

# Testing, Your Child, and the System: What Parents Can Do

## Overview:

The presenter gives an overview to parents of the national, state, and district-level large-scale assessments that relate to their children. Then small groups of participants sort strips of paper listing “Things Parents Can Do” according to whether the action could have impact at the level of helping their own child, at the level of improving the assessment system in general—or both. The purpose of this activity is to provide participants with some basic knowledge about the specific large-scale assessments that impact their own children, and some possible actions they could take to support their own child and/or improve assessment systems.

## Use:

Can be a stand-alone activity or serve as follow-up to any of the standardized testing activities.

## Key Concepts Addressed from Public Understanding Framework:

Standardized Testing  
What is a Parent’s Role?

## Time Frame: 45-60 minutes

Overview of Specific Large-Scale Assessments (15-30 minutes)  
What Parents Can Do (30 minutes)

## What You Need:

For each group of 4-6 participants:

- o 1 set of “Things Parents Can Do” action strips
- o 1 envelope (or ziplock bag) to hold the set of action strips

**For the presenter:**

- o 1 set of overhead transparencies describing the state and district-level assessment systems in play in your region ([see samples](#))
- o 1 overhead transparency of “No Child Left Behind” ([master](#))
- o overhead projector
- o extension cord (optional)

## Getting Ready:

### Before the Day of the Workshop:

- 1. Research the Specific Large-Scale Assessments in Use in Your Region.** Find out about each of the large-scale assessments children of the participants are likely to participate in. There are likely to be one or more statewide tests and possibly a district-level test. See the masters we have prepared for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); and California's STAR Assessment System for samples of the kinds of information participants might like to know.
- 2. Make Overhead Transparencies for each Large-Scale Assessment.** Make an overhead transparency that describes the key features of each large-scale assessment used in your region. (See samples).
- 3. Make No Child Left Behind Overhead Transparency.** Make an overhead transparency of "No Child Left Behind" (master)
- 4. Make action strips.** Make one set of "Things Parents Can Do" action strips for each group of 4-6 participants. To make one set: duplicate the masters provided. Using a paper cutter, cut the pages into strips so each action is on one strip. Put one complete set of strips in an envelope. You may choose to use colored paper in making the strips.
- 5. Make Venn diagrams.** Make one Venn diagram for each group of 4-6 participants. To make one diagram: on a piece of paper approximately 2' x 3' use a marker to draw two overlapping circles. Label the left circle as "Supports Your Child Directly" and the right circle as "Helps Improve Assessment Systems in General."

### Immediately Before the Workshop:

- 1. Set up the room.** Arrange the room so that groups of 4-6 participants can sit at a table together. If you are in a classroom, move desks together to make "tables." Tables should be oriented so that all of the table groups can join a large group discussion, and see what's projected on the overhead.
- 2. Set up overhead projector.** Set up overhead projector at the front of the room near where you will stand.
- 3. Have overhead transparencies on hand.** Place the 7 overhead transparencies (in numbered order) next to the overhead projector.
- 4. Have sets of action strips and Venn diagrams on hand.** Have easily accessible, the sets of action strips and Venn diagrams.

## Overview of Specific Large-Scale Assessments

- 1. Explain No Child Left Behind.** Show the No Child Left Behind overhead transparency. Explain that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a federal law enacted in 2002-2003. It has 3 key elements—Professional Development, Accountability, and Alignment with Standards. The accountability element of NCLB requires states and school districts to develop accountability systems that:

- Test reading and mathematics skills every year in grades 3-8 beginning in 2005-6, By 2007 science must be included.

- States must demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” toward state learning standards for all groups of students (including economically disadvantaged students, racial/ethnic groups, disabled students and limited English speakers). The goal is 100% proficiency for all students in 12 years.

There are consequences related to not making “adequate yearly progress” (including transfer of students, hire more teachers, provide supplemental education services, replace staff, institute new curriculum, restructuring, possible state takeover after five years). There are rewards for achieving it (teacher bonuses, “distinguished schools” honor, grants for professional development and reading instruction, flexibility in spending federal funds). Point out that NCLB has substantially increased the focus on large-scale testing nationwide.

- 2. Describe Large-Scale Assessments.** Use the overhead transparencies you have prepared to share some of the details of each of the specific large-scale assessments in which the children of participants are likely to participate. Allow time for questions after the description of each assessment system.

## What Parents Can Do

- 1. Introduce Sorting Activity.** Say that now that we have an idea of the assessment systems we’re working with, you’d like to turn the focus on some practical aspects of parent involvement. Tell them that you have prepared a set of action strips, each one detailing practical things that parents can do related to the issues of testing and accountability. You’d like them to work in their small group to read and sort the strips. Hold of a Venn diagram. Ask them to place a strip that describes something that would SUPPORT THEIR CHILD DIRECTLY into the circle on the left. Place a strip that describes something that would SUPPORT ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN GENERAL in the circle on the right. In the overlapping area of the two circles, place things that you would both SUPPORTS THEIR CHILD DIRECTLY and HELPS SUPPORT ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN GENERAL.

Summarize briefly what they are to do and then check for questions.

2. **Have them Begin the Activity.** Distribute diagrams and strips and have them begin. Let them know they will have about 15-20 minutes to conduct the activity.
3. **Circulate among the Groups.** Circulate among the groups as they work, commenting and clarifying instructions as needed listen to what's being discussed. Not all groups need the same amount of time to do this activity. Pay attention to the level of engagement. If the group seems "through," even though they are not finished, go ahead and end the activity and use the extra time for some of the reflection that follows.
4. **Conclude.** When the groups seem ready to proceed, focus their attention. Ask for their thoughts and reactions to the activity. Accept all answers and comments. Conclude by pointing out that the choice of focusing on supporting one's child or working more broadly to improve systems is each person's choice. Some actions do one, and some do both.

## No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Federal law enacted in 2002-2003

The accountability element of NCLB requires states and school districts to develop accountability systems that:

- Test reading and mathematics skills every year in grades 3-8 beginning in 2005-6, By 2007 science must be included.
- Schools must demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” toward state learning standards for all groups of students. The goal is 100% proficiency for all students in 12 years.

There are both consequences and rewards for not making “adequate yearly progress”

Overhead #1

## National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

Called “Nation’s Report Card”  
from US Department of Education

- Only measure of student achievement in the US that compares students’ performance across all states
- Assessment in reading and mathematics given every 2 years in grades 4 and 8. Science in 2005.
- Not a substitute for state assessments
- Does not give individual data for students
- Norm-referenced

Overhead #2

## California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR)

All students tested annually in 2<sup>nd</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grades

Has 3 parts:

1. California Achievement Test, sixth edition (CAT-6). Norm-referenced. State ranking by percentile.
2. California Standards Tests, (CTS) in reading, language arts, and math. 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade also includes writing; 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade adds science & social studies (tied to the specific science course they are taking). Criterion-referenced. Gives raw scores / # correct and ranks as advanced, proficient, basic or below basic.
3. California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) for high school only, begins in 2004. Determines whether students have mastered skills before receiving high school diploma. Covers math and English/language arts.

Overhead #3

# Things Parents Can Do:

## Get Out and Vote

One of the most important actions you can take is to learn about the issues and vote in each election. Find out where the candidates stand on educational issues and study ballot measures affecting schools.

## Get Active on a State Level

“Edvoice” is a statewide grassroots organization advocating for education reform and support for public education. You can sign up to receive email updates on legislation and action alerts.

## Interpret School Scores Responsibly

When you review a school’s test scores, always look beyond the basic numbers. A school’s score from a single year has limited value for judging performance. It is more important to look for trends over time and to compare them to schools with similar demographics.

## Learn What’s Behind the Scores

Ask what’s happening at a school that may account for changes in test scores. Find out about the school’s teaching methods, the leadership provided by the principal and whether students feel safe and valued.

## Communicate with your Child

Find out whether your child is feeling nervous and if so, why. When your child is preparing for standardized testing, let him know that, while you hope he does his best, it’s not a competition. Explain that the results may help him and his teacher understand areas where he might be especially strong or where he might need to focus more.

## Expect More from the Media

If a local newspaper writes about test scores, but doesn’t dig deep enough, write a letter to the editor. Make it clear that you don’t approve of having school performance reported based on a single measure, but would like to see an exploration of the strengths and challenges of each school and the issues around testing.

## Find Schools that are Good Role Models

Use GreatSchools.net’s “Compare Schools” tool to search for a school a high percentage of non-English speaking students, but also high standardized test scores. Take a look at the school’s profile for clues about what they’re doing to succeed.

## Talk to Your Principal

Ask how tests are changing the nature of teaching and learning at your school, either positively or negatively. Ask how much time is being spent practicing test-taking skills and learning content covered on the test. Does the school make use of test results to identify areas of the school that need improvement or to get support for certain students? If there are disparities between test scores for particular groups of students, what is being done to address these?

### **Get the Facts**

Find out the exact dates your child will be tested and which tests he will take this year. Check to see if the tests will be different in any way from what he was taken the year before.

### **Help Your Child Practice**

Being familiar with the format of the test will make your child feel more prepared. Ask the teacher or check the state's Dept. of Education web site for some sample questions or other preparatory materials.

### **Take Care of the Basics**

See that your child gets a good night's sleep the night before the test and eats breakfast that morning.

### **Keep Your Cool**

Try to keep a balanced perspective. While tests have increasing importance, they are just one measure of student learning. Remaining calm about testing will most likely help your child to feel calmer, too.

### **Gather Other Evidence about Your Child's Performance**

Incorporate your own observations with your child's self-assessment. Do they seem to be overwhelmed by assignments, have difficulty completing work, or not very interested in school? Ask about favorite subjects and whether they are satisfied with the latest progress report. A careful look at the quality of your child's work and the teacher's assessment of it, will tell you a great deal about the expectations for student achievement.

### **Use Your Child's Results from Standardized Tests Wisely**

Tests that are based on state standards ("standards-based" or "criterion referenced") are generally more informative than those based on a national comparisons ("norm-referenced"). Comparing your child's test results to his grades and teacher's comments, will give you an idea of how close the school's expectations are to those of the state. Standards-based test results are usually reported in terms of whether your child meets state standards. Norm-referenced tests give you a percentile rank that shows how well your child did compared to his or her peers nationally.

### **Monitor Your Child's Progress**

In elementary school, meet with the teacher at least twice a year to discuss academic progress. In the fall, ask about the year-long plan so that you know what's expected by the end of the year. Ask how the teacher will gauge your child's progress towards these goals and how you will know if they are falling behind. Ask for specific ideas on how you can support your child's learning at home.