

Why Test Students?

There have always been tests, but there have never before been so many! It's natural for parents and concerned citizens to wonder what is motivating this increase and to examine the many reasons why.

Why test students?

Well, to start with because we need to know how children are doing in school. Ever since there have been schools, teachers have used tests of various kinds to find out how well students are learning and if their instruction has been successful or not. But the reasons for testing don't stop there.

In recent years, large-scale testing has taken on a more significant social role. Many policymakers claim that American education isn't doing the job it needs to do. They cite studies showing that by 12th grade, students in the U.S. perform below most other industrialized nations on international assessments. Our 12th grade students fail to make substantial gains in reading or mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, "America's report card." Numerous educational reforms of the 1990s, they say, have failed to deliver on their promise to improve student achievement.

In this context, policymakers have passed federal and state legislation using tests to measure school performance and spur improved achievement. Tests are used to rank schools, place students at various levels, and decide who will graduate from high school. In schools where test scores fail to improve substantially, parents may transfer their child to a higher performing school. In some cases, federal law allows students to use their share of Title 1 funding for tutoring services. Such uses of test scores go far beyond finding out how well a child can read, write, or solve word problems.

According to testing experts and researchers, testing serves many important purposes. Tests are used to:

- Diagnose individual student strengths and weaknesses.
- Focus learning and instruction to state standards and key concepts.
- Motivate improved student, school, district, and state performance.
- Make school and college entrance decisions.

Resources

Helpful Web Sites

CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>



- Report how well schools are performing and improving to the public.
- Help determine whether or not schools should be accredited.
- Evaluate school program quality and recommend improvements.

Education researcher Robert Linn points out that tests are on the increase not only because they serve so many purposes, but also because they are less expensive than many other school reforms—such as professional development (teacher education programs). He notes that tests can be put into place relatively quickly, can pressure teachers to make instructional changes in hopes of improving test performance, and tend to attract media and public attention.

So the shorthand answer to “Why test students?” is because tests serve an expanding number of significant educational purposes, bolstered by some financial and political considerations.

Classroom Tests

State tests have garnered the headlines, while far less attention has been paid to classroom tests—the most frequent tests taken by students. Like state tests, classroom tests can have major consequences, especially in the upper grades when test performance contributes significantly to a student’s grade point average, a key factor in many college and university admission decisions. While classroom tests are generally useful for evaluating student skills and learning, they sometimes fail to reflect state content standards or may assess only low-level content. In more negative cases, classroom tests can fail to provide effective feedback to students and can contain scoring errors.

In general, teachers use classroom tests to:

- Diagnose student strengths and weaknesses.
- Monitor each student’s progress.
- Assign grades.
- Determine the teacher’s own instructional effectiveness.
- Provide information to inform instructional and curricular decisions.
- Help teachers clarify their instructional intentions.

When combined with results from school assignments, state tests, and teacher observations, classroom tests can provide a dependable picture of a student’s strengths and weaknesses. They can also inform the teacher or parent if the child is improving or falling behind.

Determining a teacher’s or lesson’s instructional effectiveness can be another very useful facet of a classroom test. If the entire class performs below a teacher’s expectations on a test, the teacher can use



those results to change their instruction. He or she might try a different instructional approach, spend more time teaching missed concepts, or use different instructional materials.

Classroom tests also help teachers clarify their own instructional intentions. Developing tests prior to instruction encourages teachers to develop a clear roadmap for learning, which includes standards, instruction, and assessment. Both classroom tests and state tests serve many important purposes helping to answer the question, “Why Test Students?”

What You Can Do

- Stay informed about testing. Read newspapers, magazine articles and school newsletters to see how test results are used by your district and state.
- Discuss test scores and school rankings with your school principal or district assessment administrator. If your district administers their own local tests, ask how they are developed, scored, and used.
- Carefully review your child’s classroom tests. Look not only at your child’s performance, but the quality of the test. Is it challenging? Was the content covered well in class and supported by homework, assignments, and textbooks so your child had an opportunity to learn the material?
- Become better informed through reading some of the resources listed below.

Useful Resources

Building a Workable Accountability System

http://www.WestEd.org/online_pubs/kn-01-03.pdf

Classroom Assessment and the Pursuit of Illuminating Feedback

<http://www.nwrel.org/msec/images/nwteacher/winter2002/classroom.pdf>

EdSource Online

<http://www.edsource.org/>

In an Era of Reform: Standards and the Classroom

<http://www.nwrel.org/msec/nwteacher/winter2001/standards.html>

Standards for Educational Accountability Systems

<http://www.cresst.org/products/newsletters/polbrf54.pdf>



Standards-based Accountability: Ten Suggestions

<http://www.cresst.org/products/newsletters/policypaper.pdf>

Wondering What to Think About All These Tests?

<http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/ca/160/track/print>

Ron Dietel, the original author of this article, is a member of the Public Understanding strand of CAESL, and the Assistant Director for Research Use and Communications at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). CAESL Reviewers included: Jacquely Barber, Lincoln Bergman, Grace Coates, Kathy DiRanna, Joan Herman, Julia Koppich, Karen Milligan, Mike Timms, and a group of parents and teachers who provided their comments before we finalized this series of briefs.

Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0119790.

© CAESL 2003. All rights reserved. Permission to reproduce, with CAESL copyright notice included, is hereby granted.