

# How Parents Can Help Their Child Succeed on Standardized Achievement Tests

*Over the past several years, standardized achievement testing has become a major focus in public schools. Federal and state law and regulations have mandated the increased use of these tests with students. In Arkansas these tests include the Benchmark Exams in Grades 3-8, End-of-Course Exams in Algebra I and Geometry, and a Literacy Exam in Grade 11. This booklet was written to help parents gain a better understanding of why there is more testing and what they can do to help their children do well on these tests.*

## **What are standardized tests?**

Standardized academic achievement tests are given by schools to measure what students know and can do in different subject areas. They are considered “standardized” because students at a particular grade level get the same questions administered with the same rules, scoring, and time limits. This allows scores to be compared to others across the state.

## **Why are schools focusing so much on standardized tests?**

These tests are used not only to measure the academic strengths and weaknesses of individual students but also to evaluate the performance of groups of students in each school. As part of the school improvement movement, schools are now being evaluated by the results of these tests. The section below provides a brief overview of how student testing (using the tests mentioned in the introduction) relates to school accountability, public school choice, and supplemental educational services (tutoring).

**School Accountability.** Federal education law is focused on increasing the accountability of schools and school districts in order to improve student achievement. It also seeks to eliminate the achievement gap between different groups of students such as those based on race/ethnicity or on family income.

To address school accountability, standards are set for what students should know and be able to do at different grade levels. Then, each year, schools are required to test students at specific grade levels to determine what percentages of students are meeting those standards. These tests primarily focus on reading and math. School districts must then publish school report cards each year on the performance of each school. These school report cards indicate the percentage of students in that school who are on grade level based on the testing (reported as being at the “Proficient” or “Advanced” levels). School report cards should be provided to parents through the school district. If you don’t receive a school report card, you should request a copy from the school’s principal, the school’s parent facilitator/coordinator, or the school district office. You may also obtain information on the performance of an individual school, school district, and the state of Arkansas at <http://normes.uark.edu>

There are special requirements for Title I schools (public schools that serve a large number of low-income families) in regard to school accountability. **The majority of schools in Arkansas are Title I schools.** A Title I school is considered in “School Improvement” if, for two consecutive years, the school does not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward having all students on grade level in reading and math. Consequences for being in “School Improvement” status include having to provide options for parents/students. These options depend on how long a school has been in school improvement status. The options include Public School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services (SES).

**Public School Choice.** Students in Title I schools that are in school improvement status may be eligible to transfer to a higher-performing school in the school district. School districts are required to inform parents how to apply for the transfer. School districts are also required to provide transportation to the new school. Note: Parents must apply for the transfer by the deadline date specified by the school district.

**Supplemental Educational Services (SES).** Students in Title I schools that are in school improvement status may also be eligible to receive Supplemental Educational Services (SES). SES is basically free tutoring. These services are provided outside of regular school hours. This tutoring is paid for by the school district. Schools are required to inform parents if their child is eligible. Note: Parents must sign their children up for this approved tutoring, or it will not be provided.

For more information on this topic, please see the Arkansas State PIRC’s handout: What Parents Need to Know: School Accountability, Public School Choice, & Supplemental Education Services (which can be viewed at [www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org))

## How to help your children do well on standardized tests?

**Create a positive attitude about school.** Let your children hear you make positive comments about education, their school, and their teachers. Keep negative thoughts to yourself. When you are positive about school, your children will be more likely to be positive too! And, the more positive your children are about school, the more motivated they will be to try hard to achieve academically.

**Make learning a top priority in your family.** Help your children develop a passion for learning from an early age. Let them see you being curious to learn new things. Show them how you find information to improve your knowledge and skills. Talk to your children about new things you have learned. Play games with your children that involve learning (for example, number and word games, board games, and even computer games). Be excited about learning new things. Excitement is contagious!

**The importance of school attendance.** Help your child develop and maintain good attendance habits. It is critical that your child not miss school unless it is absolutely necessary. Children who miss a lot of school tend to have lower test scores. Don’t let your child miss school for family activities or trips. Try to schedule doctor and dentist appointments after school hours. Also, make sure your child is at school, or at the bus stop, on time every day. By stressing the importance of regular attendance and being on time, you are teaching your children a life lesson that will carry over to adulthood.

**Closely monitor your children's progress in school.** Keep track of your children's grades and school work. Try to identify potential problem areas early. Discuss concerns with the teacher and develop a plan to address problem areas. Communicate with teachers on a regular basis to check on progress in these areas.

**Use parent-teacher conferences to get information about testing.** Make a list of questions to ask the teacher such as: How can I best support my child's learning at home? When will achievement/benchmark testing be conducted? What is the content and format of the tests? What are you and the school doing to prepare students for these tests? What can I do to help prepare my child for the testing?

**Help your children develop good study skills and organizational skills.** Help your children develop a system for keeping track of assignments. Teach them how to plan ahead to allow enough time to complete all assignments and studying. Make the completion of homework and studying a priority in your family (minimize activities that would interfere). Provide your children with a lot of encouragement and positive feedback when they show effort in these areas.

**Help build your children's reading skills.** Reading is a fundamental skill for learning. It is also a critical skill for test taking. No matter what the subject is, children must be able to read and understand the questions. When children can read well they are better prepared for tests. There are many things you can do as a parent to build your children's reading skills. Here are a few suggestions:

- Encourage your children to read every day. Set a good example - let them see you reading every day. Try having DEAR time - Drop Everything And Read!
- Discuss stories that you or your children have read.
- Help your children develop a love of books. Visit the library with your children on a regular basis. Encourage all family members to check out library books.
- It is important to place limits on activities that interfere with your children's reading time. From an early age, limit how much time your children can spend watching television and playing videogames. Consider turning off the television and videogames during the school week.
- Crossword puzzles are a great way to improve literacy skills.
- Help build your children's vocabulary - learn a new word together every day.
- Also help your children develop stronger writing skills. Encourage your child to write letters, thank-you notes, and/or keep a journal.

**Help strengthen your children's math skills.** Encourage your children to use math every day outside of the classroom. Here are some suggestions:

- Have your children help you add prices when shopping or eating out.
- Let them help you measure ingredients when cooking.
- Help your children connect what they are learning in math to everyday life. For example, explain and discuss charts and graphs that you see in newspapers and magazines.
- Play games with your children that involve numbers and math.

**Help strengthen your children's skills in science.** Help your children explore science outside of the classroom. Here are some suggestions:

- Visit nature centers, zoos, and science museums with your children.
- Encourage their participation in science fairs and other activities that focus on science.
- Discuss with your children science related stories you read or hear about in the news.

**Make sure your children get adequate sleep.** Children who don't get enough sleep often have problems learning. This is because areas of the brain closely related to learning are also the areas affected by lack of sleep. Adequate sleep is important not only on the nights before tests, but on a daily basis. Establish a regular bedtime and wake-up time for your children. As a general rule, most children need 9-11 hours of sleep a night.

**Make sure your children have a healthy diet.** Having a nutritious breakfast has been found to help children pay attention and concentrate in school. Try to have your children eat healthy meals every day. A healthy diet includes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products.

**Take advantage of Supplemental Educational Services (SES).** If your children are eligible for SES (free tutoring) enroll them. Your children's school district should let you know if your children are eligible. If they are, make sure you enroll them before the deadline.

**Teach your children test taking tips.** How well children do on standardized tests is determined not only by their knowledge but also by their test taking skills. Emphasize these important test-taking tips with your children:

- Listen carefully to what the teacher says before the test starts.
- Read and follow all directions carefully. Make sure you understand the directions before you start answering questions.
- Read every possible answer – the best answer may be the last one
- Reread, when necessary, the parts of a passage needed to choose the correct answer
- Keep track of time during the test. Don't spend too much time on any one question. Don't waste time on questions you don't know how to answer. Skip those questions and focus on those you can answer. If there is time go back to the other questions.
- After finishing the test, use any remaining time to check your answers.
- Ask if it is okay to guess (i.e., Will points be taken away for wrong answers)
- Make sure to record answers in the correct place on the answer sheet.

**What to do on test day.** Make sure your children get plenty of sleep the night before the test. Feed your children a healthy breakfast. Make certain your children get to school, or the bus stop, on time. Have a positive attitude about the test. Encourage your child's best effort on the test, but don't put too much pressure. Don't make your child anxious. Simply "Do your best work!" is a good parenting message for test day ... or and day!

## Additional Resources

The Center for Effective Parenting / Arkansas State PIRC has numerous handouts on topics related to what parents can do to help their children succeed in school. These handouts are all free of charge and available on our website ([www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)). Available handouts include the following:

- Improving your Child's Learning & Grades
- Creating a Home Environment for Learning
- Helping Young Children Learn to Read: What parents can do
- How to Help your Child Study: Strengthening your child's home study skills
- Your Child and Homework
- Improving your Child's School Organizational Skills
- Increasing your Child's Motivation to Learn
- Effective Parent-Teacher Communication
- Making the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences
- No Child Left Behind: What parents need to know about school accountability, public school choice, and supplemental educational services



*AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting  
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580  
NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

*For additional resources, visit our website:*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**

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