

Project CHOICES

CHILDREN HAVE OPPORTUNITIES IN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS AND SCHOOLS
An LRE Initiative of the Illinois State Board of Education which includes the CHOICES/Early CHOICES Grants

Preparing Students for Testing

By: Kaycee Lindeman
Special Education teacher at
Alessandro Volta Elementary

No one likes to see the confidence of a student suffer when it comes time to take a standardized test, but according to the current laws almost all our students are going to sit in front of the ISAT this March. The best thing we can do is provide them with some skills and strategies to help them at this time. Preparing for the test should be a natural, integrated part of teaching. Since our goal with all students is to increase independence, it can be helpful to keep in mind the following sequence for providing students with support: "I do, we do, you do."

The first part of teaching any new skill should include a lot of modeling by the teacher. Think-alouds are perhaps the easiest and most effective way to demonstrate a process to the group. For example, you might compose an extended response using an overhead projector and requiring students to simply copy your words. Rephrasing the question, looking back in the text, and forming paragraphs are modeled for students. After providing a few examples, ask the class to contribute. During the "we do" part of the lesson, the teacher acts as a facilitator leading a discussion or asking guiding questions to help students produce the desired product. When students are able to respond with less support, it's time to start giving them some independent work. This should be done cautiously, and there needs to be frequent reviews and checks for understanding. Remember that it takes a lot of repetition for students to acquire a skill.

Another way to help students is to teach them that in a multiple-choice test, there are often answers that are "throw-aways" or obviously incorrect answers. By eliminating answers that aren't related to the text, the student has a better chance of selecting the correct response, even if they resort to guessing. Encourage students to find the best answer, but explain that making a best guess is absolutely acceptable, especially if they can narrow it down to two possibilities.

Use of time is another concern during the test. Many students have an accommodation for extended time, but only some use this- and many students will use only a portion of the time allowed because they simply guess every answer without looking at the passages or questions. If a student is easily frustrated, it might help to ask him/her to read each question and look in the text for related words or phrases in order to eliminate some of the choices. The commonly taught strategy of previewing questions before the passage, then re-reading the questions to answer is cumbersome for those students who are reading below level or at a slower rate than their peers. Reading through one time or skimming is more realistic and less daunting. For students who lack comprehension skills more than fluency, this strategy would be acceptable, but it might be more effective to teach students to pause frequently while reading the passage and ask themselves questions. For students on the other side of the spectrum, it might help to talk about metacognition. Point out that we know what we don't know! Some times a student will perseverate on a problem when it may be best to make a guess and continue.

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2008

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Best Practices in Early Childhood Forum

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www.projectchoices.org

Lessening ISAT Anxiety

By: Staci Garvin - North Team Consultant

If you step into many schools across Illinois during the months of January and February, you will very likely sense the frenzy that precedes the Illinois State Achievement Tests (ISAT) that are given in the spring of each year. Many teachers use these months to prepare their students for taking the ISAT tests by reviewing concepts and cramming as much information into their students as possible. Unfortunately, these attempts at preparing students a few weeks prior to the test can create an environment of stress and anxiety for students. Taking the ISAT tests are stressful enough, and as educators we should do our best to lessen the anxiety by helping students feel confident about being good test takers by teaching them skills and strategies through out the school year that will help them be better test takers. The following are some suggestions that were successful with my fifth grade students in lessening their anxiety about taking the ISAT tests:

- Test preparation begins on the first day of school, not a few weeks before the tests. This does not mean that we begin talking about the ISAT tests on the first day of school, but as teachers we incorporate test taking skills and strategies into our curriculum. If this is not part of your designated curriculum, it is easy to incorporate 10-15 minute mini-lessons designed to teach test taking skills into reading or language arts lessons. If students learn and use these skills through out the year, students will have been given skills they can use through out their lives. It also eliminates the stress of having to try to cram all these strategies into students' brains a few weeks prior to testing.
- To lessen anxiety about taking timed tests, students need to practice them just like a basketball player practices free-throw shots. When taking ISAT tests, students must complete extended responses and write essays in a given amount of time. Give students timed writing and reading tests a couple of times a month starting at the beginning of the year. Set these tests up as practice and begin by modeling how a good test taker approaches these kinds of tests. Use the same language for directions as the ISAT does so that students become familiar with testing language (you can find examples of previous ISAT tests at www.isbe.net/assessment/html/sample_books.htm). Students will be required to take tests with time limits through out their academic careers. By giving them time to practice this skill, we are helping prepare them for future test taking situations as well.
- So that students know what is expected of them on the ISAT tests, show students examples of previously scored ISAT tests so that students understand how the tests are scored. My students enjoyed trying to guess what score the example essay had received before I showed them the given score. This activity helps students understand the scoring process and what test assessors will be looking for in student answers.
- After students complete a practice test, have students assess their own work using the scoring rubrics that they will be assessed with on the ISAT tests (these can be found at the same web address as above). After students assess their own responses, you can provide your own feedback to them about their responses. Students' confidence will increase about their ability to take a standardized test if they see that these practice sessions help them learn strategies for being a good test taker.

The more that we can take the mystery out of standardized tests, the less anxious our students will feel about test taking. We also must emphasize to our students that the ISAT tests are merely one component of assessing their academic progress. If we are creating a comprehensive assessment program in our classrooms, students will understand that their success is not indicated by their score on one test but by how well they are progressing in all areas of their development including academic, social, and emotional.

Books 2 Read

*The Case Against
Standardized Testing:
Raising the Scores,
Ruining the Schools*
By Alfie Kohn

*Fair Isn't Always Equal:
Assessing & Grading in the
Differentiated Classroom*
By Rick Wormeli

Check Out These Sites:

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/assessment/studentprogress.htm>
Question and Answer about Best Practices in Assessment

<http://www.grantwiggins.org/resources.lasso>
List of resources about Understanding by Design and Authentic Assessment

http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Assessments/Ideas_and_Rubrics/Rubric_Bank/rubric_bank.html Chicago Public Schools Rubric Bank

<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>
Website where teachers can create rubrics. Free registration!

“Preparing Students for Testing”
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Encourage all students to “think like a test maker” instead of thinking like a “test taker”. When learning new reading skills and strategies, integrate them in this questioning process. Ask students to think of good questions to ask about a piece that assesses the skill they are learning; for example, story elements or character development.

Most importantly, the preparation and practice need to be ongoing. We aren’t just working toward March each year like it’s the finish line. We aren’t able to take a breather after the tests are complete. The skills the students need to get through this assessment are in many ways the skills they need to be successful in other ways.

Bright Ideas

Inside/Outside Circle Review

1. Students line up in two circles, one inside the other.
2. When music is played, the students walk around the circles. The circles move in opposite directions.
3. When the music stops, each student finds a partner (from the other circle). Together the pair discusses “anything they remember about the topic to be tested.”
4. The above procedure is repeated several times, with students reviewing with different partners.
5. Variations:
 - Lengthening the time as the activity progresses allows the review/discussion to become increasingly detailed.
 - The teacher can provide additional structure/guidance by asking specific questions throughout the review.
 - At the end, as a large group, the students can discuss information they were reminded of (but didn’t initially remember) during the Circle Review.

By: Sue Raso - South Team Consultant



Taking a Test is as EASY as 3 ON 3

By: Beatrice Barajas
A Junior at Prosser High School

I-BEFORE

1. Use flash cards to review important facts. Study in small portions for 10-15 minutes everyday. Trying to study it all at once the day before the test doesn’t work.
2. Have someone at home or a friend quiz you in order to check your answers.
3. The day before the test have a good night’s sleep and a good breakfast. Both your body and your brain will be ready.

II- DURING

1. Find a way to relax: maybe counting from 1 to 10 or taking a really deep breath.
2. Be confident! You studied, so you know the material.
3. Look at the test and begin by answering the ones you know and then move on to the others.

III- AFTER

1. Be proud and celebrate your grade. Know that you did your very best
2. Check your mistakes and correct them.
3. Think: What helped during the test, and what can you do to improve for the next time?

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Last Thoughts . . .

Attention for Special Education

By: Deb Fornoff

I was disappointed to see the headline "Special Ed hindering rural schools from making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)" on the front page of the Nov. 4, Peoria Journal Star. A more appropriate headline would have read, "Scores demonstrate need for improved strategies for children receiving special education services in rural schools." Schools that aggressively addressed the problem areas turned them around. It's not an impossible task. This is the point of dissecting the testing information. It allows schools to understand where their strengths and needs are and provides the opportunity to make education work for all students.

No Child Left Behind requires Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all students. That was purposeful. Most students with disabilities are capable of achieving at a similar level as their non-disabled peers with appropriate supports and modifications. There are exceptions and alternate means of assessment for students with more significant disabilities. I don't believe NCLB is the answer to everything. There are certainly many significant things that our schools do and do well that cannot be evaluated with testing. But high academic expectations and accountability are good for all students. Surely we would all agree that our children who receive special education services deserve accountability too.

In these instances, special education is not hindering AYP. Schools are learning that additional or alternate strategies are needed to make education work for their students with disabilities.

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