

Making Sense of Test Scores

It's challenging for parents and the general public to make sense of the reports on test scores that appear in the mass media. Here are some things to consider as you bring a critical eye to what you read in the papers!

Usually reports on test scores in the media are quite short and focus on one or two aspects of test results. Often, they draw oversimplified conclusions—expressing surprise that students are making gains or (perhaps seen as more newsworthy) registering shock at low scores. Sometimes reports on test scores are sensationalized and exaggerated—especially when they claim to show how poorly students or schools are doing or how "behind" students in the United States are compared to other countries.

These claims may or may not be true, but based on the limited information in many news reports, there is often not enough **evidence** presented to confirm the conclusions. A critical reader is almost always left with important unanswered questions. In the case of test scores, there is frequently a lack of basic information about the kind of test, its development and history, its reliability, fairness, accuracy, and validity.

Yet we are living in an age of much testing and assessment, with increasing demands for teacher and school accountability, and ever-more rigorous expectations for improved student test performance. In this setting, as Gerald Bracey and many other educational researchers have suggested, it is important that parents and all people interested in education gain a greater degree of what Bracey has termed "assessment literacy."

What is Assessment Literacy?

We're all familiar with the use of the word literacy to mean having the ability to read and write at a reasonably competent level. More recently, the word has been applied in other ways. **Assessment literacy means having an adequate amount of information and understanding about how student learning is assessed and tested.** Reading the other CAESL Assessment Briefs and suggested resources listed below can be a start toward assessment literacy. For a specific test, it's often quite helpful to read the information that usually accompanies your child's scores. What are the strengths and limitations of the test as described by the testing organization itself?

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>



As with all learning, the first steps in achieving a higher level of understanding about assessment start with questions. What was the test designed to measure? What purpose(s) are the test results designed to serve? Was the test based on state standards? Such questions can help parents place their child's results in perspective. Questions can also reveal limitations on the significance that can be attached to results. For instance, an international examination tested students on their knowledge of algebra and reported poor results by U.S. students. When critical questions were asked, however, it became clear that the test was given to U.S. students the year **before** they typically study algebra in school. So it's not surprising they did not test well. Another report about statewide standardized test results spoke alarmingly about students' lack of knowledge as reflected by the below-average scores. It did not mention students had only 20 minutes to answer 60 questions. Rapid recall and knowledge are not the same, especially for students who are not practiced in test-taking strategy. These are just two among many examples of missing information crucial to a more complete understanding of test results.

Consider the Source

In addition to the sometimes sensationalized and simplistic approach of the media, various interest groups may have reasons to put their own "spin" on the interpretation of test results. Interpretations of some reports may be slanted in defense of stakeholders in the system, such as administrators, teacher's unions, or the established bureaucracies of state education departments or large districts. Groups that don't like the currently accepted approaches to education are definitely motivated to conclude that things are not good enough at present and may emphasize one finding of a test over another. Those who think current approaches make sense, but believe education is vastly under-funded might also tend to conclude that things are not good enough, in the hope that more money will be allocated. Even those who feel pleased with the progress being made, but hold high standards and want to head off a natural tendency toward complacency, may want to send out a somewhat critical message.

In all of these cases, the real question is whether or not the changes such groups advocate are realistic, needed, and based on more than their particular interpretation of test scores. There are many credible research studies that indicate problems with the U.S. educational system, and there are serious educational challenges, but it is important to find out whether or not a group may have a particular agenda or goal. It is useful to seek out those more complete media reports that provide this level of analysis.

Student assessment is a complex and controversial field—and it ranges from classroom discussions and quizzes to large-scale standardized testing. But there are some basic ideas that should help parents navigate reports on standardized testing and large-scale test results. We suggest some questions in the "What You Can Do" section. Other CAESL Assessment Briefs on this website contain helpful information on assessment terms and scoring, such as the brief *Types of Testing*. For those who want to dig deeper, we've provided more resources at the end of this article.



What You Can Do

- Bring a critical eye to reports about test scores, asking questions to clarify their meaning. What was the test designed to measure? Factual recall? Complex thinking? What does this test not measure? Were students being tested on what they were taught? Was there a connection between what was tested and what state/national standards say is important for students to know? How was the test scored? Were students tested in a language they understood? Was the test measuring rapid recall or thoughtful response? What exactly does the score indicate about the student that may need to be improved? What exactly does this test score indicate about the school or district that may need to be improved?
- Keep firmly in mind that more than one “data point” is needed to accurately assess your child’s learning progress. Multiple measures of student progress over time provide much more reliable information—and the same is true when using test or other data to evaluate teachers, schools, districts, states, the nation and the different nations of the world.
- Don’t panic over media reports! As a parent, it is especially difficult not to react with alarm to reports that our students and schools are failing. Be sure to bring a critical sense to what you read and then draw your own conclusions. If you have questions about a specific test your child took, ask to speak with your principal or counselor. If many parents are concerned, consider working through the PTA or other group to hold a forum with a district administrator, a testing expert, or other source of testing information.
- Remember that children are “smart” in many different ways. There are many kinds of intelligence. The ability to be sensitive to and work well with others can be seen as interpersonal intelligence. We all know people with musical intelligence, or people with a special ability to build and transform with their hands, another kind of intelligence. Large-scale tests tend to focus on measuring just two kinds of “smarts”—number smarts and word smarts. Just because your child receives a low score on a particular test does NOT mean that he or she is not intelligent! By knowing **how** your child is smart, you can positively reinforce those strengths and you can encourage improvement in areas she or he finds more challenging.
- Remember that you *can* make a difference. It can be frustrating to read about things that relate to our children in the paper, and yet feel helpless to improve the educational system. A tremendous amount of research shows the positive educational benefits of active and consistent involvement in your child’s education.
- Become better informed through reading some of the resources listed below.

Useful Resources

Bracey, Gerald W., *Thinking about tests and testing: A short primer in "assessment literacy."* American Youth Policy Forum in cooperation with the National Conference of State Legislatures (also available as a PDF at <http://www.aypf.org/>)

Fiske, Edward B. *Smart Schools, Smart Kids: Why Do Some Schools Work?* New York, Simon & Shuster, 1992.

Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* New York, Harper Collins, 1983.

Herman, Joan; Ansbacher, Pamela; Winters, Lynn. *A Practical Guide to Alternative Assessment,* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia, 1992.

Popham, W. James. *Testing! Testing! What Every Parent Should Know About School Tests.* Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

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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.

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