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Carolyn Boccella Bagin

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## Talking to Your Child's Teacher about Standardized Tests

*Bagin, Carolyn Boccella*

American Institutes for Research

*(updated 11/99 by the editors to better reflect current assessment practice)*

Teachers learn about students by using a variety of methods. They assess students by observing them in the classroom, evaluating their day-to-day classwork, grading their homework assignments, meeting with their parents, keeping close records of how they change or grow throughout the year, and administering tests.

Tests give teachers only part of the picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers combine the results of many methods to gain well-rounded insights into the skills, abilities, and knowledge of your child.

This article highlights one tool that teachers use--standardized tests. It explains basic features of testing and suggests questions that you might ask your child's teacher. By understanding the role of testing, you can help your child succeed in school and can develop a better relationship among you, your child, and your child's school.

### WHAT ARE STANDARDIZED TESTS?

The word "standardized" in standardized tests refers to the conditions under which the test is taken, such as the directions that are read, the way answers are recorded, and the tools that students may use. All students who take a standardized test do so in equivalent, "standardized" environments. In that way, a standardized test is designed to give a fair measure of students' performance. Since the same test is given to large numbers of students, a comparative yardstick can be derived to tell evaluators whether individual students are succeeding or to give them a picture of the skills and abilities developed by today's schools.

Standardized tests are usually objective tests that are created by commercial test publishers, although some states create standardized testing programs on their own and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is also taken under standardized conditions. Other names of standardized tests that you may be familiar with include the California Achievement Tests (CAT), the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, to name a few popular tests.

### WHY DO SCHOOLS USE STANDARDIZED TESTS?

Standardized tests can help teachers and administrators make decisions. They help schools to 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.

Schools should not use standardized tests to label students as incapable of learning, to place students in a grade or class, to give report card grades, or to evaluate teachers unless they are used along with additional evidence collected to complement the information the test yields. No important decision should ever be based on the results of a single test.

### 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 students are likely to do in future school work. They do not measure subjects taught in school, but rather they measure a broad range of abilities or skills that are considered important to succeed in school. The results from aptitude tests help teachers to plan instruction that is neither too hard nor too easy for students. These tests can measure verbal ability, mechanical ability, creativity, clerical ability, or abstract reasoning.

Remember that standardized tests have limitations. They are not the perfect measure of what individual students can

or cannot do. Paper tests cannot measure everything that students learn. Also, your child's scores on a particular test can vary from day to day and many factors can affect a particular score -- whether your child guesses, receives clear direction, follows the directions carefully, is comfortable, and so forth.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILD?

Here are a few tips to remember.

- Don't be overly anxious about test scores, but encourage your child to take the test seriously.
- Don't judge your child on the basis of a test score.
- Talk to your child's teacher often to monitor your child's progress.
- Ask your child's teacher to suggest regular activities that you could do to help your child.
- Make sure your child does his or her homework.
- Make sure your child is well rested and eats a well-rounded diet.
- Have a variety of books and magazines at home to encourage your child's curiosity.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU ASK YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER?

Before the test...

- Which tests will be administered during the school year and for what purposes?
- How will the teacher or the school use the results of the test?
- What other means of evaluation will the teacher or the school use to measure your child's performance?
- Should your child practice taking tests?

After the test...

- How do students in your child's school compare with students in other school systems? across the country?
- What do the test results mean about your child's skills and abilities?
- Are the test results consistent with your child's performance in the classroom?
- Are any changes anticipated in your child's educational program?
- Are there things that you can do at home to help your child strengthen particular skills?

## WHERE CAN YOU GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

This article highlights some important points about testing; it doesn't tell you all there is to know about standardized tests and test results. For more detailed information about testing, you may want to contact these organizations:

American Federation of Teachers  
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20011

National Education Association  
1201 16th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

National Congress of Parents and Teachers  
700 North Rush Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

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