

**A**s a parent, you are the most effective advocate to make sure that your child gets the education to which he or she is entitled in the public schools of your community.

Tests used to make important decisions about the future of a student, a teacher, or schools are called high-stakes tests. High-stakes tests have become as much a part of education as chalkboards and textbooks. To help your child succeed in school, you need to understand how high-stakes tests affect your child. All parents need to know how high-stakes tests are used in their particular schools, school districts, and communities. Parents need to know how to communicate with teachers, principals, school board members, and other officials about how high-stakes tests affect their children's education.



This guide is designed to help you learn more about high-stakes testing. It includes definitions of important testing terms, guidance on what you should know about the tests your child takes, how tests

relate to your child's school, and how you can help your child learn to do better on tests, including ones that have high stakes.

Further information on each section in this guide can be located on the Center's website at [www.greatlakescenter.org](http://www.greatlakescenter.org).

## In Minnesota...

To receive a high school diploma in Minnesota, students must pass Basic Skills Tests (BST) in reading, mathematics, and written composition. The tests are the state's only **high stakes tests**. The state is in the process of adopting legislation and regulations that would measure students' Adequate Yearly Progress in achievement of state standards per the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*.

### Exceptions to or appeals of high-stakes tests and results:

Minnesota law provides for **accommodations and modifications** for certain students identified as having special needs or disabilities. Accommodations cover adjustments to the testing conditions that recognize a student's disability. Modifications cover changes in test scoring procedures, such as a change in the passing score required for the Basic Skills Test.

Students have a total of 11 tries to pass the test: twice a year, in February and in summer, for students in grades 8 through 12, with a "last chance" test in April for seniors. Students who fail all attempts do not receive a high school diploma.

### Pending legislation and other action that may affect the state:

In May 2003, Minnesota's legislature adopted new academic standards in mathematics, language arts, and arts. Per federal requirements, test alignment with the math and reading/language arts standards are being developed. New science and social studies standards are also planned, as well as science tests mandated in ESEA.

In November 2002, National Computer Systems settled a class-action lawsuit arising from charges the company incorrectly scored the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests in 2000, erroneously failing about 8,000 students who had in fact passed. The company agreed to pay \$16,000 to students denied graduation and \$1,000 to students required to attend summer school.

### State resources on high-stakes tests:

Minnesota Department of Education:  
[http://education.state.mn.us/stellent/groups/public/documents/translatedcontent/pub\\_intro\\_acad\\_standards.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/stellent/groups/public/documents/translatedcontent/pub_intro_acad_standards.jsp)

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Background research provided by the Arizona State University Education Policy Studies Laboratory



GREAT LAKES CENTER  
FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH & PRACTICE

# A Parent's Guide To High Stakes Testing



TERMS, LEGISLATION  
AND TIPS TO HELP  
YOUR CHILD SUCCEED



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## Terms You Should Know

**Achievement Tests** are tests designed to measure how much a student has learned in a particular subject or group of subjects.

**High Stakes Tests** are achievement tests that have specific, serious, consequences attached to their results.

**Standardized Tests** are achievement tests in which all students are scored and their achievement calculated according to a common standard. High stakes testing programs use standardized test results to judge the performance of students and sometimes of teachers and administrators.

**Norm-referenced** standardized tests compare an individual student's test performance with the performance of students in a sample group.

**Criterion-referenced** standardized tests report how well a student performs against a fixed standard.

**Results** of norm-referenced tests are typically reported as **percentiles**. A percentile rank tells you how your child performed in relation to the children in the sample group and others who took the test. Results of criterion-referenced tests report how well your child did in accomplishing a desired learning goal. Typically, results are reported using words such as "not proficient," "satisfactory," or "proficient."

## Current Federal Regulations

**No Child Left Behind Act of 2001:** The popular name for the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law in early 2002. This act included for the first time a requirement that states test students in grades 3 through 8 and to show certain test score results in return for federal funding.

Under the act, schools whose average scores do not improve enough may lose federal aid; parents of children in those schools may receive the right to transfer to other public schools or to hire private tutors using federal grants.



## What Parents Can Do

High stakes testing is a reality that has an important impact on virtually every child's education, including yours. What can you as a parent do to help your child learn and succeed in this environment?

**1. Stay informed.** Ask your child's teacher and your school principal what tests are given each year in your child's school and which of those tests may have high stakes attached to them. Ask what sort of preparation will take place in your child's classes for each of those tests. Are certain days being set aside to drill for tests? Ask how testing in general, and high-stakes tests in particular, are shaping decisions about what is being taught in your child's school. Are tested subjects getting a more intense focus? If your child has a documented, diagnosed learning disability, find out whether an accommodation is appropriate and contact your school's special education office to advocate for your child.

**2. Understand what test results mean.** First of all, it's important not to judge your child on the basis of a single test. How your child is performing day to day -- in class, on homework, and on tests for classes -- will tell you more about how well he or she is learning. If a test seems to show your child is doing poorly in a subject in which you thought he or she was doing well, speak with your child's teacher. If the test report shows your child's percentile score, the test is a norm-referenced test. Ask if criterion-referenced scores also were obtained, and if so, what they may show about your child's performance. Keep in mind that standardized tests are given in a limited amount of time. Some students may find it easy to "race against the clock" to complete the test, but other, equally intelligent students may find the time limit to be very stressful, so that it actually interferes with their concentration in taking the test. In reviewing your child's test scores, consider whether the time pressure of testing may have affected the score.

**3. Help your child prepare.** Parental support for student learning has always been important; now it's even more so. Make sure your child has an adequate place, and adequate time, to complete homework each day. Spend time reviewing homework and engage your child in conversation to make sure he or she understands the material. Encourage your child to study regularly over time instead of "cramming" for tests. Encourage your child to understand test-taking mechanics and strategies:

### Test Taking Strategies

- ✓ Relax and stay calm before and during tests.
- ✓ Read and listen carefully to all directions and follow them closely.
- ✓ Budget time. Make sure to leave enough time to answer all questions, or as many as possible.
- ✓ Check work carefully.
- ✓ Answer easy questions first, and come back to more difficult ones.
- ✓ Read questions and all answers completely.
- ✓ If the correct answer isn't immediately obvious, figure out which answers are definitely wrong, then see if you can choose from those that are left.

When you talk to children about tests, don't overemphasize test scores and try not to be anxious. Listen to your children's anxieties and concerns, and try to reassure them without discounting their feelings.

**4. Find resources to help you understand high-stakes tests.** There are a number of agencies and organizations listed on the Center website ([www.greatlakescenter.org](http://www.greatlakescenter.org)) that may be able to provide you with more answers on the subject of high-stakes testing from various points of view.