



Research Brief

Optimal Testing Environment

Questions: What does the research say about optimal testing environments?
Is there evidence that oft repeated testing tips work?

In a Nutshell

Although there is little evidence than any test preparation strategy is more effective than any other there is evidence that techniques that help students gain confidence in their knowledge and skills and that help students to be comfortable in the testing environment do positively impact student success on standardized tests.

Summary of Findings:

Even though it often feels like standardized testing is a relatively recent phenomena, it has been around at least since the 1800s, when in China, those that wanted a government job were required to take a test on their expertise of Confucian philosophy and poetry. During the Industrial Revolution, standardized tests were a quick way to test large numbers of people. During WWI, Army servicemen were given aptitude tests to determine where their talents could be best utilized. In the 1930s, the SAT was designed and in the 1950s, its cousin, the ACT, was launched (Fletcher, 2009). In 2001, with the passage of *No Child Left Behind*, high stakes standardized testing in schools became a regular part of the educational landscape. This approach reflects the world outside of school where people are required to take standardized tests for things like driver's and professional licenses, job skills and promotions.

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with mandated testing, it is a reality. Students, teachers and school districts are held accountable for the tests' results. The initial effects of standardized testing were to compare students with their peers and determine how much curriculum students had learned so that the instructional program could be improved. Today the results are often being used to make decisions about students' grade promotion and high school graduation (FairTest, 2007).

Suggested ways to support students

In order for students to feel good when entering a testing arena, possessing a positive frame of mind and having an appropriate skill set are vital to one's confidence level. The literature has identified some ways that students can be supported to do their best on standardized tests.

- Have students take the tests in their regular content classrooms, given by their usual teacher (i.e. English classroom by the English teacher, etc.).
- Explain why the tests are important and be positive about them. Have students think of the tests as exciting challenges, not something to be endured.
- Structure some class assignments in different testing formats. Review and discuss the formats regularly.
- Use practice tests as often as appropriate and teach the applicable vocabulary.
- Periodically, administer timed tests and include bubbling in answers.
- Teach specific skills such as: how to read a passage, reading questions before the passage, outlining writing prompts before writing, underlining key words in the test questions and directions, planning the use of time, completing the questions they know first, going with their first answer, answering every question and not allowing themselves to be distracted by others.
- Emphasize the importance of a good night's rest before the test and to allow sufficient time to arrive at the testing locating with time to settle in and get comfortable.
- Practice deep breathing and counting to ten to help students learn to relax.
- Suggest that students dress in layers, so that they will be able to monitor a temperature that is comfortable for them.



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- Eat a good breakfast and bring a snack that is not salty.
- Provide reading, writing and math coaches to assist students before and after school and possibly on Saturdays.
- Have teachers keep anecdotal notes on each student listing their strengths and weaknesses. Provide additional support and assignments to assist them with their weaknesses.
- Encourage students to write a sentence of support to a peer and have it taped to their desk during the test.

(Anderson, 2009; Berrent, n.d.; CollegeBoard, n.d.; Cuesta College, n.d.; Duke & Ritchart, n.d.; Family Education, n.d.; Otterman, 2010; Perfection Learning, n.d.; Test Taking Tips, n.d.; Test Taking Tips, 2010; Wolpert-Gawron, 2009).

Summary:

There is little evidence that any single test preparation strategy is more valuable than any other but there are several techniques that can support student success. Any strategy that helps students gain confidence in their knowledge and be comfortable in the testing environment will contribute to greater success.

Online Resources

- Anderson, J. (2009, December 29). Test taking strategies. Retrieved online http://educationalissues.suite101.com/article.cfm/how_to_take_and_pass_any_test
Reasons why tests should be a positive experience are provided in this piece.
- Berrent, H. I. (n.d.) Standardized test-prep kit. Retrieved online http://www.charliefrench.com/test_tips.htm
Several lists of what students and parents can do to be better prepared for standardized tests are given.
- CollegeBoard. (n.d.) Exam day: I will survive. Retrieved online <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/boost-your-skills/10296.html>
Strategies to use for taking tests are listed in this article.
- Cuesta College. (n.d.) How to reduce test anxiety. Retrieved online <http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/as/710.htm>
A list of suggested long and short term relaxation, anti-anxiety techniques are provided.
- Duke, N. K. and Ritchart, R. (n.d.) Standardized test preparation. Retrieved online <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4006>
This article provides strategies to help students prepare for reading and math portions of standardized tests along with some basic techniques for prepping students to do their best in all testing situations.
- FairTest. (2007, August 17). The limits of standardized tests for diagnosing and assisting student learning. Retrieved online <http://www.fairtest.org/The+Limits+of+Standardized+Tests>
Reasons why standardized tests are not the answer to determine curriculum, standards and student progress are given in this article.
- Family Education. (n.d.) 11 ways to help your child prepare for tests. Retrieved online <http://school.familyeducation.com/educational-testing/teaching-methods/37499.html?detoured=1>
A list of guidelines for parents about helping them prepare their child to do their best on tests is provided in this piece.
- Fletcher, D. (2009, December 11). Standardized testing. Retrieved online <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947019,00.html>



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A brief history of standardized testing is described in this article.

- Gallagher, K. (2010, March). Reversing Readicide. Retrieved online
http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/mar10/vol67/num06/Reversing_Readicide.aspx
The author describes why she believes the youth of the U.S. is suffering from “readicide” and what can be done to help students become strong thoughtful readers.
- Otterman, S. (2010, April 25). Brooklyn school scores high despite poverty. Retrieved online
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/26/education/26test.html?ref=nyregion>
A description about the strategies used in one school to help students score well on standardized tests is presented in this article.
- Perfection Learning. (n.d.). How to get better test scores. Retrieved online
<http://www.perfectionlearning.com/get-better-test-scores>
This company describes their system for helping students make substantive gains on standardized tests.
- Test taking strategies. (n.d.) Retrieved online <http://bruteforcestudyguide.com/standardizedtests.html>
Although this is a guide about how to study and prepare for different college tests, there are active links to lists of appropriate study habits.
- Test taking tips. (2010). Retrieved online <http://www.testtakingtips.com/test/index.htm>
More test taking skills are offered on this site.
- Wolpert-Gawron, Heather. (2009). Test prep doesn't have to be overwhelming. Retrieved online
<http://www.edutopia.org/preparing-students-state-standardized-tests>
A few but important test taking strategies are listed in this article.

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