

# Understanding School Testing and Test Scores

*School Evaluation Data Analytics for Parents*



SOUTH DAKOTA  
**ParentConnection**

*Resources for families of children with disabilities.*

# Introduction



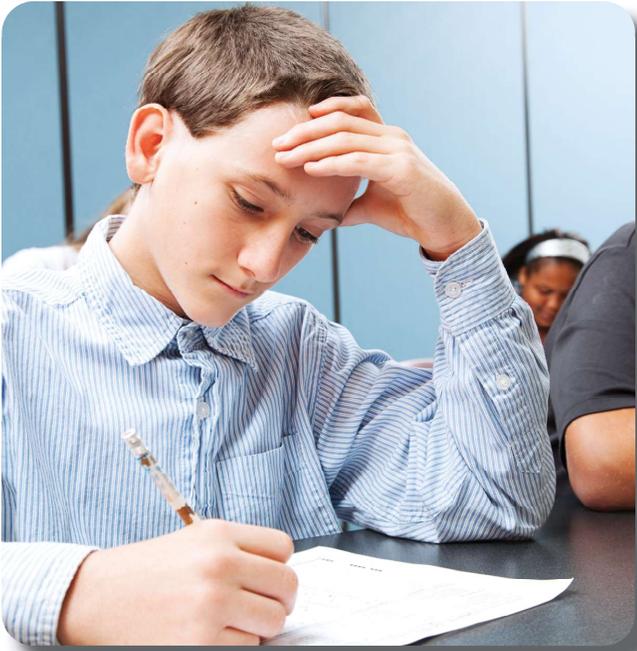
According to the Data Quality Campaign (the nation’s leading voice on education data), states have made remarkable progress in making sure that useful data is collected about student performance and progress on key indicators of school/learning success.

## What Families Say . . .

90% of families say they need to understand the data that schools are reporting about their child such as grades and test scores so they know how their student is progressing and how they can help them do their best.

93% of families support teachers using data such as grades, attendance, and test scores to ensure that their student is getting the support and enrichment they need.

\*Source: Online survey conducted within the US by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign: May 1-6, 2019, among 1013 families with at least one child age 5-17 who attends school.



When students, families, educators, and policy makers have an understanding of the same information, students excel! A picture may be worth a thousand words, but in education, information speaks volumes. Understanding data helps everyone know what students know, what they should know and what can be done to meet their academic needs. With appropriate information, educators can make informed decisions that positively affect student outcomes. As equal partners in decision making, it is important that families understand this information also.

# What are Common Types of Tests for All Students?

- Classroom teachers assess students to monitor their understanding of what is being taught, evaluate learning style, skill growth, and academic achievement.
- The state of South Dakota requires assessments at specific times to determine if students have mastered skills they should know at specific grade levels.
- Students who receive supports and services through Special Education take part in very specific assessments to determine strengths, needs, and whether the student is eligible for or continues to be eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

This guide will help define assessments that are commonly used for each of the purposes described above.

Because this information can be confusing, the following information is a review of specific terms that you may hear in regards to the type of assessments that are given.



**Criterion-Referenced Tests:** Provide information on how the individual performed on some standard or objective (without considering the performance of others).

They may include multiple choice questions, true-false questions, open ended questions, or a combination of question types. For example, a classroom spelling test or math multiplication facts test are examples of criterion-referenced tests. The scores are based on percentages and as an example, a student who gets 8 out of 10 answers correct will receive 80%.

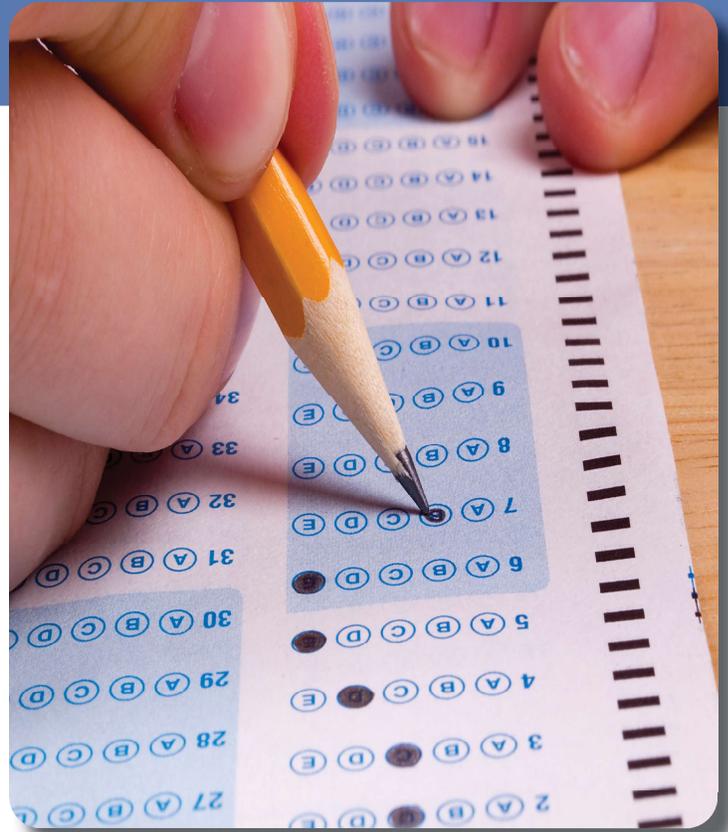
One of the most widely used and best examples of the criterion-referenced test is the **Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM)**. The curriculum based measurement is a method teachers use to find out how students are progressing in basic academic areas such as math, reading, writing, and spelling. This testing is tied directly to the type of curriculum that is being used in the classroom. Teachers who implement CBM will briefly test students, usually once or twice a week, based on academic content from their school curriculum.

**Standardized Tests:** Standardized tests are tests that are administered in a consistent or standard manner with the same questions, administration, and scoring procedures for all the test takers.

**Norm-Referenced Tests:** These tests compare an individual child's performance to that of their classmates or some other larger group. Most norm-referenced tests are standardized.

**Some examples of Norm-Referenced/Standardized tests include:**

- Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-4) administered by a school psychologist
- Woodcock Johnson IV-often used in determining if a student qualifies for special education and given by a special education teacher
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called "[The Nation's Report Card Smarter Assessment](#)" is administered by the regular classroom teacher
- SAT/ACT-High School students often required as part of college entry and are administered at testing sites



For more information on State of South Dakota required assessments: <https://doe.sd.gov/Assessment/>

For more information on Creating a Computer Adaptive Test: <http://bit.ly/3IYf4eQ>



# Questions to Ask Regarding State Standardized Tests

- What are the different tests my child will take this school year, and what is the purpose of each test?
- Do you use tests that measure my child’s academic growth as well as grade-level proficiency? Which tests do you use?
- How are my child’s test results used to help him or her learn? Are they used to help my child set his or her learning goals?
- Is my child comfortable taking tests? If not, what can we do to reduce his or her anxiety?
- What is the testing schedule? When will I find out tests are being given? When will my child’s test results be available?

To learn more go to: <http://bit.ly/3QMxdxQ>

## SD-STARS: Student Teacher Accountability Reporting System

The goal for SD-STARS is to securely consolidate and link all educational data that currently resides within the South Dakota Department of Education. In other words, it pulls data that is already available from different sources (ex: Infinite Campus, assessments), places the data into a centralized system, and links data together.

Through the SD-STARS, student outcomes are measured so educators can identify at-risk students, examine achievement gaps, evaluate programs, recognize strengths, and address areas for improvement.

Educators will have the ability to access and use high quality data to aid in informing instruction and decision-making. SD-STARS increases data availability for schools and districts so administrators can make informed, data-driven decisions.

Administrators have the data to answer questions like, “Which students are at risk for dropping out?” or “Did this program or teacher impact student success?” In addition, SD-STARS eases reporting requirements for districts.



*For more information on SD-STARS:*

<https://doe.sd.gov/sdstars/>



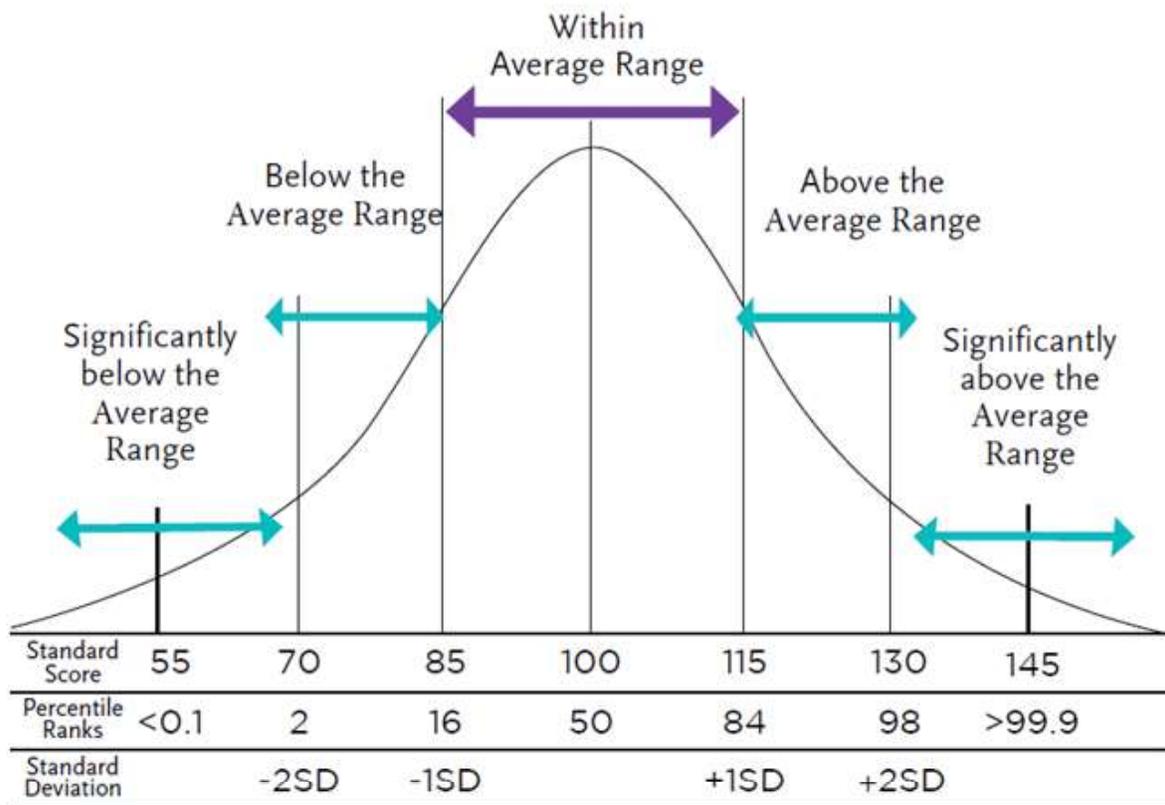
# How do I Interpret What My Child's Test Scores Mean?

You can advocate for your child by understanding the test scores on tests and assessments. These test scores provide information about your child's abilities, academic achievement, and functional performance.

A student's performance may be reported through a variety of scales such as a percentile, percentage, standard score, etc. Often the best way to understand these

Familiarizing yourself with the bell curve below can help you understand and discuss your child's performance with others. The bell curve shows how student achievement on tests fall in a range from below average, to average, and above average.

Bell Curve Graph



## Standard Scores

- Standard Scores tell us how close to "average" a score is
- An Average (or Mean) score for most tests is 100
- Scores between 85 and 115 are considered to be in the average range
- Each Standard Deviation is 15 Points from the Mean

## Percentile Rank

- The Percentile Rank tells us how many children scored the same or lower than the child tested
- The average percentile is 50
- Scores between the 16th and 84th
- Percentiles are considered to be the average range

# Receiving Evaluation Results May Lead to Questions

Good questions to ask the evaluation team include...

## **What does “average” mean?**

The average range when using standardized tests typically falls between 85-115, as indicated by the purple arrow on the bell graph. The majority of students fall within this range. Scores below an 85 would be considered below average.

## **As an example, what does a score of 70 mean on the test? (Or you can ask about a specific score your child achieved.)**

When you refer back to the bell graph, a 70 falls in the range of the blue arrow. A standard score (SS) of 70 means that your child is falling in the significantly below average range. A SS between 55 and 69 shows that the student is scoring in the markedly below average range and is an area of extreme deficit.

## **What does my child’s score mean?**

Sometimes schools will report scores by standard deviation. When looking at the bell graph, you can see where a standard score falls in the range of averages.

## **My child has a diagnosis from a doctor. Doesn’t this qualify them for service?**

A diagnosis from a doctor alone does NOT make a child eligible for special education services. The IEP team from your child’s school, including you, as the family, will determine if your child is eligible through comprehensive evaluation that determines whether your child’s disabilities give rise to educational needs.

## **If my child is “below average”, why don’t they qualify for services? Isn’t this a delay?**

Your child may be in the below average range, but to qualify for special education services, the scores need to be in the significantly below average range. There are qualifications for eligibility for each disability category. For better clarification of your child’s specific situation, ask your school to better explain this during your child’s eligibility team meeting.

## **For more information on qualifying for special education:**

- [“What Parents Should Know...About Special Education in South Dakota”](#)
- [“What Parents Should Know...About Evaluation and Reevaluation](#)



## **Did You Know?**

The vast majority of people in the US have I.Q.'s between 80 and 120, with an I.Q. of 100 considered average. To be diagnosed as having a cognitive disability, a person must have an I.Q. of 70 or below, or significantly below average.

# Examples of Children Who Qualify for Special Education Services

## Case 1

Bobby is a 3 year 7-month-old who has been evaluated for early childhood special education services. A child between 3 and 7 years old or up to turning 8 is tested in the developmental areas of: cognition, motor, language (expressive and receptive), adaptive, and social-emotional skills.

In order to qualify, a child of this age must get a standard score of -1.5 in two developmental areas of development, or a -2 standard score in one area. Bobby received a -1.5 in cognition and a -1.87 in personal- social skills. Because he had two scores of a -1.5 or greater, Bobby qualifies for special education in the areas of cognition and personal-social-social skills.

## Case 3

Samuel is a 6-year-old who was reevaluated upon turning 6 years old. His evaluation results show a significant below-average score because he had scores that were two standard deviations below the mean. Because these scores are significantly below average, as you can see on the bell curve, Samuel will qualify for special education services with a cognitive disability.

## Case 2

Susan is in second grade and had been evaluated due to a referral for basic reading skills and reading comprehension.

General Intellectual Ability Assessment Measure- Overall Composite Score: 84

Achievement Measure in Basic Reading Skills: 69

On the ability or (IQ) test given by the psychologist, Susan was given an overall score of 84. If you look at the bell curve graph again, you will see that a standard score of 84 falls in the average range of ability. Susan was also given some achievement tests, including in the area of Reading.

Her Reading score was determined to be a 69. Because there is a discrepancy between what her ability is (84), and her achievement in Reading (69), Susan qualifies as having a Learning Disability in Reading.

More information on preparing for an education evaluation meeting and understanding test scores:

- ["What to expect at an IEP eligibility determination meeting"](#)
- ["Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Meeting Checklist for Parents"](#)

# What Does it Mean if the School Tells Me My Child May Need to Take the Alternative Assessment Rather Than the Statewide Test Other Students are Taking?

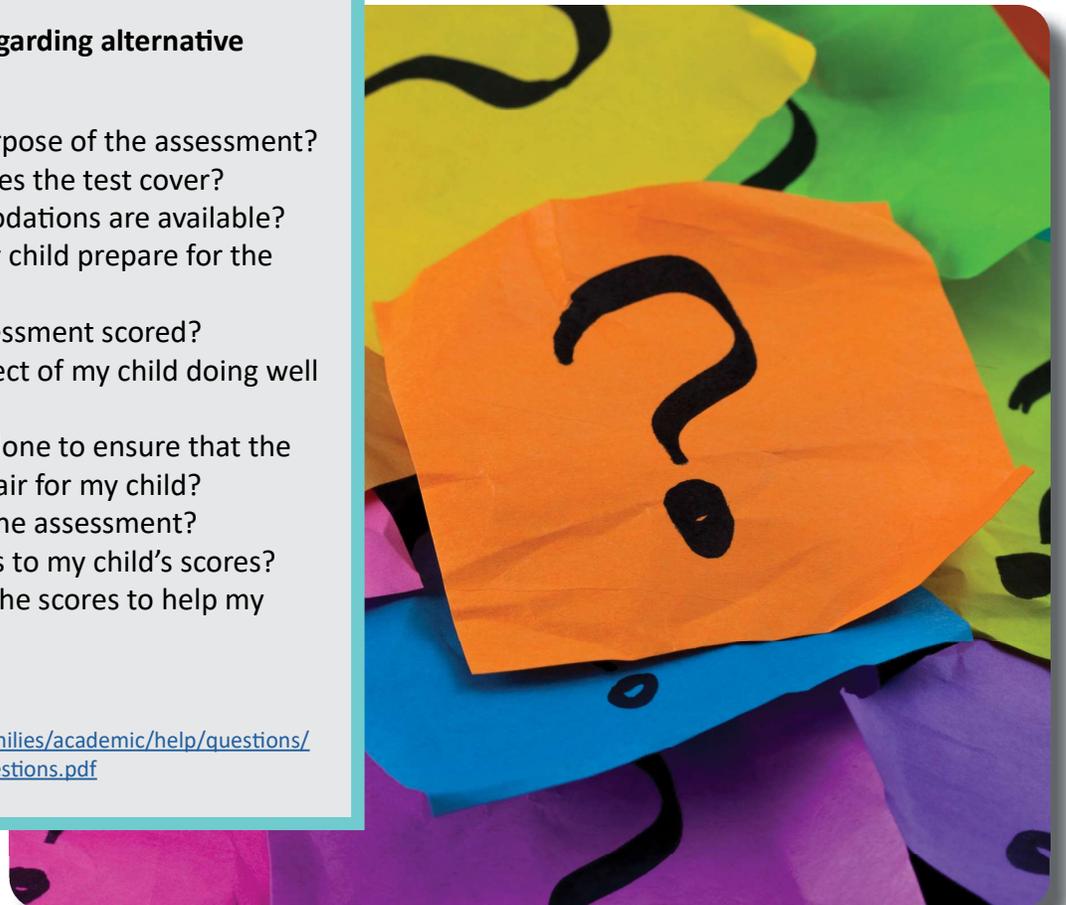
An alternative assessment is available for students who have significant cognitive disabilities. This is a term given to a small number of students with disabilities. In order for them to participate in the state alternative assessment program, they must meet three criteria:

1. The student has a disability, or disabilities that significantly impacts cognitive function and adaptive behavior.
2. The student's instruction is aligned to the South Dakota Content Standards but is adapted to reflect the knowledge and skills in the Core Content Connectors.
3. The student is unable to apply academic, life, and job skills in home, and community without intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction and supports in multiple settings. (Alternate Assessment, SD Department of Education)

## Questions to ask regarding alternative assessment:

- What is the purpose of the assessment?
- What topics does the test cover?
- What accommodations are available?
- How should my child prepare for the assessment?
- How is the assessment scored?
- What is the effect of my child doing well or poorly?
- What is being done to ensure that the assessment is fair for my child?
- Can I preview the assessment?
- Who has access to my child's scores?
- How can I use the scores to help my child?

<https://www2.ed.gov/families/academic/help/questions/questions.pdf>



# Glossary of Terms Used in Assessments and Evaluations

## **Assessment/Evaluation**

The process of gathering information and identifying a student's strengths and needs; data is used in making decisions regarding a student's eligibility for special education and IEP needs.

## **Consent**

Permission from the parent/student (eighteen years or older) required by law for individualized assessment and/or implementation of an IEP for the provision of special education services.

## **Assessment Plan (Prior Notice)**

A written description of the assessments that will be used to evaluate a student's strengths, weaknesses and progress and to determine his or her eligibility for special education services and the types of services that would help that student succeed.

## **Cognitive Skills**

The act or process of knowing; analytical or logical thinking.

## **Alternate Assessment (AA)**

The alternate assessment is designed for students with disabilities who cannot participate in the state standardized testing and reporting system. It is a means of including students with the most severe disabilities in the State's assessment and accountability program.

## **Multidisciplinary**

A group of professionals from different disciplines who function as a team but perform their roles independent of one another.

## **Referral**

The process of requesting an evaluation for a student who is suspected of having a disability to determine eligibility for special education and/or related services.

## **Special Education**

Specifically designed instruction, at no cost to families, to meet the individual needs of a child with a disability.

## **School Psychologist**

A professional trained to give psychological tests, interpret results, provide counseling, and suggest appropriate educational approaches to learning or behavioral problems.

## **Intelligence Quotient (IQ) or Ability Score**

One of the measures used to determine eligibility for special education services reflects a student's overall ability to engage in and use what is learned toward forming future knowledge.

# Who to Talk to if You Have More Questions



South Dakota Parent Connection provides assistance to families of children with disabilities and special health care needs and the professionals who support them.

Contact us for individual assistance, educational workshops, referrals to community resources, or need help navigating the special education process.

**Sioux Falls**  
**3701 W 49th Street, Suite 102**  
**Sioux Falls, SD 57106**  
**(800) 640-4553**  
[sdpc@sdparent.org](mailto:sdpc@sdparent.org)

With Offices Also In  
Aberdeen & Rapid City



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