

What Parents Should Know About Test Types

Testing in our nation's schools is on the rise. From the classroom quiz to the large-scale standardized test, the pressure for education to be "accountable" has intensified. As your child experiences this new tide of testing, it's helpful to become more aware of the different types of tests and their purposes.

What types of tests does my child take at school?

Students in the United States usually take three types of tests in school: standards-based tests, norm-referenced tests, and classroom tests. Below are basic descriptions of each type.

Standards-Based Tests

States and school districts develop standards-based tests to measure student and school progress toward reaching state content standards. State (or district) standards are a written description—usually by grade level—of what students are expected to know in major subject areas. Students across the state or district take the test and the results are used to create a series of proficiency levels linked to the state standards. The levels usually include *below basic*, *basic*, *proficient* and *advanced*, but the terms and number of levels can differ between states or districts. In general, the more questions a student answers correctly, the higher the proficiency level reached. A standards-based test may include multiple-choice, short answer, or essay questions, or include a combination of formats. Most students take a state standards-based test once a year, often in the spring. Results are provided to teachers, schools, and parents several months after the test. Federal legislation contained in the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires all students to reach the proficient level in reading and mathematics on their state test by the year 2014.

Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests

Many states or school districts include a national norm-referenced test as a part of their assessment programs. Norm-referenced tests measure basic concepts and skills commonly taught in schools throughout the country. These tests are not designed as measures of any specific curriculum or instructional program. Well known norm-referenced tests include the Stanford Achievement Test, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, California Achievement Test, and Terra Nova test. Results from norm-referenced tests compare a student's achievement with that of a national sample of similar students. Scores are

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>



often given as a percentage or a ranking based on percentage. A rank of 40 percent means a student scored better than 40 percent of the students in the sample; 75 means a student scored better than 75 percent of the sample group. Another way norm-referenced scores are expressed is the grade equivalent score. A 4.5 grade equivalent score implies that the student is at the 4th grade, fifth month grade level. Such a specific score suggests more accuracy than a test can measure. No one really knows exactly what a student at the 4.5 grade level should be able to know and do, so the score is an estimation that should be taken somewhat cautiously. Similar to standards-based tests, most national norm-referenced tests are administered once a year with results returned to students several months later.

Classroom Tests

We're all familiar with basic classroom tests from our own school experience. Classroom tests are given periodically, sometimes weekly, or at the end of a curriculum unit. The teacher may originate many; others are adapted from a textbook or other instructional material. Classroom test formats may include multiple-choice, true/false, short answer, essay, performance, displays or exhibits, and even computer-administered tests. Performance tests require students to apply their knowledge to longer or more complex problems. Classroom test results allow students to get ongoing feedback about their own progress and can inform teachers about additional instruction students may need. Teachers often use classroom test results during parent/teacher conferences as evidence of strengths, areas needing improvement, and progress. Portfolio assessment (a collection of student work graded to specific criteria) can also help demonstrate student progress over a period of time. Classroom tests are important components of student evaluations, but they are only one means of assessment—a more complete picture includes teacher observation of a student's classroom participation, student performance on assignments, portfolios, and many other assessment strategies that experienced teachers employ.

Is one type of test better than another?

Each type of test serves important but different purposes. At its best, a state standards-based test tells you how well your child is achieving the state standards and can also provide important information about how well your school is teaching those standards. A national norm-referenced test provides valuable information that can be compared to a national average. On the other hand, standards-based and norm-referenced tests often are not able to assess a student's deeper conceptual understanding or complex thinking abilities. A classroom test provides information about your child's performance in a specific topic taught by a specific teacher. Major advantages of classroom tests are that they can provide much more frequent information on student progress, help diagnose specific student strengths and weaknesses, and can lead to improved instruction for students. However, they lack a national or state comparison and both test design and scoring may be less precise than on a norm-referenced or state standards-based test. When classroom tests are well aligned with state standards, they can reflect student progress in reaching the standards and can help prepare students for the state standards-based test.

What You Can Do

- Attend school or school board meetings where test scores are discussed. Many district-based administrators will provide helpful information about what your student's test scores really mean.
- Carefully read information about test scores from the test publisher, your school, and school district. Understanding test scores is essential to understanding your child's performance.
- Compare results across the different types of tests and the student evaluations they use to see how consistent (or inconsistent) they seem to be in portraying your child's overall pattern of performance.
- Keep a folder and compare changes in test scores across two or more years to determine if improvement is being made, not just in the current achievement of a student, school, or district, but over time.
- Remember that test scores are not perfectly accurate and that interpretations can differ. Most classroom tests, for example, do not undergo a rigorous evaluation process for content or difficulty level. Large-scale tests often lack depth of information about student knowledge. Reviewing results from many assessments with your child's teacher can provide a better picture of your child's achievement.
- Learn more from web sites, publications, or books about testing. We suggest several below.

Useful Resources

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

Thinking About Tests and Testing: A Short Primer in "Assessment Literacy" by Gerald Bracey. Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum. <http://www.aypf.org/publicatons/BraceyRep.pdf>

A Practical Guide to Alternative Assessment by Joan Herman, Pamela Aschbacher, and Lynn Winters (1992). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

Note On Terms: Standardized tests are any tests that are administered and scored in a pre-specified, standard manner—each test-taker is asked the same questions and/or given the same tasks, provided the same information before and during the test, has the same amount of time to take it—and all tests are scored in the same way. Standardized tests are usually used in large-scale settings to gain information across schools, districts, states, and nations; so standardized tests are often also referred to as large-scale tests. A standardized test can be either norm-referenced or criterion-based, and either an achievement test or an aptitude test. A norm-referenced test is scored by comparison to a sample of



other students. A criterion-based test is scored directly from the content (or criteria) tested. Each student's score is based on how many questions she or he answers correctly without reference to any "norm" or sample group. Standards-based tests are criterion-based tests—scored by how well each student taking the test has mastered the "criteria." A standards-based test is also an achievement test. Achievement tests are designed to measure students' specific knowledge and skills (California Achievement Tests, Stanford Achievement Tests, Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Metropolitan Achievement Tests). Aptitude tests are designed to predict how well students are likely to perform in another setting, such as college (Scholastic Assessment Test or SAT and the ACT). Check out Useful Resources and Helpful Web Sites to learn more.

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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!

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