



# Enrollment Management & Marketing TOOLKIT

## De-Mystifying Standardized Tests! — A Parent's Guide Part II — Test Interpretation

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This is the second in a series of articles on standardized testing written for parents of elementary school students. In this segment, I will address the language of the test and how to interpret the scores your child's teacher will present to you in the "student profile narrative."

As we learned in the first article in this series, the achievement test used by elementary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis is known as the **IA**, which stands for "Iowa Assessments." **CogAT** stands for "Cognitive Abilities Test."

Elementary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis are required to administer both batteries of tests (IA and CogAT) in grades 4, 6, and 8 each year. Many schools give tests in other grades, as well, based on the needs of a particular school, and, at the discretion of the administration.

About three weeks after the tests have been sent away for scoring, the testing company provides the school with a number of reports. Parents will receive a report known as the "student profile narrative." Usually, the test report comes at about the same time as the first-quarter report card, and often around the same time as parent-teacher conferences, which may include the student, as well.

Wise parents use all available information in order to understand their child's progress in school, as well as in talking with their child about his or her school experience. Hopefully, you have saved report cards and test reports from previous years. If not, it would be a good idea to start saving them this year. Let's begin with a discussion of what each battery of tests actually covers.



The **Iowa Assessments** are achievement tests that measure students' skills in Reading, Language, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science. The **CogAT** measures a student's current level of verbal, quantitative and non-verbal (spacial) reasoning, and the ability to process information.

The results of these tests are important when considered separately, and together. Standing alone, scores on the **CogAT** give insight into the relative strengths of a student. For example, does he possess stronger reasoning ability in the verbal area than in the quantitative? Used together, the scores provide insight into the relationship between reasoning ability and achievement. For example, is a strong verbal reasoning ability reflected in the reading and language scores on the **IA** and in daily schoolwork in language arts? If not, a teacher or a parent may wonder, "Why not?"

Test publishers carefully develop questions in each subject tested. Test questions measure a wide variety of knowledge and skills, but do not include everything that could be asked about a subject at each grade level. No student is expected to know all the answers, but the more questions a student can answer correctly, the higher the score. Scores from all of the subtests are combined to comprise what is known as a **composite score**.

The next piece of information is critical and very often misunderstood: Standardized test scores are reported in **percentiles**, while many of the tests and quizzes your children take outside of standardized testing are scored in **percentages**. **THEY ARE NOT THE SAME THING!**

If a student earns 80% on her Friday spelling test of twenty words, that means she got sixteen correct and four incorrect. In standardized testing, if a student scores at the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile in the spelling sub-test of the Language test, it means that the student did as well as, or better than, 80% of other students who took the test.

When I was an elementary principal, parents sometimes expressed the fear to me that a total math score at the 76<sup>th</sup> percentile meant that their child had not done well on that test. In fact, a dad might have equated that to mean his son had earned what would have been a low "C" or perhaps a "D+," had it been on



a weekly math test from his teacher. The truth is that student scored in the top 25% of students who took the test, or said another way, “in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile.” A score in the 76<sup>th</sup> percentile is a very strong score! On standardized tests, the **50<sup>th</sup> percentile** is exactly average, and the average range extends from the **24<sup>th</sup> to 76<sup>th</sup> percentiles**.

As I said at the beginning of this article, it is a good idea to save report cards and test reports each year. Then, track your child’s progress from year to year. If scores remain fairly consistent year after year, your child is making appropriate progress academically. If scores seem very inconsistent one year when compared to several others, think back on what might have been going on in your child’s life, in the family, etc. around test time. Illness, trauma, or unexpected stressors can all cause a child to lose concentration and “bomb” part or all of a test. This is NOT the end of the world or his academic career!

Talk to the teacher, either at the fall conference, or at a special one, for other clues about what might have caused the deviation from what has become her “norm.” Sometimes unavoidable things happen that result in an atypical testing experience and an unusually low set of scores, but one set of low scores is not particularly significant when it is inconsistent with the student’s “typical performance” over a number of years.

However, consistently low scores and poor daily performance in school might signal a need for further evaluation to rule out a specific learning disability. Your child’s principal or the school learning consultant will assist you through this process. The results of that evaluation may provide critical information that can be helpful to the school in understanding how your child learns best, and to you, in working in partnership with the school.

Finally, file the reports in a safe place until next year. Remember, the standardized test is only one of many indicators of your child’s achievement and abilities. It is a “snapshot” taken on a given day. It remains frozen in time, and out of context to some degree. It may tell a thousand words, but it does not provide the depth and nuance that is best experienced by examining the **whole child** the other 364 days of year!



If you are the parent of an eighth grader, you may want to wait before filing that student profile narrative. Soon, you will be finalizing the decision-making process related to high school applications. Test scores are an important component in a student's academic profile. My next article will deal with the topic of how standardized test scores are used by Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis in the admissions process.

May God continue to bless you in your role as parents and primary educators of your children!

