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A CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION NEWSLETTER

Parent Guide to Assessments in Schools

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS USE MANY TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS to help determine how students are achieving and growing in their learning. Each assessment has a different purpose, depending on the information needed about student progress.

While educators use assessment data to learn about how students are achieving individually, as a class, grade-level, school, or (arch)diocese, most parents want to know, "how is my child doing academically?" No single assessment can answer all the academic questions a parent may have about their student's learning. However, assessment data can give the parent a broad understanding of their child's achievement in school.

WHAT ARE STANDARDIZED TESTS?

A standardized test is an objective test that is given and scored in a uniform manner to all students in a class or grade level. The purpose of standardization is to assure that all students are assessed under the same conditions so that their scores have the same meaning and can be compared. Standardized tests usually assess student skills and knowledge on a broad level and may test all academic areas at the same time (math, reading, science, etc.)

Catholic schools in (arch)dioceses across the nation administer standardized achievement tests at some point during the academic year. Standardized tests provide an indication of how much knowledge a student has accumulated at a given point in his or her schooling in relation to other children of the same age in schools across the state and nation.

Standardized achievement test results can affirm your child's learning progress. As a parent, if testing indicates that a child is struggling in certain areas, you will be able to provide additional support and use different methods of instruction to help the child gain necessary skills in partnership with your child's school and teacher(s).

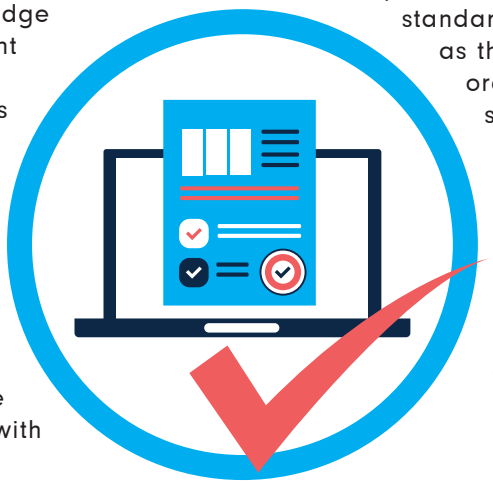
ARE THERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF STANDARDIZED TESTS?

There are many kinds of standardized tests that are used for a variety of purposes with both children and adults.

■ **Norm-Referenced Tests** measure student scores on basic concepts and skills commonly taught in schools throughout the country. These tests are not designed to measure individual student knowledge or performance on a specific skill or objective, but rather the knowledge generally taught at a particular grade level against other students at that same grade level. Results from a norm-referenced test compare a student's performance to a national reference group (the "norm") of students at the same grade level.

■ **Criterion-Referenced Tests** measure a student's performance against a specific set of criteria. For example, state departments of education typically use criterion-referenced testing to determine a student's progress against the established grade-level learning objectives (criteria) for that state. This allows schools to determine grade-level performance.

■ **Interim Computer Adaptive Tests** combine both the norm-referenced and the criterion-referenced tests. These tests are administered several times throughout the year and measure a student's achievement against a specific set of criteria, typically the standards of the state. The tests adjust as the student answers questions in order to find the exact zone of the student's learning.



Remember that a standardized achievement test cannot measure the sum total of your child's progress. It is only one assessment tool designed to measure a certain set of skills at the time it is administered.

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INTERPRETING THE SCORES ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

Every test will have its own terminology, so it will be important to look at the glossary on your child's report or ask your school to help interpret the scores. However, there are some terms that are consistent among most tests.

- **Percentile Rank:** Percentile rank indicates the percentage of the norm group obtaining scores equal to or less than the tests-taker's score. *A percentile score does not refer to the percentage or number of questions answered correctly.* Instead, it indicates the test-taker's standing relative to the norm group standard. This score ranks individuals within a group on a scale of 1-99, with 50 being average.

- **Raw Scores:** The raw score is the number of items answered correctly on a given test. Raw scores by themselves have little or no meaning. A student's raw score (number correct) is compared to the original group of students of the same age who first took the test.

- **Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE):** NCE's provide a way to measure where a student falls along the normal curve. The numbers run from 0-100, with 50 as the average. Similar to percentile rank, the score indicates how many students out of a hundred had a lower score than the test taker. An NCE is also a growth measure unlike the percentile rank. If a student makes one year's progress after a year of instruction, the NCE score will remain the same and reflect a NCE gain of zero. If the student makes more than one year of progress after a year of instruction, the student will have made more progress than the norm group, resulting in a net gain in the NCE score.

- **Norms:** The averages of the scores of a group of students who have taken the same test, typically of the same age or grade level. Norm-referred test scores compare a child's score to the norm group. Some tests report both a status norm (one-time snapshot of student performance) and a growth norm (measure student performance over multiple time points).

- **Scaled Score:** A scaled score is a mathematical transformation of a raw score. Scaled scores are useful when comparing test results over time. Most standardized achievement test batteries provide scaled scores for such purposes. Several different methods of scaling exist, but each is intended to provide a continuous score scale across the different forms and levels of a test series.

- **Stanine:** This term comes from the combination of the words "standard of nine." It rates a child's achievement on a scale of 1-9 based on a coarse grouping of the scores. In general, a stanine of 1, 2 or 3 indicates below average achievement. A stanine of 4, 5 or 6 indicates average achievement, while 7, 8 or 9 indicate above average.

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