

Test Results in the News

The results of standardized testing and international comparisons always seem to attract attention—especially when they are shocking! Reporters often look for attention-grabbing angles so that is how this news is typically framed.

It is not uncommon for news reports to make use of simplistic interpretations of data or lump different kinds of data together to draw unwarranted conclusions. For instance, an international examination tested students for their knowledge of algebra a year before U.S. students typically study algebra in school. So in this instance it's not surprising that U.S. students did not test well in algebra!

Another recent report about statewide standardized test results spoke alarmingly about students' lack of knowledge as reflected by below-average test scores. Nowhere did it mention that students had 20 minutes to answer 60 questions. Rapid recall and knowledge are not the same, especially for students who are not practiced in test-taking strategy.

Bring a critical sense to what you read in the newspapers. When reading about test results, wonder the following:

- Consider the source. In addition to the sometimes sensationalized and simplistic approach of the media, various interest groups may have reasons to put their own “spin” on interpreting test results.
- What was the test designed to measure? Factual recall? Complex thinking?
- Were students being tested on what they were taught?
- Was there a connection between what was tested and what state or national standards say is important that students should know?
- Were students tested in a language they understood?
- Was the test measuring rapid recall or thoughtful response?
- How does what was tested relate to desired work force skills?

Asking questions like these can help reveal more about what the test results may or may not mean. If you have questions about a specific test your child took, speak with the principal or counselor. If many parents are concerned, consider working through the PTA or another group to hold a forum with a district administrator, a testing expert, or other source of testing information. Keep firmly in mind that more than one “data point” is needed to accurately assess your child's learning progress. Multiple measures of student progress over time provide much more reliable information—and the same is true when using test or other data to evaluate teachers, schools, districts, states, the nation and the different nations of the world!

Remember that you can make a difference. It can be frustrating to read about things that relate to our children in the paper, and yet feel helpless in improving the educational system. A tremendous amount of research shows the positive educational benefits of active and consistent involvement in your child's education.