

How Is My Child Doing? What Assessment Can Tell Parents About Their Child's Learning



Overview

Testing—as any administrator, teacher, or student will tell you, there is a lot of it going on in schools. It's not only the formal testing that many of you may remember from your school days. There is now a wide array of different kinds of assessment initiated by states, districts, schools, and classroom teachers.

Why all this attention to testing and assessment? The short answer is because assessment provides information about students' learning. Teachers and administrators use that information to help students achieve the standards—or learning expectations—for their grade level. And also, as parents and guardians, you can use information from an assessment to support your child's learning.

The purpose of this guide is to help you interpret the many classroom assignments, score reports, and rubrics you receive in the mail or find in your child's backpack. The guide describes three common types of assessment: **classroom assessment**, **district and school interim assessment**, and **state annual assessment**. For each assessment type, the guide answers the following questions:

- *What is it?*
- *What can you learn?*
- *What can you do with information from the assessment?*

The guide also includes examples of questions you can ask teachers and administrators about assessment. The goal of these conversations is to devise a plan for how your child will get the supports he or she needs—both in school and at home.

Three Common Types of Assessment

Imagine the learning pathway your child travels in one school year—from where he or she starts at the beginning of the year to success on grade-level standards at the end of the year. Teachers and school administrators are responsible for laying out that pathway. They use the three types of assessment to both measure and support student progress.

Classroom assessment is the most frequent type of assessment. It gives detailed information on how students are doing day by day, unit by unit, and semester by semester in each of their classes. **District and school interim assessment** provides periodic, cumulative checks on student progress in particular subjects throughout the year (note: these assessments are not given in all districts or schools, so they may or may not be given in your child's school). **State annual assessment** gives a yearly measure of how well students have mastered your state's grade-level standards.

These three types of assessment make up a balanced system that can provide valuable information to students, teachers, administrators, and parents. The table below provides additional details about what these assessments are and what you, along with the school and district staff supporting your child, can learn from them.

Key Details About Three Common Assessment Types

TYPE	WHAT IS IT?	WHAT CAN YOU LEARN?
Classroom Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures student understanding and progress toward classroom learning goals and grade-level standards Takes place throughout the school day and year Planned by teachers Involves both informal measures (e.g., teacher observation, classroom writing samples) and formal measures (e.g., unit tests, research reports) of student learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides detailed information about what students understand in the moment, as well as how students are able to use and apply what they are learning Teachers use in-the-moment, or formative, assessment to adjust their teaching and support students Teachers typically use culminating, or summative, tests and assignments to determine grades
District and School Interim Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures student progress toward grade-level standards Administered across the school or district every few weeks, months, or at the end of a quarter or semester May be required by the district or school; not administered in every school May include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short-response questions, as well as extended writing exercises and other performance assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides information on student progress in meeting grade-level standards Typically measures a larger portion of the curriculum than classroom assessment but a smaller portion of the curriculum than state annual assessment May predict whether students are “on track” to meet grade-level standards at the end of the school year
State Annual Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures student accomplishment of grade-level standards Administered either at the beginning or the end of a school year Required by federal law to be administered every year in grades 3–8 for English language arts and math; once in high school for English language arts and math; and once in elementary, middle, and high school for science (states may require additional summative tests at other grade levels or subject areas) For English learners—students who are not yet fully proficient in English—annual assessments of English language development are also required May include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short-response questions, as well as extended writing exercises and other performance assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides general information about how near or far students are from meeting grade-level standards in tested content areas For English language development tests, provides information on how near or far students are from proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English May provide information about student's performance in comparison to other students in the school, district, or state

What can you do with information from these assessments?

Classroom assessment

Classroom assessment can be a window into children's progress and the kinds of assignments their teachers are giving them. You probably see examples of classroom assessment often during the school year. You may see it in the form of graded papers, projects, and report cards that your child brings home. During parent-teacher conferences, you can also ask teachers to see examples of your child's classroom work and might ask what they have noticed about it: What are my child's strengths? What does my child need to improve upon? What resources are available to help?

You can also use classroom papers and projects to spark conversations about learning with your child. When children bring completed assignments home, you can ask them about the steps they took to write a paper or create a project: What did they learn from the process? What was most interesting? What was challenging? Or, you can ask what children are most proud of in their work, and what they would like to improve for the next time.

District or school interim assessment

Some districts and/or schools give interim assessments in particular subjects. If your child's school gives this type of assessment, you will likely receive the results every few months, or maybe at the end of a grading period.

Interim assessment provides another opportunity for teachers and parents to monitor students' progress throughout the year and determine whether they are on-track to meet grade-level standards. Based on the results, teachers may adjust instruction and provide additional supports for students. You can speak with teachers about your child's strengths and areas for growth, as well as how to work together to support your child's progress. Teachers may also have information about additional resources and programs in the district and local community.

State annual assessment

Beginning in the third grade, students will take state annual assessments in school subjects like English language arts, mathematics, and science. The score reports you receive provide a general picture of your child's achievement on grade-level standards (e.g., *standards not met*, *standards nearly met*, *standards met*, *standards exceeded*). When you get one of these reports, you might think about how the scores compare to other information you have about how your child is doing in school (such as report cards, graded projects, and teacher feedback):

- If the scores are consistent with this other information, then use your child's score level on the state test as a guide for next steps.
- If the scores meet or exceed grade-level standards, then you may want to speak with the classroom teacher about how to extend and enrich your child's learning.
- If the scores do not meet grade-level standards, then you may want to find out more about your child's strengths and areas for growth.
- If the scores are far below grade-level standards, then consider asking about programs or services, such as tutoring, that might be available for your child.

Sometimes your child's state test scores may be much lower or higher than your child's performance on classroom and interim assessments. There may be a variety of explanations for these differences. Different assessments test different types of knowledge and skills. It may be that what your child learned in class was not well aligned with what was

tested on the state assessment. Or perhaps classroom instruction addressed what was tested, but your child needed more practice to cement the learning. Or maybe your child felt anxious about the test or didn't feel well on the day of the assessment. When you find a discrepancy between state test scores and other assessments, it is important to speak with your child's teacher about the possible reasons for it.

Other tests

In addition to these three types of assessment, your child may take other tests that are not directly addressed in this brief. For example, schools sometimes use diagnostic tests to try to pinpoint sources of student difficulty. Advanced placement tests, as well as tests required for college admissions, are common in high school. In addition, students with special needs may engage with a whole variety of specialized tests to place them in appropriate programs and monitor their progress. (For more information on these various tests, see "Resources About Assessments Your Child May Take" at the end of this brief.)

Quality assessment

In addition to knowing about what assessments your child takes, it can also be helpful to know something about the quality of the assessment. No assessment is perfect, and some give a more accurate picture of learning than others. To be useful, assessments should be reliable, fair, and aligned with important learning goals. Although these terms may seem like technical issues, the concepts are key to understanding assessment quality. For instance, you may want to ask: Does the assessment measure the most important learning goals for my child's grade level? Does the assessment provide reliable and consistent information about my child's learning? Does the assessment allow my child to demonstrate what he or she knows and can do?

Closing Comments

Assessment has the potential to provide teachers, administrators, parents, and guardians with useful information about student learning. This guide highlights how a balanced assessment system involves multiple types of assessment.

To get a full understanding of your child's progress and achievement, you also need to consider various other sources of information. No single source of information can give a complete picture of what your child knows and is able to do, and no one test should be used on its own to make a high-stakes decision (such as grade retention). There are important capabilities beyond academic grade-level standards—like motivation, persistence, and collaboration—that also affect your child's learning. Nonetheless, coupled with everything you know about your child, classroom assessment, district and school interim assessment, and state annual assessment can provide meaningful information to guide your child's success.

We encourage all parents to speak with teachers and administrators about the assessments their children are taking at school. The example questions at the end of this brief can help you with these kinds of conversations.

Questions to Ask Teachers and School Administrators About Assessment

You will likely see your child's results from many different kinds of assessment over the course of the year. This section provides sample questions you can ask teachers and administrators throughout the year. The goal of these conversations is to identify and plan ways to best support your child's progress in school.

Early in the School Year

- What assessments will my child take this year?
- What is the purpose of each assessment?
- How will you use the assessment results to support my child's learning?
- How will you share information about my child's progress with me?
- Based on last year's assessment results, are there specific areas where my child needs additional support or to be challenged? How can I support my child's learning at home?

During the School Year

General questions to ask about your child's learning:

- What information is available about my child's learning?
- How is my child progressing? What does my child's report card tell me about my child's progress?
- Is my child achieving expected standards?
- What are my child's strengths? What does my child need to improve?
- Can I see some examples of my child's work?
- What do my child's subject-area grades reflect? Did you consider effort as well as learning and achievement?
- Based on my child's work in class, can you share additional insights about my child's progress?
- What knowledge and skills are most important for my child to master now in order to do well next year?
- What supports and resources are available to support my child's learning through extra help or enrichment? How can I support my child at home?

Questions to ask about your child's assessments:

(While the types of assessment your child takes will vary, these standard questions can help you better understand both the assessment and your child's progress.)

- What does this assessment measure? Why is the content important for my child to know?
- What does this assessment tell me about how well my child is meeting grade-level standards?
- Is this score a good indicator of my child's progress? Why or why not?
- Based on my child's work in class, can you share additional insights about my child's progress?
- What knowledge and skills are most important for my child to master now in order to do well next year?
- How will my child's scores from this assessment be used?
- How frequently do you give these assessments? Is there another assessment this year? If so, when is it? What standards does it cover?
- What does my child need to learn before the next assessment?

References

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Resources About Assessments Your Child May Take

- Advanced Placement (AP) Information for Parents and Families
<https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/exploreap/for-parents>
- ACT Information for Students and Parents
<http://www.act.org/content/act/en/students-and-parents.html>
- English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century
<http://www.elpa21.org/learn-more/parents-and-guardians>
- National PTA Parents' Guides to Student Success (Grade-Specific)
<http://www.pta.org/parentsguides>
- National PTA State Assessment Guides
<https://www.pta.org/home/family-resources/College-and-Career-Readiness/State-Assessments>
- PARCC Parent Resources
<http://parcc-assessment.org/resources/parent-resources>
- SAT/PSAT Resources
<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/about>
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: What Parents and Students Should Know
<http://www.smarterbalanced.org/parents/>
- Special Education—Types of Tests Used
<https://www.education.com/reference/article/types-tests-used-special-education/>
- Understand the Score
<http://understandthescore.org>
- WIDA ACCESS for ELLs 2.0
<https://www.wida.us/assessment/ACCESS20.aspx#scoring>



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