

De-Mystifying Standardized Tests! — A Parent’s Guide, Part III — Catholic High School Admissions and Test Scores

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One of the reasons parents, and some students, worry most about standardized test scores (known in Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis as the **Iowa Assessments** or **IA**) is that they are taken into consideration, along with a student’s elementary school academic record, in the admissions process for the Catholic secondary schools in St. Louis.

The academic, or “permanent,” record indicates how well the student demonstrated knowledge of the curriculum of his/her school. The standardized test scores compare a student’s performance on a limited set of knowledge and skills to the performance of a large group of students at the same grade level representative of the entire nation, also known as the “national norm.”

Scores on the **CogAT (Cognitive Abilities Test)** over several years can be a reliable predictor of student success. The combination of the student’s academic record (report cards) and test scores form a reasonably reliable profile of a prospective student. Some high schools incorporate additional means of assessment, (placement tests, interviews) but test scores and academic transcripts are the two “universal” criteria.

The secondary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis provide an abundance of information to help students and their parents make informed decisions about which high school might be “the best” for an individual student. In this archdiocese, we are truly blessed with 27 terrific schools—schools that serve thousands of students with a wide variety of interests, academic backgrounds, abilities and economic circumstances. But, there is no “best school.”



Information about Catholic high schools can be found at archstl.org. (Follow “**Secondary Schools Information**” to “**The Red Book,**”) or visit individual school websites. “**High School Nights**” in September/October (locations and dates are posted at archstl.org) provide opportunities to hear from several schools in one location. And, all schools hold their own open houses, most of them this year on **Open House Sunday, November 6, 2016**. Check the [Open House information page](#) for details, as well as additional dates and times.

In St. Louis, it is a fact of life that, for some eighth graders and their parents, the high school application process can be stressful if acceptance is based upon certain criteria, including test scores. Should parents seek special training for their sons and daughters in test-taking skills to provide an extra advantage? There are a number of good reasons why this is a waste of time and money. First, the number of percentile points gained is typically not significant. Second, and more important, any significant difference might cause a “false positive score,” in that the student may gain admission to his or her desired school, and then not be successful because the test score did not reflect his or her true academic potential. In the end, parents should desire the best fit for their child, not the mythical “best school.”

Over the next weeks leading up to high school application deadlines, I encourage parents of eighth graders to devote some time preparing by exploring the informative secondary education website (archstl.org) and “The Red Book.” Speak with your child’s principal to discuss whether your ideas about schools that would be a good fit for your child are appropriate based on his or her academic record and test scores.

Your child’s principal will be able to guide you in making a good decision about where to send the application. Please note that the form asks for a second and third choice, as well. This is important because if the first school listed is not able to accept a student, their admissions department is directed to forward that student’s application immediately to the next school listed. This will ensure that every applicant will receive a letter or email of acceptance on the anticipated date. Then, try to relax, knowing that there is just the right Catholic high school out there for your child. But, what if he or she ends up



“disappointed” by the results of the admissions process because that letter of acceptance did not come from the school listed first on the application? What then?

For this reason, sensitive principals request that displays of congratulations by parents of eighth graders be respectful of the possibility that not all students will receive the letter they had hoped for. (Please do not send bouquets of flowers, for example, to your child at school.) And, sometimes, in spite of the best planning, the U.S. Mail does not deliver all letters on the same date, and a few children’s letters may be delayed by a day or two. Does that mean no letter is coming, or that the news is not good? Absolutely not!

Please know that elementary principals are strongly advised to allow the secondary schools to communicate acceptance/non-acceptance themselves. Any question about the status of a student’s application should be made directly to the Director of Admissions at the secondary school in question—not the elementary school.

Success and acceptance are positive, powerful emotions. We all enjoy those feelings, and usually have no difficulty handling them. Disappointment, however, is an inevitability of life—if not now, eventually. Parents have a real opportunity to help their child cope with it. (Educators call these “teachable moments.”)

You can begin right now by putting the whole discussion of where to apply to high school in perspective. What if the choice is not between one school and all the rest, but between or among two or three great schools? As I’ve said, there is not one “best school,” but, there are certainly a number of excellent schools that will suit the needs and interests of your child, and ***there IS a Catholic school that is “just right” for him or her!***

Once again, God bless you in your vocation of parent! It is the most important job you do. And, in Catholic schools, there is help available from the principal, the pastor, the teachers, and most importantly, from God! Ask for it—He’ll understand—His Son was a teacher!

