



PVAAS Projections in Action: Optimizing Course Placement Decisions

Decisions about students' course placements are critical to their successful academic path. A multi-step decision-making process for individual student course placements, when applied across the LEA/school, ensures that there is **uniformity**, **consistency**, **transparency**, and **specificity** to how students are placed in certain courses.

Establishing the decision-making criteria for specific courses is vital, but equally important is the additional step of determining how the criteria will be applied –in other words, how the criteria is used in considering student placement.

So, a truly effective course placement process includes:

1. Establishing data sources and assessment data to be used in the decision-making process;
2. Setting the data criteria; *and*
3. Determining the application of the data criteria.

- *Establishing the decision-making criteria for specific courses is vital, but equally important is the additional step of **determining how the criteria will be applied**, i.e., how the criteria is used in considering student placement.*

Step 1: Establish data sources and assessment data to be used in the decision-making process.

The team/educators may want to start by determining how students are placed in courses currently, adding **transparency** to the process. The team also needs to determine any additional data sources that need to be added to build **consistency** between subjects and grades. For example, are course decisions made based on:

- Teacher recommendation?
- Course completion?
- Student choice?
- Report card grades?
- Performance levels on PSSA/ Keystone Exams?
- Benchmark and diagnostic assessments?
- Attendance?
- PVAAS Projections?
- Some of these? All of these?
- Any sources not listed?

*If not currently used for course decision making, it is **strongly encouraged that you access the information on student course placement decision-making on the PVAAS website**. It can provide highly reliable information to inform course placement.*

It is important that a list of data sources for each relevant course be created, as there may be slight differences depending on the course itself. In this step, **specificity** is key: for example, the data sources for Algebra I placement may differ slightly from those used to determine placement in an English Honors level course.



STOP AND THINK: *Have you identified **data sources** to be used as **course criteria** for the courses where decisions are required? Are these data sources **known** to stakeholders? Are individual **PVAAS student-level projections** a key part of this process?*



Once the data sources have been agreed upon, the next step is to determine the criteria for each data source.

Step 2: Set the Data Criteria

This step involves determining the criteria set—or “targets”—for each of the data sources identified. The criteria set or target brings **specificity**, **uniformity**, and **consistency** to the process.

For example, it is not enough to list “final exam” as a criterion, because that only tells us that the final exam grade is to be considered as part of the decision-making process. Adding the target of “85% or higher” to the final exam criterion brings **specificity** to the data source.

What follows is an example of establishing targets for each data source. *Note: All examples are included as examples, not requirements. LEAs determine local criteria.*

Criteria for Placement into: *Advanced Grade 6 Math*

| Data Source | Criteria (Target) for Each Data Source |
|--|--|
| <i>Benchmark assessment score</i> | <i>Cut score to correspond to 5th Advanced</i> |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to Grade 5 Math Advanced</i> | <i>Probability greater than 70%</i> |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to Grade 6 Math Advanced</i> | <i>Probability greater than 70%</i> |
| <i>PSSA Math score — Grades 3 & 4</i> | <i>Advanced</i> |
| <i>PSSA ELA score — Grade 4</i> | <i>Proficient</i> |
| <i>Grade 5 final exam</i> | <i>85% or higher</i> |
| <i>Teacher Recommendation</i> | <i>Affirmative / Yes</i> |



STOP AND THINK: *Have you collaboratively established and communicated the **targets for each of the criteria** set for a course? If not, how will you proceed? If yes, does what currently exists need **revision** or **refinement**?*

Step 3: Determine application of the data criteria

This third step brings even more **consistency** to the course criteria – without this final step, the decision could be interpreted differently across educators.

Tightening the Criteria Targets

This step requires collaboration and consensus to identify how the criteria are to be applied.

Let’s use the same example to show why tightening the process is so important. The chart that follows shows that placement into 6th grade Advanced Math has six data sources set as criteria, with the right-hand column showing the targets. Here is the question:

- *What if the student meets **SOME** of the targets, but not all of them?*
- *How is the decision made?*
- *Will the decisions be made with consistency?*



Criteria for Placement into: *Advanced Grade 6 Math*

| Data Source | Criteria (Target) for Each Data Source | Targets: |
|--|--|--------------------|
| <i>Benchmark assessment score</i> | <i>Cut score to correspond to 5th Advanced</i> | <i>Didn't meet</i> |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to Grade 5 Math Advanced</i> | <i>Probability greater than 70%</i> | <i>Met</i> |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to Grade 6 Math Advanced</i> | <i>Probability greater than 70%</i> | <i>Didn't meet</i> |
| <i>PSSA Math score – Grades 3 & 4</i> | <i>Advanced</i> | <i>Met</i> |
| <i>PSSA ELA score – Grade 4</i> | <i>Proficient</i> | <i>Didn't meet</i> |
| <i>Grade 5 final exam</i> | <i>85% or higher</i> | <i>Didn't meet</i> |
| <i>Teacher Recommendation</i> | <i>Affirmative / Yes</i> | <i>Met</i> |

With some targets “met” and others “not met”, it is quite possible that different educators may arrive at differing conclusions for this student.

Adding a **uniform** approach to the application of the targets will help to bring about **consistency** and **transparency** in the decision-making process. Without this next step, you may find that inconsistent and even arbitrary decisions are being made for students.

Examples and Approaches

Approach 1: Decisions by Total Targets

This method totals the number of target values that met by the candidate. This total is next compared to the criteria that is set in advance by the LEA/district team.

Advantage: Very simple to tabulate
Disadvantage: Categories considered of equal weight

Criteria for Placement into: *Honors Math 6*

| Data Source | Target for Each Data Source | Yes | No |
|---|--|-----|----|
| <i>PVAAS Projection to 5th Gr Math (Proficient)</i> | <i>Probability ≥ 70%</i> | | |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to 6th Gr Math (Proficient)</i> | <i>Probability ≥ 70%</i> | | |
| <i>PSSA Math – 4th Gr</i> | <i>High Proficient – Scale Score ≥ 1090</i> | | |
| <i>PSSA ELA – 4th Gr</i> | <i>High Proficient – Scale Score ≥ 1050</i> | | |
| <i>District Uniform 4th Gr Math Test</i> | <i>B- or better</i> | | |
| <i>Class Grade – Midterm 5th Gr</i> | <i>B- or better</i> | | |
| <i>Attendance</i> | <i>Consistent attendance (LEA decision to establish specific criteria)</i> | | |
| <i>Totals</i> | | | |
| Criterion: minimum of 4 Yes's | Decision: | | |

NOTE: LEAs will want to check the scores for high proficient/advanced with PDE cut scores to ensure the use of the appropriate score.



Approach 2: Decision Based on Weighted Point Values

This method requires that the weight of each target data element be assigned in advance. The product of the value and weight in each category are totaled and that total is compared to the criteria that is set in advance by the administrative team.

Advantage: Categories can have different values and weights

Disadvantage: Best implemented with technology, such as Excel. Detailed process required.

Criteria for Placement into: *Honors Math 6*

| Data Source | Possible Values | Points | Weights | Weighted Score |
|---|--|---------------|-------------|----------------|
| <i>PSSA Math – 4th Gr</i> | <i>Advanced = 10 Basic = 4 Proficient = 7 Below Basic = 0</i> | | <i>.15</i> | |
| <i>PSSA Read – 4th Gr</i> | <i>Advanced = 10 Basic = 4 Proficient = 7 Below Basic = 0</i> | | <i>.15</i> | |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to 5th Gr Math (Proficient)</i> | <i>Between 70–100% = 10 Between 40–50% = 5 Between 0–40% = 0</i> | | <i>.20</i> | |
| <i>PVAAS Projection to 6th Gr Math (Proficient)</i> | <i>Between 70–100% = 10 Between 40–50% = 5 Between 0–40% = 0</i> | | <i>.20</i> | |
| <i>Class Grade – Midterm 5th Gr</i> | <i>A = 10 B = 7 C = 4 D = 0 F = 0</i> | | <i>.20*</i> | |
| <i>Attendance</i> | <i>Consistent Attendance (LEA decision to establish specific criteria)</i> | | <i>.10</i> | |
| | | <i>Totals</i> | <i>100%</i> | |
| Criterion: <i>Minimum Points Achieved =</i> | Decision: | | | |

*LEA’s will want to consider the weighting of grades based on how grades are derived and the relationship of the grade to academic performance.

NOTE: LEAs will want to check the scores for high proficient/advanced with PDE cut scores to ensure the use of the appropriate score.

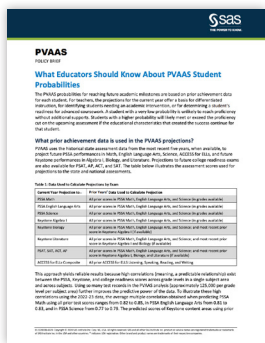


STOP AND THINK: Have you collaboratively discussed **which option** is to be used for each relevant course? Is this information **communicated and shared** with the appropriate stakeholders?



Summary and Take Aways:

- Decisions about a student’s course placement are critical to a student’s successful academic path.
- Prioritizing course placement work provides access and opportunity for students.
- Data sources should be identified for courses that require decision-making (for example, Honors courses, AP courses, or Keystone Algebra grade placement).
- PVAAS (projections) play a critical and meaningful role in planning a student’s academic course placement/schedule.
- A course placement process that relies on data can bring **uniformity** and **specificity** to what may otherwise be an arbitrary decision.
- Assigning criteria targets and defining how they are applied will bring **consistency** of understanding across teachers with an LEA/district or school.
- A consistent course placement process promotes **transparency** for students and families.



Learn more about PVAAS Projections:

What Educators Should Know About PVAAS Student Probabilities (PDF) >

<https://pvaas.sas.com/support/PVAAS-StudentProbabilities.pdf>

Visit pa.gov/education for additional resources on this topic.