

- Ask about how homework assignments relate to testing.
- Have a variety of books and magazines at home to encourage your child's curiosity. Help your child understand that learning is about more than just preparing for a test.
- Don't be overly anxious about test scores, but encourage your child to do his or her best.
- Don't judge your child on the basis of a single test score.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions about tests and test-preparation activities.

What Should I Ask About Test Scores?

School districts and state departments of education should provide information to help parents interpret test scores. To help see beyond a simple score, ask:

- Will I receive a report that includes more than just a numerical score? For example, will I receive information outlining strengths and weaknesses on specific skills so I can help my child with homework and other studies?
- Are the standardized test results consistent with my child's performance in the classroom?
- Do the test scores illustrate a larger trend? How does this affect my child?
- How does the performance of students in my child's school compare with the performance of students in other schools and school systems?
- Can a student earn good grades and still do poorly on a standardized test? (If the district or state test is not well-matched to what your child is taught in school, there is a chance your child could score poorly on the test while still making good grades. For this reason, test experts recommend that no important decision be made on the basis of just one test.)
- What appeals processes are in place for parents and students who feel their test scores do not accurately reflect their mastery of skills?
- Will poor test results produce more resources for students and schools who need extra help?
- Will good test results produce more challenging curriculum for students performing at higher levels?

Michigan

Thousands of pieces of data on every Michigan school district—including spending, graduation rates and tests scores—are available online (www.ses.standardandpoors.com/Homepage.html), thanks to Standard & Poor's evaluation system.

Parents can see how each school's spending compares to its performance. Information includes test scores, attendance, dropout rates, poverty levels and much more.

Minneapolis

Minneapolis Public Schools, in partnership with the Minneapolis Foundation and Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, released Measuring Up—an online information source (www.mpls.k12.mn.us) that includes enrollment information, graduation rates, spending categories, family involvement, reports on how students spend their time and more.

A More Complete View of Your Child's Learning

Tests are one important measure in guiding education reform, but saying that one test can measure fairly the progress and needs of a child or school is like saying a thermometer is the only instrument a doctor needs to diagnose a sick patient. It takes quality in many areas to make an effective school (*see below left*).

Paper-and-pencil tests give teachers only part of the picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers use many techniques and approaches to gain insights into your child's skills, abilities and knowledge. These may include the following:

- Observation in the classroom
- Evaluation of day-to-day classwork
- Grades on homework assignments
- Meetings with parents
- Keeping track of changes or growth throughout the year

Tests are not perfect measures of what individual students have learned. Your child's scores on a particular test may vary from day to day, depending on whether he or she guesses, receives clear directions, follows the directions carefully, takes the test seriously, and is comfortable in taking the test.

Don't judge your children on any one test result. Talk to them about how they felt about taking the test. You are likely to discover factors that affected their scores.

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Parent's Guide to Testing and Accountability

MNEA
Missouri National Education Association

Thoughtfully designed and implemented tests can provide important information for educators, parents and taxpayers to use to improve student and school performance. However, no single test will tell you everything you need to know. Getting the most out of a test requires understanding the scope of what a test can and cannot measure.

Most standardized tests can:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses in subject areas so that adjustments can be made to achieve better results.
- Inform communities about whether students are mastering skills set out in state standards.
- Allow school districts and states to identify areas of need and target extra help to schools in need.

Most standardized tests cannot:

- Track progress over time. Reports of test scores only include the results from each grade level—a snapshot in time. In other words, your third grader’s performance for this year will not be compared to his or her performance in fourth grade. Similarly, the progress of his or her class is not tracked from grade level to grade level.
- Diagnose specific reading problems or learning disabilities. Identifying these special needs requires a teacher’s trained eye and sometimes a test administered on a more individualized basis.

- Provide multiple opportunities for children to demonstrate what they know. For example, some children are better at expressing what they know through speaking, writing or conducting projects. Others excel at taking multiple-choice tests.
- Provide a more complete picture of what motivates your child to learn and inspire confidence in tackling new subject areas. This measure requires a caring, competent quality teacher.

What Should I Ask My Child’s Principal?

- What is the difference between the federally mandated test and other tests administered in class?
- How much class time will be devoted to test preparation?
- Have subject areas that are not tested been sacrificed to allow more time for test preparation?
- How will the teacher or the school use the results of the test?
- How is the material my child learns in class related to what is covered on tests?
- What other means of evaluation will the teacher or the school use to measure my child’s performance?
- For high school students, has the school reduced the number of advanced-placement and enrich-

ment classes in an effort to devote more time to test preparation?

- For elementary school students, has the school reduced attention to group activities that promote social development, cooperation and empathy skills?
- Have tests been integrated into school life in a comfortable manner, free from fear? Is support available for students whose nervousness may affect performance?
- What safeguards are in place to prevent cheating? Are the rules about cheating clear and explicitly communicated to teachers, parents and students?
- Is “teaching to the test” a form of cheating? How do I explain the distinctions to my child?

How Can I Help My Child Do Well On Tests?

- Talk to your child’s teacher often to monitor your child’s progress and find out what activities you can do at home to help your child do well in school.
- Ask when tests will be administered throughout the school year, and learn which subject areas will be covered in class, the kinds of preparation sessions being planned, etc.

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With a flourish of the President’s pen, annual testing in grades 3–8 became the law of the land. This sweeping mandate from Washington will mean changes in America’s classrooms. Many parents wonder how it will affect their child and what they should do to prepare. Following is a guide for parents as they navigate the new world of testing.



Valid, Fair Tests

The new education law requires the use of valid, fair tests that promote quality teaching and learning.

However, valid tests aligned with challenging curriculum are more expensive and require more time to implement.

Ask your superintendent and school board what kind of tests your school will use and whether teachers were involved in their selection and implementation.

Protecting Your Child

Decisions that affect an individual student’s life chances or educational opportunities shouldn’t be made on the basis of one test. As *New York Times* columnist Richard Rothstein notes—a baseball player’s batting average is never computed based on just one game.

Parents can contact elected leaders to ensure that legislation does not promote high-stakes decisions based on just a single test.

The American Educational Research Association developed a set of 12 criteria based on solid research that can help schools evaluate the fairness and effectiveness of proposed or existing systems of testing and accountability (www.aera.net).