Firefly is Expanding in 2025-2026

Last year, more than 900 schools took advantage of the new Firefly assessments, resulting in more than 378,000 tests being administered across the Commonwealth! This year, Firefly will be expanded to include Science for grades 5 and 8 and Biology and will continue to be the only benchmark assessment program fully aligned to Pennsylvania's assessment standards.

PDE launched the Firefly program to provide schools with free, high-quality benchmark assessments that are designed specifically for Pennsylvania and measure the same knowledge and skills as the PSSA and Keystone Exams. Computer-adaptive assessments are available for ELA, Mathematics, Science, Literature, Algebra I, and Biology.

The Firefly program will be further expanded in 2025-2026 to include predictions for student performance on the ELA, Mathematics, Algebra I and Literature assessments and progress across multiple test administrations. These unique features further bolster PA Firefly as the optimal tool to gauge student mastery of Pennsylvania content and prepared-ness for the spring assessments. In addition, a host of new interactive reports and instructional strategies will be released throughout the year to provide teachers with valuable tools to analyze results and monitor student progress.

The 2025-2026 Firefly administrationopens on October 6. All schools can administer Firefly, and participation is as simple as adding students and test sessions in the DRC INSIGHT Portal. Additional information about PA Firefly can be found on PDE's website, the DRC INSIGHT Portal, and DRC's resources and training site (sites.google.com/datarecognitioncorp.com/psa-assessments/home).

Transition to Statewide Online Testing

All PSSA and Keystone Exams testing will fully transition to online in the spring of 2026. The 2025/2026 Winter Keystone Exams will be the last administration for which paper test booklets will be available.

The transition to online testing is meant to offer benefits for students and educators alike, and PDE encourages all LEAs to utilize the online system prior to the statewide administration this spring. If your LEA has not yet administered the tests online, you can still provide your students, teachers, and technology staff with valuable experience by administer-ing the Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT) or Firefly tests. Both assessments utilize the exact same platform that is used for the PSSA and Keystone Exams. If your LEA is not administering either of these tests, it is especially important that your students are provided access to the Online Tools Training (OTT) and Online Tutorials prior to the spring administration. These resources are an imperative piece of preparing students for online testing. They are located at: https://portal.te.drcedirect.com/PA/patrain, which is a new link to access the INSIGHT Training platform.

Understanding the Winter Keystone Biology Test

All LEAs that intend to administer the 2025/2026 Winter Keystone Exams should be aware that the Biology test will not be aligned to the new STEELS standards. The Winter Biology test will be aligned to Pennsylvania's former Science Standards that were assessed on the Keystone Exams through Spring 2025. As such, the content of the test will not be aligned to Pennsylvania's STEELS curriculum and participation should be limited to students who are retaking the Biology test to improve their best score calculation. Students who are taking a corresponding Keystone Biology course in the 2025-2026 school year should participate in the Spring 2026 administration, even if a student finishes the Biology course in the first half of the 2025-2026 school year. Having students participate in the spring administration will ensure that the Biology test matches the curriculum they are taught during the 2025-2026 school year. Additionally, students who take the Winter Biology test ("legacy" test) as first-time testers cannot have their scores combined with a future STEELS Biology test for a best score calculation.

Paper Accommodations for the Spring Assessments

Schools will continue to receive paper copies of the Handbook for Assessment Coordinators and the Directions for Administration manuals this spring. These manuals, along with printed reference materials, will be shipped automatically, and additional copies can be ordered via the Additional Materials Ordering system. The only paper secure materials available to schools in spring 2026 will be large print and Braille booklets. These accommodated materials will need to be ordered exclusively via the Additional Materials Ordering system. Because an enrollment system is no longer needed for a fully-online administration, schools will not be asked to provide projected large print and Braille needs for the spring administration. Instead, schools will place their orders based on the needs identified prior to test administration.

Students who participate in the assessment using a large print or Braille booklet will need to have their responses fully transcribed into the online test engine. Schools will be required to place these students into online test sessions with the appropriate accommodation selected. LEAs will be responsible for handling and securely destroying the large print and Braille booklets after transcription is complete.

Students whose IEP/504 plans require paper testing on a standard form will need to access a Print on Demand version of the test this spring. This accommodation will require local printing of the test form and full transcription of student responses into the online test engine. Only a very small percentage of students will need this test accommodation. It is not an option for students who simply prefer a paper-and-pencil form. LEAs will be responsible for handling and securely destroying the Print on Demand forms after transcription is complete.

Spanish Tests Moving Online

Beginning with the 2026 PSSA and Spring Keystone Exams, all Spanish math and science tests will transition from paper to online and students who require the Spanish accommodation will access their tests through the same online platform that delivers all of Pennsylvania's assessments—DRC INSIGHT. The transition to online Spanish tests also provides an opportunity to eliminate the additional English booklets that were provided as a reference. Instead, students who take the Spanish test online will have access to embedded English references directly within the test engine!

Schools will be able to add students who require Spanish to any online test session in spring 2026; the students do not need to be uploaded to separate test sessions. Students who require a Spanish accommodation will need to have the appropriate accommodation marked on the student's record. This is done through the Student Management section of the DRC INSIGHT Portal.

Resources and Training Google Site

The most frequently accessed resource and training materials are now on a Google site. This site supplements what is already available to you on the DRC INSIGHT Portal, and includes training videos as well as a FAQ section. The site is located at: sites.google.com/datarecognitioncorp.com/psa-assessments/home or scan the QR code.

Pre-Populated Test Sessions Are Coming!

Beginning with the 2026 PSSA, DRC will pre-populate your schools' online test sessions based on information you provide in PIMS. This option is possible because all testing will be online, and all students can be placed in online test sessions. Students who are assigned a homeroom in PIMS will be placed in a test session that corresponds to the same homeroom designation. Test sessions will be generated at the subject (ELA, Math, Science) and homeroom level. Homeroom is an optional field within PIMS. All LEAs that provide homeroom data to PIMS will receive pre-populated test sessions for the 2026 PSSA. To support the transition to PIMS-based test sessions, PDE has waived the requirement for teachers to be assigned to each test session. LEAs can continue to upload and assign teachers, but the pre-populated test sessions will not have a teacher assigned to them. LEAs that do not want pre-populated test sessions should not provide homeroom data in PIMS, and schools can remove unwanted test sessions from the DRC INSIGHT Portal. Look for more information to come about this exciting new option for the PSSA testing program.

New Contact Update System

For many years, Assessment Coordinators have been required to update their LEA's contact information for each test administration as part of the Enrollment Systems in the DRC INSIGHT Portal. Administration-specific enrollment systems were necessary to manage paper production and shipping; however, maintaining more than one source for contact information could cause the information to be out of sync across administrations.

Enrollment systems will be eliminated in spring 2026, and DRC is leveraging the transition to online testing to introduce a single source for maintaining contact information for all test administrations. Transitioning contact information to a single administration will simplify the process of managing contact information and will diminish the potential for communication gaps that can occur if the data is not properly updated across multiple administrations.

There will be no changes to the actual process. District Assessment Coordinators (DACs) and School Assessment Coordinators (SACs) will be able to update and manage their contact information (email, phone number, physical address) throughout the school year, and the information will flow into all active administrations. Look for more information in the future about this new functionality within the DRC INSIGHT Portal.

Enrollment System News

The 2025-2026 Winter Keystone Exams is the last administration for which enrollment numbers will be gathered using the DRC INSIGHT Portal. The window is September 11-15, 2025, and is your opportunity to enter projected enrollment counts for testing, including accommodated material, and update contact information at both the district and school levels. The information collected from the enrollment system provides DRC with updated contact information, online forecasting details, paper materials quantities, manuals, and delivery locations. Beginning with the 2026 PSSA and Spring Keystone Exams, DRC will no longer require LEAs to provide projected enrollments for the production and delivery of paper materials. Instead, all quantity projections will be gathered from information provided to DRC from PIMS. The PIMS data will prompt an automatic shipment of printed manuals and reference materials. Contact information will be maintained in a separate system and all paper accommodations (large print and Braille) will be ordered via DRC's Additional Materials Ordering system.

Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT) Update

The CDT continues to meet the growing needs and expectations of Pennsylvania's educators, and this year offers operational science tests that are fully aligned to Pennsylvania's new STEELS standards (Science, Technology & Engineering, Environmental Literacy & Sustainability). As such, the CDT represents your first opportunity to gauge how well your students are mastering the new STEELS curriculum and content. The new science tests can be administered as full tests or Diagnostic Category tests and will provide the full spectrum of reporting, including links to STEELS-aligned support materials and sample items. If your LEA has not yet tried the CDT, now is the time!

2025- 2026 Important Dates

2025-2026 Winter Keystone Enrollment Window	September 11-15, 2025
Winter Keystone Testing Dates Collection Window	October 16-22, 2025
Winter Keystone Test Setup Window for Precode Labels	October 20-22, 2025
Winter Keystone Wave 1 Secure Materials arrive	By November 19, 2025
Winter Keystone Wave 1 Testing Window	December 3-17, 2025
Winter Keystone Wave 2 Secure Materials arrive	By December 18, 2025
Winter Keystone Wave 2 Testing Window	January 5-16, 2026
Winter Keystone materials pickup date for report inclusion	January 21, 2026
PSSA Testing Dates Collection Window	February 9-20, 2026
Winter Keystone Match to Master Window	February 13-18, 2026
Winter Keystone Student Data Files posted	March 10, 2026
Spring Keystone Testing Dates Collection Window	March 16-27, 2026
PSSA Manuals and Reference Materials arrive	By March 23, 2026
PSSA Additional Materials System and Test Setup Open	March 23, 2026
Spring Keystone Manuals and Reference Materials arrive	By April 13, 2026
Spring Keystone Additional Materials System and Test Setup Open	April 13, 2026
PSSA Testing Window ELA	April 20-24, 2026
PSSA Testing Window Math, Science, Make-ups	April 27-May 1, 2026
PSSA Testing Window Math, Science, Make-ups (Optional)	May 4-May 8, 2026
Spring Keystone Testing Window	May 11-22, 2026
PSSA Student Data Files posted (no Science)	June 12, 2026
Grades 3-8 Attributions Window	June 25-July 1, 2026
Spring Keystone Match to Master Window	June 22-24, 2026
Spring Keystone Student Data Files posted (no Biology)	July 13, 2026
Grade 11 Attributions Window	July 23-27, 2026
Accountability District Student Data Files (no Science)	August 18, 2026
PSSA Student Data Files—Science posted	September 23, 2026
Spring Keystone Student Data Files - Biology posted	September 28, 2026

Device Support Awareness

Each release of the DRC INSIGHT online testing system is configured to work within the security and functionality features of the newest operating systems. LEAs should ensure ALL devices are running on the most current version of the device's operating system. If testing devices are running on "obsolete" operating systems, the device will not be able to deliver the online tests with the needed level of functionality to provide the expected student test experience or the level of security the assessments demand. The DRC INSIGHT system requirements and other documentation related to device support are readily available within the DRC INSIGHT Portal.

Testing Devices and Software

If supportive software has been added to the devices on which your students will take the state assessments (e.g., Grammarly), it's important that you have a plan for disabling the software during the test administration. DRC's INSIGHT test engine blocks student access to standard system applications when the test is launched. However, add-on software that is not part of a device's standard operating system must be disabled by the school prior to testing. For more information and support for this topic, please access the Technology User Guide from the DRC INSIGHT Portal. Technology staff should call DRC Customer Service if additional information is needed.