

Parents' Guide to Standardized Testing

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Standardized testing is one form of assessment used in schools. Find out about standardized tests, how and why schools use them, and how you can support your child in this article for parents.

What should parents know about standardized testing in schools?

One tool that schools use to learn about students is the standardized test. This article explains basic features of these tests and suggests questions you might ask your child's teacher about testing. Understanding the role of testing will help you to enable your child to succeed in school and to develop a better relationship between your family and your child's school.

What are standardized tests?

Usually created by commercial test publishers, standardized tests are designed to give a common measure of students' performance. Because large numbers of students throughout the country take the same test, they give educators a common yardstick or "standard" of measure. Educators use these standardized tests to tell how well school programs are succeeding or to give themselves a picture of the skills and abilities of today's students.

Some popular tests include the California Achievement Tests (the CAT), the Stanford Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (the ITBS), and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale.

Why do schools use standardized tests?

Standardized tests can help teachers and administrators make decisions regarding the instructional program. They help schools measure how students in a given class, school, or school system perform in relation to other students who take the same test. Using the results from these tests, teachers and administrators can evaluate the school system, a school program, or a particular student.

How do schools use standardized tests?

Different types of standardized tests have different purposes. Standardized achievement tests measure how much students have already learned about a school subject. The results from these tests can help teachers develop programs that suit students' achievement levels in each subject area, such as reading, math, language skills, spelling, or science.

Standardized aptitude tests measure students' abilities to learn in school-how well they are likely to do in future school work. Instead of measuring knowledge of subjects taught in school, these tests measure a broad range of abilities or skills that are considered important to success in school. They can measure verbal ability, mechanical ability, creativity, clerical ability, or abstract reasoning. The results from aptitude tests help teachers to plan instruction that is appropriate for the students' levels. Educators most commonly use achievement and aptitude tests to:

- Evaluate school programs
- Report on students' progress
- Diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses
- Select students for special programs
- Place students in special groups
- Certify student achievement (for example, award high school diplomas or promote students from grade to grade)

Can standardized tests alone determine my child's placement in the classroom?

No. Paper-and-pencil tests give teachers only part of the picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers combine the results of many methods to gain insights into the skills, abilities, and knowledge of your child. These methods include:

- Observing students in the classroom
- Evaluating their day-to-day classwork
- Grading their homework assignments
- Meeting with their parents
- Keeping close track of how students change or grow throughout the year

Standardized tests have limitations. These tests are not perfect measures of what individual students can or cannot do or of everything students learn. Also, your child's scores on a particular test may vary from day to day, depending on whether your child guesses, receives clear directions, follows the directions carefully, takes the test seriously, and is comfortable in taking the test.

What are my legal rights?

Several precedents and laws define legal rights related to taking tests in school:

- Under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, also known as the Buckley Amendment, you have a right to examine your child's academic records. If these records contain test scores, you have a right to see those scores as well.
- Your child has a right to due process. For example, your child must get adequate notice when a test is required for high school graduation and adequate time to prepare for the test.
- Your child has a right to fair and equitable treatment. Schools cannot, for example, have different test score requirements based on gender or race.

Schools are not, however, necessarily liable for tests and test results being misused. Your child's best protection against the misuse of testing is for you to be knowledgeable about the appropriate uses of various types of tests. If you suspect your child is being tested

inappropriately, or is not being tested when testing would be appropriate, talk with your child's teacher.

References

Bagin, C. B. and Rudner, L. M. What Should Parents Know About Standardized Testing in Schools? Parent Brochure. ACCESS ERIC, in association with ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation.