

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HIGH STAKES STANDARDIZED TESTS

Your child is spending more and more time in school taking standardized tests. Our school system is spending untold millions of dollars – scarce resources – on standardized testing instead of small class sizes and other important improvements our schools desperately need. Some tests are required by the state of Illinois. Others are mandated by Chicago Public Schools, and even more are considered optional by CPS, but are still given in most schools. More grades and more subjects are being tested. Test taking has even expanded to our youngest children in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten.

What are standardized tests?

- Standardized tests are those that are created for large groups of students to take at the same time. The test questions, how they are worded, which answers are scored as “correct,” and how the test is administered are all decided by the companies that produce the tests, not the classroom teacher.
- All test takers answer questions under the same conditions, generally using a multiple-choice format. The way that the tests are administered and scored is in a predetermined, standard manner.

What is wrong with these tests? What makes them “high stakes?”

- These tests are used to make decisions about whether your child is promoted, retained in their grade or can graduate. In CPS, the tests also determine entrance to selective enrollment schools.
- These tests are also being used to evaluate and fire teachers even though standardized tests are not considered valid or reliable indicators of teacher performance by many experts. And no test can measure whether teachers inspire a love of learning in their students.
- Standardized test scores are used to determine “low-performing” schools that can result in your school being closed, or turned over to a private school operator. They are being used to label schools and children as “failures” even if there are many other indicators that your school is doing a good job.
- Tests are guiding what is taught, and how it is taught in your child’s classroom. Many schools are forced to abandon a rich curriculum as more pressure is put on test scores. Significant time and money are being taken away from important learning to prepare your child for the tests.
- These negative consequences have a greater impact on low-income students, students of color, English language learners and special education students. They are more likely to be held back, not graduate, or put in remedial education programs, and to be deprived of a rich curriculum.
- Experts say that big decisions like these should not be made on the basis of scores on tests that were not designed for that purpose. There is also evidence that the high stakes attached to tests encourage competition and cheating, rather than collaboration and cooperation, which is essential for a good learning environment.

Are these tests good measures of my child’s learning?

- Complex and critical thinking skills are not measured by these tests. They don’t assess students’ ability to understand difficult material, write, apply math, understand scientific methods or reasoning or grasp social science concepts. They do not measure creativity, imagination, or curiosity, or students’ ability to verbally articulate a complex idea or thought.
- They don’t tell you the whole story about your child’s abilities and where your child needs improvement.

A good test score is not the same as achievement and learning. It is just a very small piece of a big picture.

- Tests are inherently biased, and include cultural assumptions that are not relevant to all our students.
- Research shows that family income is the biggest predictor of students' test scores. Out of school factors like hunger, homelessness, or family stress have substantial effects on test scores.

Are standardized tests helpful to teachers?

- For teachers, the main purpose of any test should be diagnostic. Appropriate assessments can help educators understand your child's strengths and areas that need improvement.
- Standardized tests do NOT help a teacher know what to do next in working with your child because these tests are not written by your child's teachers based on what they are doing in their classroom. Good assessment must be based on classroom observation and needs to provide useful information to teachers.
- Many teachers report that an emphasis on testing gives them less independence to make thoughtful decisions about curriculum and teaching, increased stress as pressure mounts for their students to do well on tests, and decreasing job satisfaction. As pressure on teachers and children increase, many children experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of interest in school, according to parents and teachers.
- Many experts say that student tests can't reliably and fairly be used to judge teachers. There is much more to effective teaching than how students do on a standardized test.
- Our schools are underfunded, and teachers often do not have enough resources to give our children the best education possible. Class sizes are growing. These tests take millions of dollars out of schools to spend on tests and test prep materials.

How will I know if my child is learning if we don't use these tests?

- The best way to see how your child is doing is to look at their actual work. Teachers' close observation of students, documentation of student work, performance-based assessments and other methods involve the direct evaluation of real learning tasks and provide useful information for teachers and parents.
- Well-regarded private schools in Chicago like Lab School and Frances Parker don't use standardized tests. Instead, they use a variety of alternative assessments. Many countries with high levels of student achievement do not use standardized testing to evaluate students or teachers.

What can I and other parents in my children's school do?

- Become informed. Talk to teachers, the principal, and your Local School Council. Find out what tests are being given and how much time is spent on testing and test preparation. Talk to teachers about how children are reacting to so many tests. Talk to teachers about how children are reacting to standardized tests and what they are missing due to testing and test prep activities.
- As a parent, you have the right to opt your child out of all non-state mandated standardized testing by informing your principal your child(ren) will no longer participate. You can speak with other parents about the issue and ask questions of your principal, network chief, and CPS central office staff. You can oppose the public display of student data, which violates state and federal privacy laws.
- You can circulate the More Than a Score petition against excessive standardized testing, and support your children's teachers in creating curriculum that is child-centered, not test-centered. You can educate other parents on how much testing is happening and how many resources are devoted to testing. You can request that your principal inform parents of all testing schedules in advance.

For more information, or to get involved, contact More Than A Score, www.morethanscorechicago.org