

PARCC Grade- and Subject-Specific Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

August 2015

1. What are performance levels?

Performance levels, sometimes referred to as “achievement levels,” are the broad, categorical levels used to report student performance on an assessment.

2. How many performance levels does PARCC have for its assessments?

For all assessments for students in grades 3-8 and high school, PARCC will have five performance levels ranging from Level 1 to Level 5. Performance levels describe how well students met the expectations for their grade level. Students performing at levels 4 and 5 meet or exceed the expectations.

3. What are performance level descriptors (PLDs)?

Performance level descriptors (PLDs) describe the skills, knowledge and practices a student who has achieved a particular performance level should be able to demonstrate. PARCC has two different kinds of PLDs: [policy-level PLDs and grade- and subject-specific PLDs](#).

4. What are the differences between PARCC’s policy-level PLDs and grade- and subject-specific PLDs?

PARCC’s **policy-level PLDs** include both policy claims, which describe the educational implications for students who attain a particular performance level on the PARCC assessments, as well as general content claims, which describe in broad terms the knowledge, skills, and practices students performing at a given performance level are able to demonstrate at any grade level. They do not describe student performance at each grade level. They were adopted by the PARCC Governing Board and Advisory Committee on College Readiness in October 2012.

Using the policy-level PLDs as a foundation, PARCC has now developed **grade- and subject-specific PLDs**. These PLDs indicate the knowledge, skills, and practices that students performing at a given level should be able to demonstrate in each content area (ELA/literacy and mathematics) at each grade level.

5. What is the purpose of the PLDs? Who is the intended audience?

The grade- and subject-specific PLDs will serve several purposes, including:

- Communicate expectations to educators about what types of performances will be necessary at the high school-level for students to demonstrate that they are college- and career-ready (CCR) or making adequate progress to become CCR;
- Communicate expectations to educators about what types of performance will be necessary in grades 3-8 for students to demonstrate that they are academically prepared to engage successfully in further studies in each content area;
- Provide information to local educators for use in developing curricular and instructional materials;

- Serve as the basis for PARCC performance level setting in summer 2015; and
- Inform item and rubric development for the PARCC assessments.

6. How will the PLDs be used to set cut scores for the PARCC assessments?

Performance level setting is the process that determines which threshold score a student must attain to achieve a particular performance level. PARCC’s policy-level and grade- and subject-specific PLDs will play a major role in that process. Throughout July and August, 2015, over 240 teachers, postsecondary educators, and content area experts will meet in small groups to review the 21 grade-level PARCC tests in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. Panelists will use the Performance Level Descriptors, actual test results and empirical studies to recommend the “cut scores” – the scores that mark the threshold of performance from one level to the next.

7. How can teachers use the PLDs in their classrooms?

Classroom teachers can use the PLDs to inform the development of classroom-based formative assessment tools, including the creation of rubrics to gauge student learning against the expectations of the PARCC assessments. To further aid in this process, when teachers receive data from the assessment on individual students, the teacher can better understand what level of instructional supports students who performance fits into the same PLD, e.g., all students who score at Level 2 may need to increase achievement in the given content. Grade 3-8 educators may note that students whose PLD indicates they are not academically well prepared to engage successfully in further studies in a content area may need instructional interventions while students whose PLD indicates they have strong content skills may need instructional enrichment. Likewise, high school educators may note that students whose PLD indicates they are not college- and career-ready or on-track for college and career readiness may need instructional interventions while students whose PLD indicates they have strong content skills may need instructional enrichment.

8. What was the process used to develop the PLDs?

From fall 2012 to spring 2013, the draft PARCC grade- and subject-specific PLDs were developed and reviewed through an iterative process, involving a number of state and local leaders:

- Panels comprised of K-12 educators and curriculum directors and higher education faculty from Governing States;
- K-12 State Leads and Higher Education Leadership Team members;
- State agency content experts, including members of the ELA/Literacy and Mathematics Operational Working Groups from Governing States;
- PARCC item development contractors/subcontractors; and
- External experts, including the Center for Assessment and PARCC Technical Advisory Committee.

This process culminated in the public review of the draft PLDs from April 10 – May 8, 2013. After this review, PLD Panelists and PARCC working group members used the feedback to refine the PLDs for final review and adoption at the June 26, 2013 PARCC Governing Board and Advisory Committee on College Readiness joint session.

9. Did higher education have a role in developing the PLDs?

As with the development of the PARCC policy-level PLDs, higher education had an active role in the grade- and subject-specific PLD development process. Postsecondary content experts in both English language arts/literacy and mathematics served on the high school PLD writing panels, and helped revise the PLDs after the public comment period.

10. Did classroom teachers have a role in developing the PLDs?

The panels brought together to draft the grade- and subject-specific PLDs included classroom teachers with expertise in English language arts/literacy and mathematics to ensure that the PLDs would be written in a manner that would be useful for educators.

11. Who provided feedback on the draft PLDs?

PARCC collected over 400 individual and group responses to the draft PLDs through a public survey, and received written comments from several PARCC states and national organizations. Following the close of the public comment period, members of the PLD writing teams and ELA/Literacy and Mathematics Operational Working Groups (OWGs) convened to review the feedback and revise the PLDs as necessary. Also, due to the public release of the assessment blueprints and test specification documents, OWG members were able to make additional edits to the PLDs, beyond the feedback received, to ensure consistency with other PARCC documents.

The test specification documents for **ELA/Literacy** can be found at <http://www.parcconline.org/assessments/test-design/ela-literacy/test-specifications-documents>.

The test specification documents for **mathematics** can be found at <http://www.parcconline.org/assessments/test-design/mathematics/math-test-specifications-documents>.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY

Links to Test Specification Documents

After the public release of the draft PLDs, PARCC released a set of test specification documents, including assessment blueprints and evidence statement tables, to help educators and the general public better understand the design of the PARCC assessments. Those documents can be found at <http://www.parcconline.org/assessments/test-design/ela-literacy/test-specifications-documents>. The revised English Language Arts/Literacy (ELA/Literacy) PLDs contain several hyperlinks to these specification documents, further highlighting the connection between the PLDs and the design of the PARCC assessments.

Format of the ELA/Literacy PLDs

In the draft ELA/Literacy PLDs, the descriptions for each performance level appeared on a separate page, which included the descriptors for both the reading and writing sub-claims. In response to public feedback, the ELA/Literacy PLDs were reformatted in order to improve readability and to facilitate easier

comparisons between the performance levels. The reading and writing sub-claims now appear on separate pages.

MATHEMATICS

Emphasis on Phrases that Distinguish Between Performance Levels

Many respondents indicated that it was difficult to see differences between the descriptors of student performance for each performance level. In the revised PLD documents, key words and phrases differentiating expected student performance appear in bold print. For example, a student performing at Level 3 in Algebra I “calculates sums and products of two rational and/or irrational numbers,” while a student performing at Level 4 “calculates sums and products of two rational and/or irrational numbers **and determines whether the sums and products are rational or irrational.**”

Addition of Links to Evidence Statements

In response to several comments, the PLD writing teams added references to the evidence statements aligned with each descriptor. The mathematics evidence statements, released to the public in April 2013, describe the knowledge and skills that an assessment item or task elicits from students. The inclusion of evidence statements in the PLD documents will allow educators and other stakeholders to more easily see how the PARCC PLDs align with PARCC assessments and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The evidence statements are found in the first column of the PLD documents, under the cluster headings for each sub-claim.