

Five Ways to Get Smart About Test Scores

It's important to look beyond the raw test results when evaluating a school's academic achievement.

1. Interpret scores responsibly.

When you review a school's test scores, in the newspaper or at a school board meeting, always look beyond the basic numbers.

For Parents

The scores for a single school in a single year have limited value for judging school performance. Equally important is trend data—test scores from several years that show you how a school's performance has changed over time. In addition, comparing a school to other schools with similar demographics may give you perspective on where the school stands relative to other schools like it. You can also learn a lot from data that is broken down by ethnic group and socioeconomic level, which is now being provided under the No Child Left Behind federal law. A school is only truly successful when it helps students in all ethnic and social groups achieve at high levels.

2. Learn what's behind the scores.

The next time you hear somebody say, "That school is the best in the district because it has the highest test scores," make a point to ask what's happening at the school that accounts for those scores. Find out about the school's teaching methods, the leadership provided by the principal and whether students feel safe and valued. It's important to investigate numerous measures of school quality before making judgments about a school.

3. Communicate with your child.

When your child's class is preparing for its annual standardized testing marathon, let your child know that, while you hope he does his best on the test, it's not a competition. Explain that the results may help him—and his teacher—understand the areas where he might be especially strong or where he may need to focus more.

4. Expect more from the media.

If your local newspaper writes an article about the test scores of schools in your area, but doesn't make a point of digging deep, write a letter to the editor. Make it clear that you don't approve of having school performance boiled down to a single measure, and that you'd love to see more insightful coverage about the different strengths and challenges of each school, plus richer explorations of the issues around testing.

5. Find schools that are good role models.

Use the free tools on GreatSchools.net to find schools that are succeeding with students in all ethnic and socioeconomic groups. For example, you can use GreatSchools.net's [HYPERLINK "http://www.greatschools.net/modperl/go/FL"](http://www.greatschools.net/modperl/go/FL) [Compare Schools](#) tool to search for a school that has a high percentage of non-English-speaking students but also has high standardized test scores. Once you zero in on a school whose numbers intrigue you, take a look at its school profile for clues about what the school is doing to succeed, or contact the school and ask for more information.

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