

# Suggestions for Test Preparation

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Through CETE's work preparing large scale assessments, we have come to observe that test taking skills are an often neglected area of student preparation in many schools. While some educators would prefer not to invest time taken from subject matter instruction to improve student test-taking strategies, we can acknowledge that taking a test does in fact require skills that might not be best left to chance. As the stakes attached to test performance in school and district accountability increase, affording students a fair assessment opportunity deserves some assurances. Providing students, parents and instructors with the guidance and opportunity for developing or improving test taking skills is one, perhaps small, effort in that direction.

Historically, the world of educational testing has not been enamored by "test prep" instruction. However, research on the benefits of test prep confirm that knowing (a learned skill) and practicing how to take a test does provide an advantage, that is, can lead to higher scores. Today, test publishers actually distribute literature and practice programs to sharpen examinees' testing skills and strategies; indeed such tools are frequently sold by the test developer. In most every town there are store front businesses that provide (costly) "test prep" classes to serve parents desiring to have their children's testing skills enhanced. Some schools, through their counselors, provide formal instruction in test taking skills. Further, realize that such skills when in place not only have the potential to advantage performance on the Kansas assessments, but these skills are directly applied to all manner of test encounters (ACTs, SATs, gifted/SPED eligibility screening, employment testing, etc.). It all comes down to a matter of fairness: if a student does have a chance to hone her/his test taking skills and another individual does not, then a difference in performance may not be a difference founded in academic achievement, but rather also contains an element of the extent of one's test taking skill.

This brief paper is intended to inform school personnel of some of the elements that can be followed or utilized to assist students to take and perform on tests. Our focus is limited to instruction, test taking strategies and preparation. We have omitted intentionally "rules" and "guidance" that are associated with how to out-smart test items, item writers, teachers and thus the test (e.g., when in doubt, guess False as True statements are generally harder to create than

False statements, etc.). Such guidance (some term this “test-wiseness”) is available on this topic, and some of the references we provide in this paper will attend to such rules. But in actuality, professionally constructed, standardized assessments (as are the Kansas assessments, and other commonplace shelf tests) are routinely developed and then edited to make “test-wiseness rules” not applicable and thus not a useful investment of time (e.g., in a professionally constructed examination there will be an approximately equal number of True and False items so the test-wiseness rule to guess False is ill-advised, etc.).

We have divided this presentation into two major sections. In the first part we summarize much of the literature and identify core, rational and fundamental test taking guidance and strategies. While lengthy, this bulleted summary is not complete, nor does it “teach” the guidance suggested. The format provides suggestions that can be acted upon by (1) Teachers, (2) Students, and (3) Parents and Guardians. You will observe some redundancy across the three group sections as the “guidance” for teachers is then reflected in desired behavior of students, and then again in the support parents can provide. The coverage identifies properties and suggestions, and often without elaboration. In the last section (4) we have compiled a bibliographic reference guide on test taking preparation that is readily available through the Internet. It is from these resources that in-depth information and materials can be located. There is much out there to be found, and we have no doubt missed some useful information and material. These annotated referrals can hopefully shorten the process of finding material and support documents. Once you have surveyed these outlets, we encourage you to continue your search. Feel free to share this reference material with others (including parents and guardians).

In the three part section that immediately follows we have prepared in outline form test preparation suggestions for Teachers, Students and Parents/Guardians. Please feel free to edit, modify, add to, and otherwise adjust this information. Distribute this material as you think best. We welcome your suggestions to improve and strengthen this document for future revisions. So without further elaboration, .... clear your desks, remove your books and notes from your work place, as you are about to be tested....be prepared!

## **(1) Suggestions For Teachers**

### **Practicing Test Taking Strategies**

- P Teach students to carefully analyze test questions: note key terms, substitute common, familiar words, and put the question into their own words.
- P Instruct students to anticipate the answer before looking at the answer options, BUT advise students to examine/read all the answer choices as the choices often help to clarify the question.
- P “Comfort” students so that they understand that they will probably not know all of the answers, but they should try to answer all the questions anyway.
- P Teach and model strategies for making educated guesses (it is important that examinees eliminate choices they believe are not answers, and then guess among the remaining choices when guessing is the only recourse).
- P Teach students strategies for pacing themselves on tests
- P Place time limits on some tests and classroom activities to allow students to practice pacing themselves; but most achievement tests are expected to be “power tests” meaning most all students should be able to respond to all questions in the time allowed/scheduled.
- P Incorporate activities into the classroom to give students practice following “test directions”
- P Provide opportunities for students to practice with the Kansas assessment item formats used on the tests; the Reading assessments use a novel approach about which students should be aware and afforded practice if possible.
- P Performance assessments place different “response demands” on students. This format needs to be practiced when it is not often seen. Encourage student to elaborate their responses to such items.
- P Discuss the practice items and both the correct and incorrect answers options in detail (use Get Ready activities that are part of the Kansas assessments)
- P Provide opportunities to practice filling out answer sheets (Number 2 pencils only, dark marks that fill the circles – if you can see the letter in the circle after marking then the mark is not dark enough, also erase completely and cleanly when changing answers)
- P Strongly remind students to carefully mark answer sheets
- P For open-ended, constructed response questions, encourage students to plan before they begin writing
- P For performance items write neatly, organize information as best they can on the page, and even when it does not count, check spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- P Expose students to a wide variety of reading materials as are likely to be present on the Kansas assessments

- P Assign activities that require students to write using a variety of genres under the conditions that parallel the Kansas assessment
- P Provide practice with reading tables, charts, graphs, and maps

### **Motivation, Attitudes, and Anxiety**

- P Exhibit a positive attitude about testing and have high expectations for students
- P Use activities (pep rallies, making posters, etc.) and incentives (pizza parties, award certificates, etc.) to motivate students
- P Inform parents when the testing will occur and tell them what they can do to help
- P Inform students and parents about the purpose of standardized testing and how testing will impact them
- P Tell students as much about the test format and environment as possible so they know what to expect
- P Build up students' self-concepts and confidence as good learners and good test takers
- P Talk to students about the stress they might be feeling about the test
- P Be aware of signs of stress: headaches, stomachaches, muscle cramps, cold hands, sweating, acting out, avoidance, and inability to remember or concentrate. Intervene and provide accommodations as are needed and proper.
- P Teach students how to manage their stress through breathing and relaxation exercises
- P After testing, allow students to talk about their experiences and feelings
- P When they become available, explain test results clearly to both students and parents
- P Do not *overemphasize* or *over-stress* the importance of the test as this will likely cause undo stress in your students

### **Test Administration**

- P Familiarize yourself with the testing instructions and procedures during the days before testing begins
- P Provide a testing environment that is quiet and free of distractions
- P Make sure you have all of the required materials for the test
- P Ensure that students understand the vocabulary and key terms included in the directions
- P Encourage students to ask questions when they do not understand the directions

## **(2) Suggestions For Students**

### **General Strategies**

- P Carefully listen to and be sure to read the directions to the test
- P Ask questions when you don't understand what you should do
- P Estimate how much time is available for each test question
- P Do not spend too much time on one problem, work quickly but accurately
- P Leave time to be able to go back and check your work
- P Remember, do not to race through the test. Use time wisely, but you should have time. Use time to think, work the question, and answer as best you can.
- P Check to see that you marked the answer sheet correctly/properly
- P It is OK to change an answer if you decide another answer is better
- P Carefully read the entire test question and all of the answers provided before you answer the question (the first choice that appears to be the answer may not be the best answer)
- P As a strategy, try to answer the easy questions first and then go back to the hard questions
- P Do not be afraid to mark/write in the test booklet. Mark your answer both in the test booklet and on your answer sheet. When you are ready to turn in the test, check that you have marked the answer sheet with the choice you marked in the booklet.
- P Mark questions in the booklet, even when you have answered them, to which you might want to return and review.
- P Keep track of any questions you skip (mark the test booklet) and make sure to skip the question on the answer sheet also
- P Answer all questions even if you have to guess on the hard ones, or even when there are questions you do not get to read -- **always** mark an answer to every item before you finish the test.
- P Don't give up even if you come across a lot of hard questions in a row. Don't let hard questions frustrate you. Try to solve the questions as best you can, answer the item, and move on.
- P Take time to review the test before you turn in your booklet and answer sheet. Review that you have made a response to each question, that you have reviewed all questions you wanted to check, that you have marked your answer sheet correctly (if you skipped items, check that you did not get out of order), and that the circles you darkened are in fact the answers you selected (check against choices you marked in your test booklet).

- P Mark your answer sheets correctly: make full, neat marks, mark only one answer per question, avoid making stray marks
- P On constructed response questions (open-ended questions) don't be brief, be complete in your response.
- P A good night of rest will help
- P Be on time to school on test days
- P Eat a good breakfast on test days
- P Think positive!...tests are often meant to be hard – expect that; but you have learned a lot so give them your best effort - In many cases, you are not expected to know how to do all questions perfectly

**Strategies for Guessing (“I do not have a clue about the answer”), and Answering (This is a hard question, and I am not sure of the answer”)**

- P Eliminate answer choices you think are wrong (strike/mark out choices you think are wrong in your booklet), then give close attention to the remaining choices
- P If you have to guess, after you eliminate choices you think are not correct, then make your best educated guess among the answer choices that are left
- P Trust what you know. Understand that you do possess some knowledge over what is being tested. No matter how hard the question, or uncertain you may be, decide what you think are incorrect choices and then choose between the choices that remain
- P Always guess on questions when you don't know the answer (do not leave any item “blank”)
- P If two answer choices mean the same thing to you, they are likely both wrong and can be eliminated as possible correct answers
- P If two answer choices have opposite meanings, one of them is likely correct

**Strategies to Reduce Stress**

- P Think positively
- P Use breathing exercises, like taking deep breaths, to help yourself calm down
- P Tense and relax each of your muscles to help yourself calm down
- P Talk about your feelings and stress about testing with teachers and parents

### **(3) Suggestions For Parents/Guardians**

- P Make sure your children have a nutritious breakfast on the days of the test  
(Remember, the Kansas assessments are multiple day's so learn the schedule and plan accordingly)
- P Early to bed and getting a good night's sleep before a test day is preferable
- P Ensure your children arrive at school on time the days of the test
- P Encourage you children to do their best
- P Praise your children's efforts as well as their accomplishments
- P Be sensitive to the amount of pressure you put on your children to do well; some is desirable, lots is not as they'll just get overly stressed
- P Exhibit a positive attitude about testing and school
- P Encourage your children to read a variety of materials, such as newspapers, books, and food labels, at home
- P Find out when tests will be given so you can avoid making other appointments (before, during, immediately after school) on those days
- P Practice for the test at home if possible; use the practice sessions to make your children comfortable when taking a test and to provide an opportunity for giving help
- P Talk to your children about what they are doing in school and how you can help them at home

## **(4) Test Preparation: K-12 Resources for Teachers, Students and Parents**

The annotated listing that follows is a compilation of Internet resources that provide information, documentation and materials (lesson plans, practice material, instructional videos, etc.) in the area of test preparation. It is diverse in coverage, and you will find some redundancy and on occasion even contradictions. These are worthy of your review and use as may be useful. They are not presented in any special/preferential order. Information in parentheses alongside the web address is the title of the web page being accessed.

1. <http://www.state.tn.us/education/tsteststrategies.htm> (Test Strategies) - geared toward K-12 students; provides tips for students, parents and teachers. Thorough and detailed; a very good compilation and presentation of material. Prepared by the Tennessee department of education.
2. [http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Universal/II\\_Stories/Test\\_Workbooks/test\\_workbooks.html](http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Universal/II_Stories/Test_Workbooks/test_workbooks.html) (CPS Test Preparation Workbooks) and <http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Assessments/Preparation/preparation.html> (Standardized Test Preparation) - outstanding resources and comprehensive coverage of test preparation materials developed by staff of the Chicago Public Schools. Available are teacher workbooks and lesson plans, and student practice materials and videos. Not to be missed. Chapters 6-9 in the test prep workbooks are specific to the Illinois assessments and may not be as useful for the Kansas assessments; one of the best sites out there.
3. <http://www.inspiringteachers.com/tips/anxiety/index.html> and <http://teams.lacoe.edu/documentation/showknow/default.html> (Overcoming Test Anxiety) - a great resource; much, much information and worthy of close review. Coverage of many topics and provides access to a teaching video on test taking strategies for instructors. Well worth the time to explore in depth (home page of the Los Angeles County schools).
4. <http://www.broward.k12.fl.us/testingassessment/TestPrep.htm> (Test Preparation) - more good advice for parents; well done and informative.
5. [http://www.byu.edu/cc/Learning\\_Strategies/test/strategy.htm](http://www.byu.edu/cc/Learning_Strategies/test/strategy.htm) (Test Taking Strategies) - includes a number of tips that seem more appropriate for teacher-made tests; provides tips for a variety of item types (multiple choice, true/false, essay, matching); provides opportunities to test newly learned test-taking skills; practice tests give good, immediate feedback; better suited for high school students.

6. <http://www.sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/tests/objective.html> (Objective Test Taking skills) - geared for teacher-made tests; gives brief, surface level tips; much focus on test-wiseness skills; appropriate for older students (gr. 7-12).
7. <http://www.edu.uleth.ca/courses/ed3604/take/mc/how.html> (Basic Rules) - gives very specific tips and provides interesting examples; includes a test to practice the tips
8. <http://www.cloquet.k12.mn.us/chu/class/fourth/ks/strategies.htm> (Test Taking Strategies and Student Achievement) – very thorough action research conducted by a fourth grade teacher; describes test-taking strategy intervention in one fourth grade classroom
9. <http://www.ericae.net/edo/ed302558.htm> (Improving Skills) - Eric digest document written for high school students; contains the basic information also in other sources cited here, but it is prepared as a handout for older students.
10. <http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/achievement/9011.html> (Improving Test Taking Skills) - one of the more lengthy documents; it contains a lot of information but it is worth the time to go through; it contains useful and unique information on testing ESL students; provides general lessons and activities teachers can use to prepare all students; contains a lot of information about test anxiety; not written for the layperson. Rich in information.
11. <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/assessment/nopain.htm> (No Pain) - concise and provides sound strategies for teaching reading and math (as associated with testing formats) as well as more general strategies for test taking skills; good ideas for elementary teachers and students, and does a nice job of linking instructional approaches to test preparation.
12. [http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/assessment/take\\_out\\_pencils.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/assessment/take_out_pencils.htm) (Taking the Stress out) - core suggestions for reducing test anxiety in students; short and to the point, it is worth an inspection; internet references to other documents/materials also provided.
13. <http://www.creativeclassroom.org/ma00ttt/> (Creative Classroom) – heavily based on the Chicago Public Schools documents noted here; provides tips for dealing with math, reading, and writing tests; features a letter to send to parents; good direct and succinct coverage of topics; informative.
14. <http://family.go.com/raisingkids/learn/assess/feature/nyfm118test/nyfm118test.html> (Help your kids) - well written, simple article designed for parents of younger students.

15. [http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed429987.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed429987.html) (Master the Tricks) - discusses common mistakes and how to avoid them; written for teachers as a resources for them to help prepare lessons/instructions for students on test taking skills.