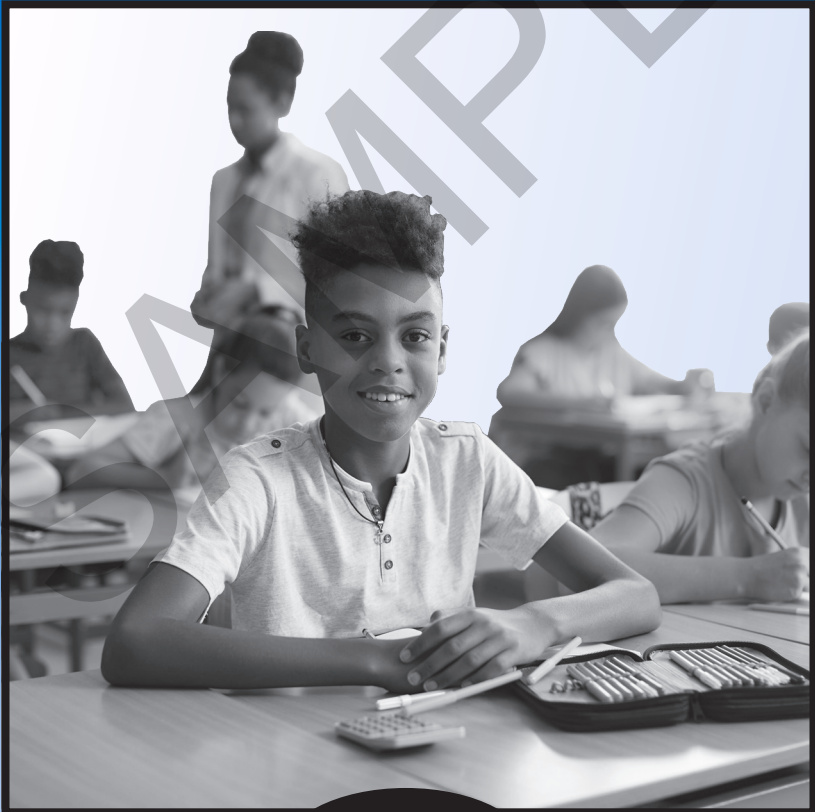


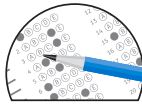
A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

Questions &  
Answers *about*

# Standardized Tests



THE  
**PARENT**  
INSTITUTE<sup>®</sup>



Standardized tests have been used to measure student achievement and ability for many years. Many states have defined specifically what students should know and be able to do, grade by grade. They use standardized tests to measure how well students achieve these goals.

National standardized tests are used to identify trends in student preparation. Today, many students need to earn a passing score on a standardized state test to graduate from high school.

And college entrance exam scores are still used by many competitive schools as a factor in admissions decisions.

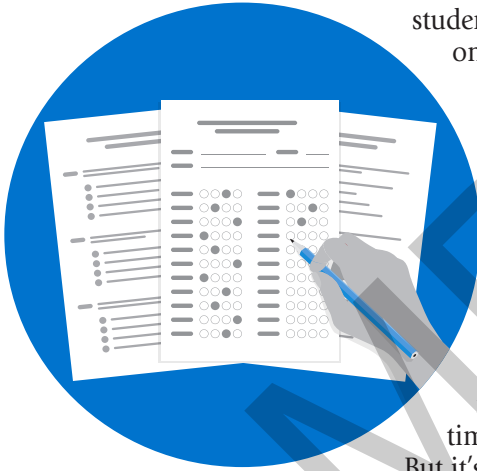
Some educators say these tests have raised standards for all students.

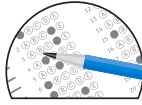
Others worry that schools may have to spend too much time preparing just for the tests.

But it's clear that tests have a place in education—and that they're here to stay.

This booklet will help you learn more about standardized tests. It will give you information about:

- The kinds of tests your child may take.
- What test scores tell you and your child's teachers.
- Ways you can work with your school to help your child succeed on standardized tests.





# Why do students have to take all these tests?

Schools have always wanted to know how students are doing. Whether it's a three-question quiz or a major unit exam, teachers have used tests to measure how well students have learned what they were taught.

**Standardized tests**<sup>1</sup> are designed to give a common measure of how well students are doing. Some of these tests measure how much students have learned about math, reading or science. Others test a student's ability to learn in school.

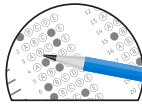
You may have heard of some of the following standardized tests: the Smarter Balanced assessment (SBAC), the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. Students planning to go to college may take either the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the ACT Assessment.

In addition, many states use their own standardized tests as one way to make sure all students know and are able to do the things that will help them succeed. High school students in most states have to pass a state test to graduate from high school.

Tests are one important tool to help you and the school measure how well your child is learning. That's why it's important for you to know all you can about standardized testing.



<sup>1</sup> Go to page 8 for definitions of terms used in this booklet.



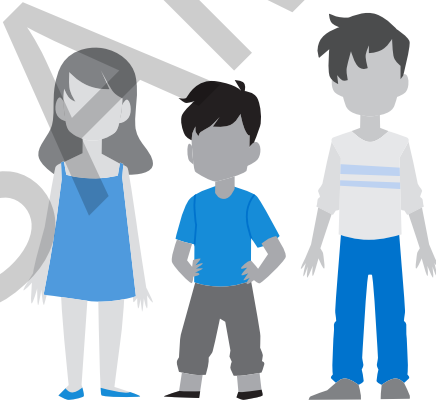
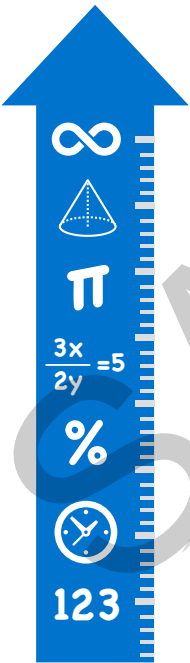
## What are standardized tests?

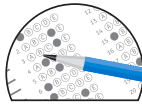
Standardized tests are created to see how student achievement in one school or class compares to student achievement across the city, the state or the country. They give educators a common standard to measure student performance.

To measure fairly, these tests need to be given under the same conditions. The amount of time students have to finish the test is strictly controlled. Each is scored in the same way—a student who answers the same questions correctly gets the same score whether the test is taken in California or in Maine.

Some tests measure students' *aptitude*—their ability to learn. They test a broad range of skills and abilities that can help students do well in school. They might measure verbal ability or mechanical ability, for example. Aptitude tests can help teachers plan appropriate instruction for their students.

Other tests measure *achievement*—how much students have already learned. For example, they can be used to measure whether students have mastered the information presented in their math or science class.

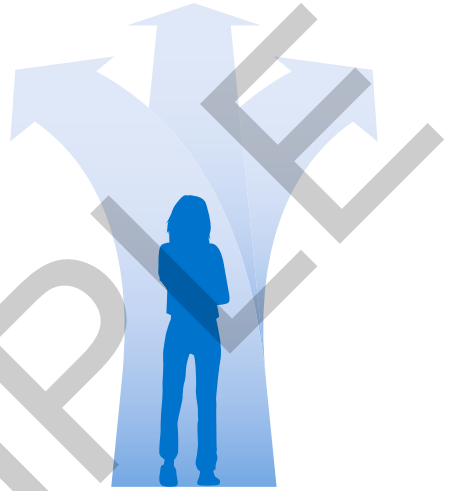




# Why and how are standardized tests used?

## *Testing can help the school:*

- Evaluate a school program.
- Report on a student's progress.
- Diagnose a student's strengths and weaknesses.
- Identify a student's interests and aptitudes.
- Evaluate a student's readiness for college and a career.
- Design an instructional program to meet an individual student's needs.
- Place a student in a class to meet special needs.



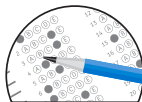
## *Testing can help families:*

- See how their child's achievement compares with that of other students locally and nationwide.
- Learn more about their child's aptitudes in various areas.
- Learn more about their child's interests in possible careers.

## *Testing can help students:*

- Better understand their strengths and weaknesses.
- Consider possible options for further education.
- Think about career choices.

Test results can tell educators and parents a lot. But no important decision should ever be based on the results of a single test. To accurately evaluate a student, the observations of parents should be combined with those of teachers, school staff, the child and specialists.



## What do I need to know about state tests?

What *should* students know and be able to do? State standards are designed to spell out what is expected of students. States set standards in many subjects, from reading and math to fine arts and computer science.

Here is one example of a standard for second graders: "The student will be able to add and subtract two-digit numbers."

*Content standards* cover what students are to learn in various subject areas, such as math and science. *Performance standards* specify what levels of ability are expected. How good is good enough?

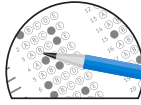
These standards are usually set by the state board of education, although others may also play a part. If you want to see the standards for your child's grade level, contact your school. You may also be able to find the standards on your state's department of education website.

Many states use computer-based standardized tests to measure whether students are meeting the standards that will put them on track for college and a career. The results of these tests are very important for individual students. Those who don't score high enough on these tests may benefit from summer school. Some

may not be able to graduate from high school.

Before your child takes state tests, find out what type of tests your child will be taking and what the consequences of the tests will be.

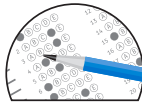




# What should I ask about standardized testing?

Parents have an important role to play in making sure their children do their best. Here are some of the questions you should ask about your school's standardized testing program:

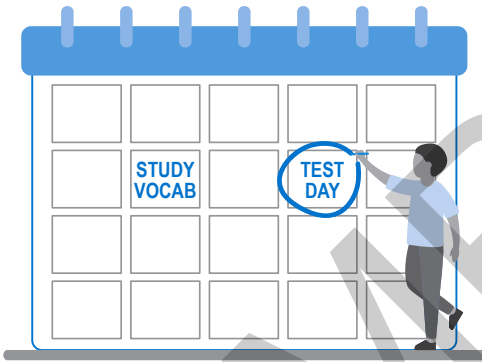
- ✓ *What are the names of the tests? When will the tests be given?*
- ✓ *What is the format of the tests? Will my child be taking tests with paper and pencil or online?*
- ✓ *How and when will I get the results?*
- ✓ *What can I do at home to prepare my child?*
- ✓ *Where can I get more information about the tests my child will take?*



# How can I help my child prepare for tests?

## *In the months preceding the test:*

- Find out when the tests are to be given. Write the date and time on your calendar. Avoid scheduling appointments or trips during these times.

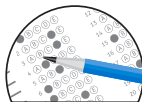


- Ask the teacher what you can do at home. Before some state tests, the teacher might ask you to review math facts or social studies terms, for example.
- Encourage your child to read. The easiest and best way to prepare your child for doing well on tests is to read often.

## *Right before the test:*

- Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep. Provide a good breakfast.
- Have your child dress in layers—kids do better on tests if they aren't distracted by how hot or cold they are.
- Don't be too anxious. Say, "This test is important. I know you will try hard and do your best." Your confidence will be contagious.
- On the day of the test, give your child these tips:
  - Pay close attention to the directions. You may be asked to choose the best answer, not simply one that is correct.
  - Check your answers carefully. Make sure the numbers of your answers correspond to the numbers of the questions on the test.





# My child didn't do as well on the tests as expected. What can I do now?

*First, talk to your child.*

*Ask these questions:*

- Were you surprised by the score?
- Do you think the score accurately reflects your knowledge?
- Can you think of a particular reason why you might have done poorly on the test? Were you not feeling well that day? Did you have a fight with a friend?
- Did you understand the test and why it was given?
- Did you run into trouble budgeting your time?
- Was there a particular section that was difficult even though you knew how to answer the rest of the questions?
- How did you prepare for the test? Would it have helped if you had studied class notes? Did you attend review sessions or take practice tests?

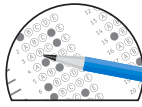


If you're not getting straight answers, or if your child just doesn't know the material, ask for a conference with your child's teacher. Talk about the scores. Ask if the scores reflect what the teacher sees in class. Also ask about how your child's test scores have changed from previous tests.

If there is a large difference between your child's performance in class and what the test shows, try to figure out together what might be the cause.

If you both agree that the test does not reflect your child's ability, and you can't figure out why your child did poorly, keep asking questions. Can your child take the test again? Some tests allow it; others do not.

You and the teacher may decide that other steps should be taken to make sure your child has the help needed to succeed in school.

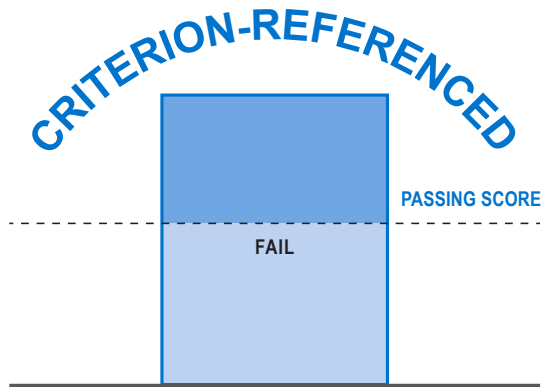


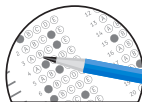
## Terms you might hear:

When people talk about testing, they sometimes use unfamiliar terms. Here are some of the terms you might hear:

### Types of Tests

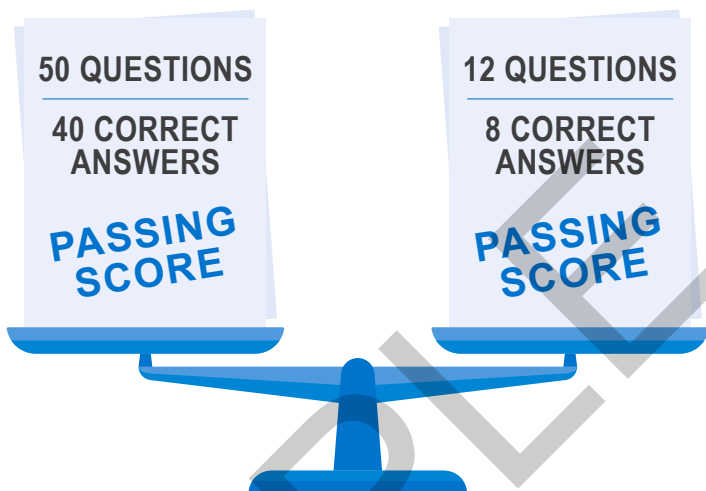
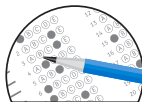
- **Standardized Test**—A test that has the same set of questions, the same test directions and the same scoring no matter where the test is given. There are two kinds of standardized tests—criterion-referenced and norm-referenced.
- **Criterion-Referenced Test**—A standardized test that measures students against criteria that are spelled out in advance. A test on the multiplication tables would be one example. The criteria might be that students must know how to multiply numbers through five.
- **Norm-Referenced Test**—A standardized test that compares one student's score to a group of other students' scores used as the "norm." These tests are given to a group of students first. Their scores become the standard, and other students' scores are then measured against that standard. Tests like the SAT and the ACT are norm-referenced tests.





## Terms used in testing and scoring

- **Computer-Adaptive Testing (CAT)**—This type of test is customized to each student. The difficulty of each question adapts to the student’s previous response, providing more precise information about the student’s performance.
- **Mean Score**—This is the average score in a group of scores. Usually, all the scores are added together and then divided by the number of students who took the test.
- **Grade Equivalent**—The estimated grade level represented by a student’s score. Let’s say the test is a third-grade reading test and it is given to a third grader. A 5.6 grade equivalent means the child scored the same as an average fifth grader in the sixth month of school *on that same third grade reading test*. That is a good performance for a third grader but it does not mean that third grader is capable of fifth grade work *in the fifth grade*. You would need a fifth grade reading test to determine that.
- **Percentage Correct Score**—This score shows as a percentage how many questions the student answered correctly. If there were 50 questions and the student answered 30 correctly, the percentage correct score would be 60 percent.
- **Percentile Rank or Score**—Used on norm-referenced tests, this score shows the percentage of other test-takers who scored *below* the student. If a student scored in the 72nd percentile, she scored better than 72 percent of the students in the norm group.
- **Raw Score**—The number of items answered correctly. For example, if a test has 63 items and the student gets 28 items correct, the raw score would be 28.

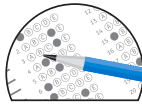


- **Scaled Score**—A way of reporting and comparing criterion-referenced test scores which have different numbers of questions, different levels of difficulty and different passing scores for each test. For example, one test might have 50 questions and the passing score might be set at 40 correct answers.

Another test might have just 12 questions, with a passing score of eight correct answers. To fairly compare how students score on both tests, the original scores on both tests can be converted to a new scoring system common to both tests. The converted scores are then called *scaled scores*.

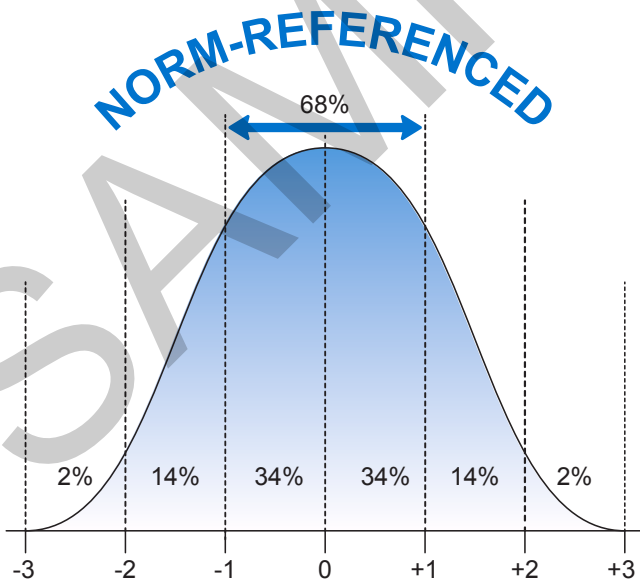
- **Standard deviation**—A way of measuring how widely a test's scores vary. When scores vary widely, the standard deviation is larger. When all the scores are about the same, the standard deviation is smaller.

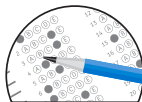
Knowing the number of standard deviations a student's test score varies from the mean provides a way to compare how the student performed with others who took the same test.



For any test the average, or mean, score can be calculated. The standard deviation is simply a number that tells how far above, and how far below, the average score one must go in order to include the scores of about 68% of all students who took the test. (See diagram below.) About 95% of the scores are within two standard deviations of the mean.

If a test has an average score of 60 and a standard deviation of five, then about 2/3 of those taking that test had scores ranging from 55 to 65— from five points above the average to five points below the average. If the standard deviation were 10 on the same test, then 2/3 of the students taking the test would have scores from 50 to 70 and 95% would have scores from 40 to 80 (scores within two standard deviations of the mean).

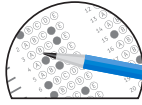




- **Standard Score**—A way of expressing a student's test score compared to the students in the norm group. A standard score converts and expresses the student's raw score in terms of the standard deviation for the test. (See definition above.) In a standard score, the average is often set to 100 and the standard deviation to 15. Standard scores allow for comparison of results from tests that have different averages and standard deviations.

## Terms about testing accuracy

- **Reliability**—A way to see whether the scores are consistent. If a student takes the same test twice, his scores should be about the same. If there are two versions of a test, the scores of students who took one version should be about the same as the scores of students who took the second.
- **Validity**—A way of looking at whether the test actually measures what it is supposed to measure. For instance, if a test is supposed to measure how well students know Algebra I, it is not valid if it is based on information they do not learn until Algebra II.



## Where can I learn more?

State laws change frequently. For up-to-date information on the testing program in your state, visit your state's department of education website.

*Remember that a test is like a snapshot. It is a one-time look at a child's performance. All children have skills and knowledge that tests do not measure. A single test score does not tell you everything about your child.*



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