

ANSWERING PARENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT STANDARDIZED TESTS

BY W. JAMES POPHAM

Concerned parents are often unsure about the significance of their children's standardized test scores. The following questions, often phrased somewhat differently, are frequently voiced by parents. I have attempted to answer these important questions.

A Parent's Question: "Other parents tell me that a good way to judge the quality of a school is by the scores its students make on standardized tests. Is this true?"

Answer: No, it isn't true. What standardized tests can tell parents is how their children's current knowledge and skills compare to the knowledge and skills of other children in the nation. Actually, much of the knowledge and skills measured by standardized tests is not even supposed to be taught in school. Children who score well on standardized tests tend to be those who either come from advantaged families or who were, luckily, "born smart." A school's standardized test scores, therefore, depend more on the socioeconomic status of the school's students than on the skills of its teachers.

A Parent's Question: "What makes a test standardized?"

Answer: Any test that is administered and interpreted in a standard, predetermined manner can be called a standardized test. But what most people think about when they discuss standardized tests are the national examinations that permit students' scores to be interpreted on the basis of a norm group's performance.

A Parent's Question: "What is a norm group?"

Answer: A norm group is usually a representative group of students who have previously taken a standardized test. Scores of subsequent test-takers are interpreted according to the performance of this norm group. For example, if parents hear that their daughter earned a standardized test score "at the 65th percentile," this means their daughter's test score exceeded the test scores of 65 percent of the students in the norm group.

A Parent's Question: "If I want my child to be able to get into a good college, aren't good test scores necessary—even in elementary school?"

Answer: College officials do use students' test scores when making admissions decisions. But those tests are a special kind of *college-predictor* exam designed specifically to forecast how well students will do academically in college.

The SAT (*Scholastic Achievement Test*) and the ACT *Assessment* are the most common college-predictor tests.

Standardized *achievement* tests, such as the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*, although administered in both elementary and secondary schools, are not intended to predict students' college performance. Standardized *achievement* test scores are not used by college officials in their admissions decisions.

A Parent's Question: "What do standardized achievement tests actually measure?"

Answer: A standardized achievement test measures a sample of the skills and knowledge

that children at a given age-level might be expected to possess. Separate tests are usually available for mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. Because many standardized achievement tests consist of only 40 or so items, these tests can cover only small sample of the knowledge and skills children might possess.

A Parent's Question: "How about college-predictor tests such as the SAT and ACT? What do they measure?"

Answer: Because college-predictor tests are supposed to foretell how students will perform in college, such tests often assess many of the same sorts of academic skills and knowledge that standardized achievement tests measure. But for a college-predictor test to function well, all of its items should be genuinely predictive. This means that, on the basis of actual experience, test items should be answered correctly by students who subsequently do well in college and should be answered incorrectly by students who subsequently don't do well in college.

Even though standardized *college-predictor* tests are really supposed to serve a somewhat different measurement mission than

W. James Popham is an emeritus professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. A former president of the American Educational Research Association, Dr. Popham is the author of more than 20 books, many of which are devoted to educational testing.

standardized *achievement* tests, students' scores on college-predictor tests are also heavily influenced by the socioeconomic status of students' families.

A Parent's Question: "Can't a school's teachers raise their students' scores on standardized achievement tests if the teachers really try hard?"

Answer: Perhaps, over the very long haul, there might be some modest increases in a school's standardized achievement test scores if the school's teachers do a bang-up instructional job. But because these tests are really not designed to detect instructional successes, whopping test-score increases are not likely. In fact, if parents find that there have been dramatic increases in a school's standardized test scores, they should be wary that teachers may have been inappropriately "teaching toward the specific test items" rather than toward the knowledge and skills the test attempts to represent.

A Parent's Question: "If standardized achievement tests can't be employed to judge the quality of schools, why are they so widely used?"

Answer: Such tests are useful because they can help parents see how their children stack up against a nationally representative sample of other children. Parents can use this information when interacting with their children's teachers.

Unfortunately, many parents continue to believe that student's scores on standardized achievement test reflect the quality of a school's instructional program.

Although newspapers often imply that test scores can be used to evaluate schools (and even though some realtors often express the same view—if it will help clinch a sale), standardized achievement test scores do not

indicate how effective a school's staff truly is.

A Parent's Question: "How accurate are standardized test scores anyway?"

Answer: Standardized test scores, whether of the college-predictor or achievement variety, are much less precise than is generally believed. Although students' performances end up in the form of numbers (some of those numbers even with *decimals*), a standardized test score is much less precise than is usually thought. If the same standardized test were *re-administered* to a child after only a few days, it is likely that the child would obtain a different score on the test—sometimes a very different score.

A Parent's Question: "Can test-preparation booklets or test-preparation courses raise my child's scores?"

Answer: Test preparation ordinarily will help students earn higher scores, especially on college-predictor tests. Unfortunately, the best preparation courses and booklets for these tests are often the most expensive—thereby limiting such preparation to children from the most affluent families.

For a standardized *achievement* test, there is no sensible reason why parents would want to raise their children's test scores. If these tests are to be useful to parents and teachers, the tests should signify what students actually know. Artificial score-boosting via extensive test-preparation can actually be misleading to both parents and teachers.

A Parent's Question: "If standardized achievement tests measure what children at a given age level are apt to know, why

isn't it fair to judge schools according to how well a school is promoting that knowledge?"

Answer: For standardized achievement tests to work really well, it is important that the tests yield a substantial "spread" of students' scores, that is, lots of low, high, and middle scores. One of the best ways to make these tests really spread out students' scores is to be certain there are not many test items that most students answer correctly.

But items that most students answer correctly often deal with the very knowledge and skills teachers thought important to teach. The better that the teachers teach certain content, the better that students will perform on items measuring the content. But, when the test is revised, these very items will most likely be discarded because too many students "did too well" on those items.

In many cases, therefore, the people who construct standardized tests end up deliberately trying to avoid including test items measuring the most important things teachers really ought to be teaching.

To judge schools on the basis of tests that don't measure the most important content that students should learn is, of course, wrong-headed.

Some items on standardized achievement tests do measure what is taught in schools. But many items on those tests measure what students learn outside of school. A standardized achievement test should not be used in evaluating schools.