

TESTING 1-2-3: Your Questions Answered

Last spring, delegates to the TEA RA and members across the state were invited to ask questions about the state's testing program to which they wanted answers.

The questions were presented to Dan Long, Executive Director of the Office of Assessment and Evaluation at the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). The questions were answered by Long and Marcy Tidwell, Associate Director for Assessment Literacy.

All 45 questions submitted and answers can be read below.

1. What is the process for creating test questions/items, and to what degree are Tennessee educators involved?

Creating new test items is a multi-step process:

- a) Vendor consultants write test items based on Tennessee curriculum standards (SPIs). The vendor, Educational Testing Service (ETS), reviews and revises the test items based on Tennessee specifications.
- b) Next, the Tennessee Educator Item Review process takes place. Item Review Committees consist of content and bias review committees. Content Review Committees are comprised of current Tennessee educators (general educators, special educators, ELL educators, etc), while Bias Review Committees are comprised of current Tennessee counselors, administrators and supervisors. During item reviews, groups of Tennessee educators read, discuss and suggest edits for each and every test item, reviewing for content accuracy, curriculum alignment, bias and sensitivity. During this structured process, Item Review Committees can accept an item "as is", accept an item with edits, or reject a test item.
- c) ETS then reviews and revises test items based on input from the Item Review Committees. Tennessee curriculum and instruction specialists, along with assessment specialists, review these items.

d) Accepted items are field tested and field-test item statistics are then evaluated. Items with acceptable statistics are eligible for operational testing.

2. How do teachers get involved in creating and evaluating test questions/items?

Teachers are invited to participate in the Item Review Process based on recommendations from administrators and supervisors.

3. What is the process for reviewing previous year's test items in order to address item validity and curriculum alignment?

Item validity is determined during field testing of items. An in-depth item analysis is completed for each and every field-tested item before it ever becomes operational on a TCAP test. Tennessee teachers determine whether a test item is aligned to the curriculum during the Item Review process. Items that appear on the operational test are reviewed annually.

4. Who is responsible for training proctors and teachers about testing regulations?

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are responsible for training all personnel involved in the testing process on Tennessee's test security law, security guidelines, local policy and test administration procedures. LEA's retain training documentation for system records. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) provides training on test security at the system level twice yearly.

5. Where are the duties of the proctor spelled out?

While the assigned duties of a proctor vary by system, there is a list of suggestions on working with proctors in the Teacher Directions booklet. Proctors serve as additional monitors to help the test administrator assure that testing occurs in a fair and ethical manner.

6. How do we get more proctors?

Proctor procurement practices vary by system. Some systems rely solely on volunteers, while others offer some incentives to qualified proctors. In all cases, early planning and scheduling of proctors is key to uniform test administration.

7. Are test proctors “best practice” or mandatory?

Proctors shall be utilized to the extent possible. Although the use of proctors is not mandated by the state, it is highly advisable as an added measure to assure that testing occurs in a fair and ethical manner.

8. How much time are test proctors given to read the test material before administering the test?

Proctors **should not** read the test material or administer the test. Proctors are intended to serve as additional monitors to help the test administrator assure that testing occurs in a fair and ethical manner. Proctors should not be responsible for administering the test themselves.

9. How does a person become a district-level test coordinator?

This is a system decision and qualifications vary by system. The state is not involved unless a request is received from the LEA.

10. Are building-level test coordinators paid a stipend or supplement?

This is a system/school decision and varies by system/school. The state is not involved in these decisions.

11. Are school counselors required to be building-level test coordinators?

This is a system/school decision and varies by system/school. The state is not involved in these decisions.

12. Who should oversee classes during TCAP testing dates when special education teachers are engaged in one-on-one testing outside of the classroom all day?

This is a system/school decision and varies by system/school. The state is not involved in these decisions.

13. Why can't the test be given during the last three-to-four weeks of the school year?

The final regulations of Public School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services (SES) in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) require districts to notify parents of eligible children of the option to transfer their child to another public school no later than 14 days before the start of the school year. Therefore, all adequate yearly progress (AYP) data must be calculated and reported to systems/schools no later than 14 days before the start of any school year. In order to get all scanning, scoring, statistical analysis and reports completed before this deadline, TDOE must set the window earlier than the last three-to-four weeks of the school year.

TDOE sets a test window for achievement tests, and systems decide which six days within the window they will test.

14. How are the TCAP achievement test valid measures if students are tested two months before school ends?

TCAP assessments are used to sample a student's knowledge of subject-related concepts as specified in the Tennessee curriculum standards and to provide a global estimate of the student's mastery of the material in a particular content area. The test is valid and reliable in that it is aligned to the curriculum standards and measures mastery of those standards, skills and concepts. The test is scheduled to be administered prior to the end of the school year so it can be scored and reported in a timely manner to meet all statutory requirements.

15. Is the Tennessee Department of Education exploring the creation of online versions of the TCAP assessments?

Yes, current contracts in all TCAP assessments have this as an optional methodology for delivering the assessments. This methodology requires that local infrastructures for technology (Internet, wiring, hardware, etc.) meet minimum

requirements. Unfortunately, a significant number of Tennessee schools do not have adequate infrastructure in place to offer this option currently.

16. Is there a way to reduce the amount of time allotted for administering TCAP achievement tests and still maintain valid test results, so we can spend more time on instruction and less on testing?

Each content-specific TCAP test must have enough items to satisfy validity and reliability requirements and must be long enough to adequately measure Tennessee curriculum standards. The length of a test mirrors the number of standards found in that content area in the Tennessee curriculum.

17. What dates and/or times of year do neighboring states administer mandated standardized test under NCLB?

A key component for comparison relates to the start and close of schools. Some states have laws, rules or policies dictating this. Tennessee statute now requires starting school for a traditional-year program no earlier than August 1, unless the local school board establishes another schedule such as a year-round school calendars.

Kentucky provides a two-week window in spring (April 19-30, 2010)

Georgia provides a nine-day window in spring (April 6-May 8, 2009)

18. Who scores the test and how?

TDOE is responsible for receiving, scanning and processing student tests. In doing so, TDOE shortens the time for reporting and saves the state millions of dollars each year by eliminating the cost of vendor scanning and initial scoring. TDOE then sends the results to the vendor who produces score reports that are available for students, parents, systems and schools.

19. In the reading portion of TCAP, how can the time limit be extended?

Extended time is available as a special accommodation for special education students and English-language-learner (ELL) students only. For special education students, extended time limits must be determined by the Individual Education Program (IEP) team or 504 Review Committee.

20. What is the value of differentiated instruction if it isn't measured using differentiated assessment?

Although TDOE does not commonly refer to its varied assessments as “differentiated”, there are options available for students at varying levels of learning ability—e.g., TCAP Alt-PA Portfolio Assessment, Modified Academic Achievement Standards (MAAS) Assessment, Alternative Performance-Based Assessments (EOC), English Linguistically Simplified Assessment (ELSA)—in addition to the regular assessment.

In addition, TDOE has specified numerous testing accommodations within the test administration manuals. Allowable accommodations may be used by any student as needed. Special accommodations may be used by students who are receiving special education services or services under Section 504 and have the need for the accommodations documented in their IEPs or 504 Service Plans. ELL accommodations may be used by students who meet the specified criteria for ELL services.

Test design elements require that all levels and depth of knowledge be tested. Items are designed to differentiate student ability from the lowest to the highest achievement levels.

21. When are TCAP portfolios due?

The binders should have been shipped to Measurement, Inc. by February 10, 2010.

22. Can the TDOE, under NCLB, allow a special education student (a student with specific learning abilities) with an I.Q. of 70 or above to take tests on functioning level rather than age-appropriate level?

No, students must test on grade-level curriculum standards. TDOE does not test out of level. Options available to students with disabilities include TCAP-Alt Portfolio Assessment (alternate curriculum standards), Modified Academic Achievement Standards (MAAS) Assessment and Alternative Performance-Based Assessments.

23. Why was the decision made to pilot the special education TCAP immediately after the general education TCAP? How can this pilot give accurate data for the standardization?

In order to receive the most accurate data on these items, the Modified Academic Achievement Standards (MAAS) Assessment was piloted during the same time of year that these students would normally receive the TCAP test.

24. How are test scores of gifted students taken into account?

It is a system/school level decision on how gifted student scores are utilized. Gifted students are considered general education students for AYP reporting purposes.

25. Is the LEA or the TDOE responsible for training teachers on how to interpret/read Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) data?

It is the LEA's responsibility to provide for training/professional development on the TVAAS. TDOE makes available TVAAS training sessions at no cost to the school or system but requests must come from system/school-level administrators. TDOE Assessment Literacy Training is provided to educators at all levels throughout the state in an effort to provide assistance concerning the appropriate use of TVAAS results for the identification of strengths and opportunities for improvement.

26. Does the state allow all teachers access to the TVAAS Web site?

TDOE strongly recommends that teachers be given access to the TVAAS Web site. However, the final decision rests with the Director of Schools in each system. Currently, a learning module is being developed to show how to navigate and how to interpret the Web site. Go to tvaas.sas.com and click on learning modules for those presently available.

27. How does a teacher get access to the TVAAS student/classroom/district data via the Web site?

This varies by system/school, but usually teachers will be able to obtain access from either their principal or system supervisor IF they are employed in a system that allows teacher access to TVAAS.

What about access to a teacher's specific report/effect data?

In the past, individual teacher reports have been delivered via hardcopy to teachers. TVAAS teacher reports will be delivered via the Internet in 2010. To ensure the confidentiality of all teachers is protected, each individual teacher will receive a unique school user account registered to his/her e-mail address. To access the account, the teacher will need to supply a user name, password and his/her unique Tennessee teacher identification number.

28. There are students in my class who are pulled out for Title I intervention programs. The schedule is packed so full that there is no time to make up for the lost instruction. However, these students are still assessed on these subjects on TCAP and my performance as an educator is still judged by these scores. Is there any way to improve this issue?

Scheduling for pull-out programs during the school day is an area of concern for many Tennessee educators. Since Title I programs are handled differently across the state, there is not one easy solution for dealing with this issue. LEAs have access to TDOE federal programs consultants that may provide best practices for scheduling of students. Also, teacher-effect student-teacher linkages allow teachers to share the responsibility for students by percentage of time they spend with other educators.

29. Why do we test students who speak no or very little English?

All students are expected to achieve the same high standards. The Tennessee's English Language Learners (ELL) testing policy states: "The purpose for including our student population of English Language Learners in our Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program is to help ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging state academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet." NCLB requires "all" students to be assessed by states.

30. Who creates and monitors the rules/policies impacting the testing of ELL students in Tennessee?

There are federal mandates surrounding the testing of ELL students. TDOE's Office of Assessment and the Federal Programs Title III office work together in carrying out the process of testing ELL students.

31. What will happen to special-needs students in regard to receiving diplomas with the implementation of the new end-of-course exams?

If the student (entering high school in 2009-10 and thereafter) passes the course, the student will receive the credit needed for graduation.

32. Are LEAs required to take the entire time allotment for special education students, even when the students have clearly finished? (This year, we were required to make them sit for the complete allotment of extended time even though they were all finished. The TCAP administrator's manual and teacher directions clearly state that when every student is finished, the subtest may be ended and you may move on to the next subtest.)

The IEP may state "extended time" without a specific time period assigned. The procedure outlined in the test administration manual allows teachers to stop test administration when appropriate.

33. Are students required by the state to take the ACT?

Public Chapter No. 273 states: As a strategy for assessing student readiness to enter and succeed in postsecondary training, every public school student shall take a series of three (3) examinations, one (1) administered at grade eight (8), one (1) administered at grade ten (10), and one (1) at grade eleven (11). These assessments shall be approved by the Commissioner of Education and provide educators with diagnostic information to assist in developing interventions for the purpose of increasing high school graduation rates and improving student preparation for postsecondary achievement. Each year, the results of such examinations shall be analyzed and reported by the Commissioner of Education to the Select Oversight Committee on Education.

The assessments approved for this purpose are ACT or College Board Products:

- ACT – EPAS (ACT for 11th Grade, PLAN for 10th Grade, Explore for 8th Grade)
- College Board (SAT for 11th Grade, PSAT for 8th and 10th Grade).

Additionally, LEAs are required to choose the same products for the 8th and 10th grade assessments.

While all systems in the state have chosen the ACT family of products, the state does not endorse a particular product. TDOE supports the use of ACT or College several nationally recognized frameworks, including ACT and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

34. Does the state incur a cost for administering the ACT to high school students?

Funds are appropriated to each system's BEP funds for participation in the ACT or SAT for each student. Additional costs related to administration services are absorbed by the TDOE's Office of Assessment.

35. What research and resources does the state use to address the racial, ethnic and income biases with which parents confront teachers regarding ACT results?

There are many assertions related to racial, ethnic, gender and income biases and test taking. Numerous research studies are available which can be found at www.act.org.

36. Are teachers/schools held responsible for the TCAP scores of students who transfer in from private and home schools (e.g., on the 11th grade writing, Algebra I, etc)?

According to Tennessee's Accountability Plan, public schools are held accountable for any student who enrolls during the first reporting period regardless of where they were previous to the enrollment. In other words, for a student to be included in AYP data for a school, they must have enrolled sometime within the first 20 days of school and must have maintained continuous enrollment.

The rules are different concerning Teacher Effect. A student's anticipated enrollment/attendance/availability for instruction must be at least 150 days (traditional schedule) and 75 days (modified schedule) for that student's record to be fully attributed to a specific teacher for teacher effect.

37. I have witnessed students filling in answer sheets without reading the questions. I was told this was not an irregularity and was held responsible for the student's test result. What should teachers/administrators do when a student does not read the test materials and just marks anything on the answer sheet?

Motivating students to try and do well on standardized tests is a challenge that all teachers, schools and districts face. While it is a school-level decision on how to handle each particular situation, it is a good idea to identify students early who might exhibit this type of behavior and develop a plan that will best fit the needs of that student. Certain allowable accommodations (or special accommodations for students with disabilities) are available for students who may perform better in a separate testing setting or during specific periods of the day.

38. If a teacher is reading the TCAP to a group of students who are tested orally and sees what he/she believes is an error on the test, what should this teacher do?

The teacher should report the perceived error to the Building Test Coordinator. The Building Test Coordinator will report to the System Test Coordinator who then will report to the state.

Will the teacher be penalized for having knowledge of the test?

No. If a teacher is required to read the test orally as a specific test accommodation, then that teacher must have access to the test items. Even so, discussion of test content with students, parents or other teachers is strictly prohibited to protect the validity of the test.

39. Why is the TCAP 11th grade writing assessment not given twice a year (once per semester)?

The TCAP Writing Assessment is a benchmark test that is given only once in fifth, eighth and eleventh grade. It is not course specific and is not designed to measure how a student performed in one course, but measures cumulative writing progress throughout a student's academic career.

40. Why are the results from the 11th grade writing assessments not returned to teachers and students earlier so that the data can be used to improve student writing? (Students are given scores with final grade cards and teachers never know what writing strengths or weaknesses have been identified.)

The TCAP Writing Assessment uses a holistic scoring process which requires hand scoring by two readers. While results are reported to the school system as soon as the scoring process is complete, this “hand” scoring requires intensive training for readers and many checks on the reliability of scoring. These scores are returned by the end of the year and certainly may be used the next year to assist with continued writing improvement.

41. Do students who are chronically absent count toward teacher and school value-added scores?

All students who test in the school are included in the school effect reports found on the TVAAS Web site. For teacher effect, there are rules surrounding availability for instruction. Teachers must claim students who were available for instruction by being in attendance and enrolled for the appropriate number of days in that school and for that subject for that academic year.

42. If a seventh grader is socially promoted at the end of the first semester to eighth grade because he/she turns 15, how does that student’s test score impact the teacher and school?

If the child tests as an eighth grade student, was enrolled sometime within the first 20 days of school, and maintained continuous enrollment, he/she will count toward eighth grade AYP data. The student will also be included in the school effect reports for eighth grade found on the TVAAS Web site.

For teacher effect, the student’s anticipated enrollment/attendance/availability for instruction must be at least 150 days for that student’s record to be fully attributed to a specific teacher. If the student’s anticipated enrollment/attendance/availability for instruction is ≥ 75 days up to 149 days, that student’s record will be partially attributed to a specific teacher. Any student with anticipated enrollment/attendance/availability for instruction of less than 75 days may be excluded from Teacher Effect.

43. In a small LEA, why are scores made public when there is only one teacher in that grade or subject?

The value-added scores made public on the report card or TVAAS public site are considered school-effect data rather than teacher effect regardless of how many teachers are in a school/grade/subject. The calculations for reporting school effect are different than the calculations used to report teacher effect. Additionally the populations of students included in the two calculations are different: school effect includes all students; teacher effect excludes special education students and students who may not have had the required enrollment/attendance/availability for instruction. Therefore, the gains that will show up on the TVAAS reports for a subject and grade may be very different from the gains that show up on a teacher-effect report even if there is only one teacher in that grade and subject.

Also, the district report card reports achievement and uses a minimum number of students, not teachers, for reporting data.

44. Do students who pass a Gateway Exam, but fail the associated course, have to retake that Gateway exam as their final exam when retaking the course?

If a student has already passed the Gateway exam but failed the course, then that student will be required to retake the course and will also be required to again take the end-of-course (EOC) examination associated with that course because the exam grade must be included as part of the course grade.

45. Is training/orientation available to parents on the numerous assessments and the parameters of each assessment that a student will experience while in Tennessee public schools?

It is the responsibility of each LEA to provide parents with information, training or orientation about Tennessee assessments. The delivery of this information varies by system/school. TDOE provides resources to help schools/districts disseminate assessment information to parents. Many of the resources available to systems/schools can be found on the Office of Assessment Web site at <http://www.state.tn.us/education/assessment/>. Parent brochures are provided on an annual basis with individual student reports.