians do if they wish for their child not to participate?

GaDOE understands and respects a parent's/guardian's desire to ensure the best education possible for their student. To that end, GaDOE recommends parents/guardians and district and school leaders have a conversation about what state assessments are and are not. This would include acknowledgment and discussion of a parents'/guardians' apprehensions and objections and what to do when a student does not participate in state assessments. Schools should discuss state and local policies surrounding testing, as well as the general uses of assessment data to inform instruction and measure student progress.