



Enrollment Management & Marketing TOOLKIT

De-Mystifying Standardized Tests! A Parent's Guide—Part I

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It seems that no sooner are the children back in school, than they (and their parents) are faced with what some believe are the most important tests of the year—the standardized tests, or the **IA** and **CogAT**. Those mysterious letters! What do they mean? How can I help my child prepare? How much do they impact his academic future? How do high schools use test scores in the admissions process? As a former elementary school principal, let me try to dispel some myths and misconceptions and, as the kids say, “break it down” for you.

This is the first of three articles in a series that will address these questions and more. My hope is that parents will come away with a better understanding of an often misunderstood topic. If these articles raise further questions, I am sure your principal will be happy to address them with your child’s particular needs in mind. Since test week begins September 19, 2016, this first article addresses why we test in the fall, (not spring) and how best to prepare your child for test week. May God bless you in your role as your child’s primary, or first, educator. The teachers and administrators stand ready to assist you in this important, sometimes challenging job!

Why Fall Testing?

The achievement test used by every elementary school in the Archdiocese of St. Louis is known as the **IA**, which stands for “Iowa Assessments.” **CogAT** stands for “Cognitive Abilities Test.” (More detailed information on this will be included in the next article on “Test Interpretation.”) Standardized testing week in the Archdiocese of St. Louis traditionally falls during the last weeks of September. Many parents and students wonder why we test in the fall, at the



beginning of a grade, and not in the spring when it would seem to measure how much a student had learned that year. Without getting too technical, students are not at a disadvantage, as some parents fear, because they have just begun the grade in which they are being tested. The scoring process takes the time of year into account to ensure that scores achieved in the fall compare to a group of students who were also tested in the fall of the same grade. (This is known as a **norm group**.) In order to achieve the exact same score in the spring, students would have to answer more questions correctly.

Having test results early in the year provides sufficient time for administrators and teachers to study the results of their students' testing, and use that information in several important ways.

- Learning about the educational needs of both individual students, as well as the class as a whole, in order to provide all students with a quality, Catholic education.
- Providing evidence of a suspected learning disability, and need for further testing. Teachers can identify gaps in students' background knowledge, and make adjustments early in the year.
- Providing criteria necessary for eligibility for particular classes/programs.

These are all valid uses for standardized test scores. There are also a number of invalid and inappropriate ways some parents might be tempted to use them. Examples of inappropriate ways to use test scores include:

- Making comparisons of class or school averages to another class's or school's averages. And, where there is any change in the make-up of a class from one year to the next, comparison of the class average from one year to the next becomes even less meaningful. Resist the urge to do so!



- Evaluating of the quality of a teacher or a school based on test scores. The temptation is strong to do so, as it is such an easy comparison to make—too easy to be anywhere near valid! That is why this Archdiocese does not publish the test scores of individual schools. It is misleading, and serves no valid purpose.
- Drawing conclusions or making decisions based on the results of one test.

Preparing for the Test

There are steps parents, students, and teachers can take to increase the likelihood of a positive testing experience, which is not an oxymoron! Parents and teachers walk a fine line in preparing students for standardized testing—too much pressure to do well because “everything is riding on this” is way too far in one direction, and, “Don’t worry, the scores don’t count anyway!” is way too far in the other! I always advised my students to get enough sleep the night before a test, have a decent breakfast the morning of, come with two nicely sharpened pencils with good erasers, and ask the Holy Spirit for the gifts of knowledge and wisdom and perseverance. Teachers are well-advised to prepare the testing materials and environment carefully, ensuring adequate lighting, space, fresh air, and quiet. Distractions must be eliminated as much as possible. In my former school, we began each testing week with an all-school prayer service asking God to bless our efforts and give us peace of mind and heart. Little ones who did not take the test offered moral support and promises of prayers to their older schoolmates. In Catholic schools we have the luxury of being able to do that, and we should!

Test week can be as negative or positive an experience as we help make it for our children. Here are some important, simple, practical, and effective steps parents can take to make it relaxed and productive:

- **Plan ahead!** Be sure that your child is able to attend school every day during the days the tests will be administered. Teachers like to spread them out over a number of days so that students do not become fatigued. Work with them, and schedule routine doctor visits for another week.



- **Fire up the engine!** Breakfast fuels the body and mind. It takes energy to maintain focus and perseverance during lengthy tests. Give him or her this important advantage!
- **Be prepared!** The Boy Scout motto is good advice for a positive testing experience. Make sure your child has sufficient rest and two #2 lead pencils (sharpened, please!) every day of test week.
- **Pray with and for your child!** There is no statistical data, but our faith tells us that the Holy Spirit has many gifts that students will need during test week—knowledge, fortitude, wisdom, right judgment are just a few. Ask God’s blessing on your child and his or her efforts. Use calming words and tone to assure them that all you expect is that they give the tests their best effort—no more, no less. And, don’t forget to tell her that you love her and, in the **end**, it’s NOT THE **END** OF THE WORLD!
(*Happy Testing!*)

