

UNDERSTANDING STANDARDIZED TESTING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS

STANDARDIZED TESTING IN THE ARCHDIOCESAN SCHOOLS

Why do we administer standardized tests in the Archdiocese?

A standardized test provides a consistent method for assessing an individual student's level of performance and the performance of groups of students in a particular class or grade level.

What is the purpose of standardized testing in the Archdiocese?

Standardized tests provide principals, teachers, and parents with current and reliable information about student achievement and ability in order to use that information to maximize individual student learning.

TESTING IN FALL

Why do we test in the Fall?

Standardized tests are administered in all elementary schools during the last full week of September. This permits principals and teachers to review results early in the school year, to share that information with parents, and to make appropriate instructional adjustments or implement learning interventions.

Wouldn't students do better if they took the tests in the Spring?

Scoring reflects the time of year when the tests were administered: Fall, Winter, or Spring. As students learn more throughout the year, they are expected to demonstrate additional knowledge and skills on the test. To obtain the same score, a student must have more correct answers in the Spring than in the Fall.

THE TESTS

What standardized tests are administered in the Archdiocese?

All of the elementary schools in the Archdiocese currently administer two standardized tests: the *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills* (ITBS), an achievement test, and the *Cognitive Abilities Test* (CogAT).

As part of a local school assessment plan, a school may choose to administer other standardized tests and assessment instruments.

What makes it "standardized"?

A test is "standardized" if it is administered to students under the same conditions – the same tasks, time limits, and directions. If any one of these conditions change, it is no longer "standardized" and the results are less precise and score interpretations are less certain.

What types of tests are the *ITBS* and the *CogAT*?

The *ITBS* and the *CogAT* are *norm-referenced* tests. That means the performance of an individual student is compared to the performance of a very large sample group which represents the wide variety of students, schools, and communities throughout the nation. This is referred to as a *norm group*.

How are student scores determined on the *ITBS* and *CogAT*?

The performance of an individual student is compared to the performance of the norm group for the same age, grade, and time of year.

Test scores are based on total number correct.

Students are not penalized for incorrect answers or items not answered.

What does the *ITBS* measure?

The *ITBS* measures the achievement of a student's knowledge and skills in many of the areas of the school curriculum.

The *ITBS* assesses knowledge and skills in vocabulary, reading, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, language usage and expression, math computation, math concepts and estimation, math problem solving and data interpretation, social studies, science, maps and diagrams, and reference materials.

The *ITBS* assesses cumulative knowledge acquired over all prior grades. It does not assess everything that could be learned in school, but test results could also reflect learning from outside the school setting.

What is the format of the *ITBS*?

Most students are not expected to answer every question correctly, but they are expected to complete all of the items on the test.

“Easy” and “hard” questions are mixed throughout each subtest.

Items which assess the same kind of knowledge are also scattered throughout each subtest.

What does the *CogAT* measure?

The *CogAT* measures general reasoning ability – cognitive processing and strategies which enable a student to identify patterns, make comparisons, learn new tasks, and solve problems.

How does the *CogAT* assess reasoning ability?

The *CogAT* assesses relational thinking in three areas using words, numbers, and shapes.

The VERBAL subtest uses words to assess the ability to make inferences and judgments about them. It is the most reliable predictor of academic success.

The QUANTITATIVE subtest uses numbers to assess understanding of relational concepts and the ability to discover and explain relationships.

The NON-VERBAL subtest uses pictures and geometric shapes to assess ability to process information in new situations.

What else is important to know about cognitive reasoning ability?

Cognitive abilities are not static; they can and do change over time. Reasoning skills begin at birth and continue to develop through adulthood.

Reasoning ability develops at different rates for each individual.

Cognitive abilities are influenced by in-school AND out-of school experiences.

TEST PREPARATION

What is the best way to prepare for taking a standardized test?

Riverside Publishing Company, publisher of the *ITBS* and *CogAT* says the following about preparing for a standardized test:

"The best preparation for taking any achievement test is concentrated effort related to classroom activities, completion of homework, engaging in activities beyond assigned homework, and undertaking a wide variety of projects which will improve the depth and breadth of a student's knowledge."

What preparation is important just prior to and during the testing period?

The principal and classroom teachers are responsible for creating the most favorable situation for standardized testing. This means balancing the importance of the tests with recognizing they are only one element among all of the instructional and assessment activities throughout the year. Maintaining

this perspective requires that a school fosters in students, and their parents, an approach to standardized testing that will allow it to produce accurate and reliable results.

Principals and teachers should be certain students and parents understand the test results will provide the school with valuable information to guide classroom instruction and to improve student learning.

While test scores will not be reflected in the student's grades like classroom tests or assignments, the school should emphasize the importance of students applying their best effort.

What can teachers do to prepare students before the test?

Teachers are responsible for having the test materials ready, knowing the test schedule, making sure the classroom is arranged properly, and limiting distractions.

Teachers need to be familiar with the format of the tests and the instructions for administering the test, especially the directions to be read and the timing each subtest, and any special accommodations required for individual students.

To make students comfortable, teachers should familiarize them with the format of the test booklet and answer document.

Teachers should have students complete the demographic information on the test answer folder prior to the first day of testing.

Before testing begins, teachers should encourage students to relax, do their best, and complete all of the test items to the best of their ability.

What can parents do to prepare their child for standardizing testing?

Parents should reinforce with their child the school's message about the importance of committing his or her best effort on the test.

Parents should refrain from placing too much emphasis on the importance of standardized tests.

Parents should send their child to school with a good night's sleep and a nutritious breakfast.

INTERPRETING SCORES

What do standardized test scores mean?

For norm-referenced tests like the *ITBS* and *CogAT*, there is no "passing" or "failing".

The *percentile* score indicates the percentage of students who scored above or below the percentile score of the individual student.

If a student's score is exactly average, the score is 50 *percentile*. The average range of performance is 24 - 76 percentile. That is equivalent to the 4th - 6th stanine, another method of reporting results.

Is the student growing as expected?

Standardized tests presume normal growth occurs from the beginning of the school year to the end and from one school year to the next. When a student's scores are similar or in the same range, it means normal expected growth has taken place since the last time the student took the test.

How well is the student doing?

Since students are different and don't all learn at the same pace, it is important to focus on the prior and current performance of the individual student.

Compare the student's achievement (*ITBS*) results with the student's ability (*CogAT*) to determine if they are consistent. Look at the student's current and past performance to see if there is steady growth from year to year.

Perhaps the most important comparison is the student's standardized test results with classroom

performance. Identify if they reflect similar patterns and levels of achievement and ability. Significant differences could warrant further investigation or a formal evaluation.

What other comparisons can be made?

When a student takes both the *ITBS* and *CogAT*, the performance on each is analyzed. If the student's achievement and ability are significantly different, the test report identifies those areas of difference. Significant differences can be a reason to investigate further.

Individual student performance can be compared with the performance of all the students in a classroom or grade level to identify where it is within that range.

Are some scores more informative than others?

It is important to focus on the scores for each individual subtest. "Total" scores represent an average performance across several subtests or even the entire test. Placing emphasis on "total" scores may result in variations among subtests and inconsistent achievement or performance being over-looked.

What are appropriate uses of standardized test results?

Standardized tests can be used to identify overall level of academic performance, as well as specific areas of strength or weakness. They can also help to identify gaps in learning which can be addressed by targeted instructions.

Comparing a student's current and past standardized test results with classroom performance allows teachers and parents to track growth over time.

Standardized test results may contribute important information for designing and implementing learning interventions or lead to additional evaluation to identify conditions which interfere with learning.

CONCLUSION

What is important to remember about standardized testing?

Keep in mind what the test measures. Not all concepts learned in school are assessed in a standardized test. It may also assess some things learned outside of the school setting.

Standardized tests represent only a part of what there is to know about a student's achievement and ability.

Standardized tests tell us HOW WELL a student performed, but not WHY the student performed as he or she did.

A student's scores should be thought of as representing a range of performance that will vary within an expected range from one test administration to another.

Many out-of-school factors can impact standardized test results both positively and negatively.

Low scores are more likely to be chance scores, while high scores are less likely due to chance.

Low scores indicate the student performed below average, but that does not indicate whether the student can or cannot perform at a higher level.

It is not appropriate to draw conclusions or make decisions based on a single test administration

If a student is achieving to his or her potential, standardized test scores and classroom performance should be reflective of each other.