
Commonly asked questions?

What are standards?

Nebraska educators were involved in the creation of Standards that reflect the expectations of learning that should be taking place in classrooms.

What are assessments?

A variety of locally written methods used to gather information to compare the level of learning, by the student, in relationship to the expectations of the Standard.

Who takes the assessments?

Assessments measure progress at 3rd through 8th, and 11th grades. Homer assesses at other grades to provide information to further guide instruction.

What happens to the results?

- ◆ Students receive feedback
- ◆ Parents receive classroom report
- ◆ Nebraska Department of Education receives a report
- ◆ Report Yearly Average Progress (AYP) for No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The mission of the Homer Community School is to provide quality education and guidance so that students will have opportunities and options in life.

BELIEF STATEMENTS:

- *We believe all students can learn and be successful.*
- *We believe education, in academics and activities, is the number one goal of students, staff, parents, and community*
- *We believe students, staff, parents, and community will be treated with respect.*
- *We believe that school is a safe and comfortable environment.*



HOMER COMMUNITY SCHOOL

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Homer District Quality Assessment System

Homer Community School



What does this all mean?

2007-2008 School Year
Assessment Brochure

The **State Standards** provide teachers the foundation on which to base their **local curriculum**. Kindergarten through 6th grade Teachers, along with Secondary Teachers **provide instruction** to students that give students **opportunities to learn**. Locally written **Assessments** are used to monitor student progress.



List of state standards can be found at: www.nde.state.ne.us
Select the A-Z Topic List.
Select "S" letter, then search for Standards.

What is my role in the education of children?

Homer Community School Academic Program assesses what we value and we value what we assess.

The challenge of educating students continues to change.

In order to provide Opportunities and support students as they meet Challenges, in and out of school, the education of each child is a **partnership** between students, parents, teachers and the community.

Homer Community School appreciates the support provided to our students and staff.

Our Language Arts and Mathematics Portfolio's have been reviewed by the State Department in the last year.

The state publishes a statewide report card to inform Nebraskans about the standards and assessment process. Each school system also summarizes their data. Both state and local data is available for viewing at: <http://homerweb.org>.

Your Child's classroom teacher has identified when each standard is addressed and tested. During the 2007-2008 school year participating teachers are to provide each parent a report indicating how your child has performed on the local assessments.



STATE ASSESSMENTS, NATIONAL TESTS: HOW THEY ARE DIFFERENT, WHAT THEY TELL US

By Doug Christensen, Commissioner of Education
December 15, 2006

News about how well our Nebraska students are learning — those in your hometown and across the state — may have you confused and questioning what student scores really mean and why some are so different from others.

In the last few months you may have read or heard about Nebraska student scores on the ACT exam, the National Assessment for Educational Progress, the Adequate Yearly Progress results, standardized test scores and the state assessments for reading, writing and mathematics.

What do all these test scores mean? Why are they so different? Are students really learning? Can these scores be trusted? What exactly is the difference between one test and another? And, can I compare my school with other schools?

Those are questions I hear frequently.

The bottom line is: All this data and information from various assessments is important. It can help us improve the education of our students but only if we know what we're looking at, why it is important and how to use it properly.

Otherwise, it is not only confusing, but we could use it for the wrong reasons.

This two-part series will explain the role and information provided by each of these national tests and how the state assessment system bridges a gap in the information we have about student learning in Nebraska.

Let's start with the national exams and tests.

ACT

Nebraska's high school seniors last year had an average score of 21.9 on their ACT college entrance exam, better than the 21.1 average score of their peers across the country. The purpose of the ACT — a paper/pencil, multiple choice exam — is to determine how much content our students know as they enter college. Colleges use the scores to determine whether students should take remedial courses before they enroll in the regular college level courses. While the ACT scores are valuable for that, they don't help public school teachers address the needs of an individual student since students have or are about to graduate. But then that wasn't the purpose. The ACT scores are "blunt instruments" and a score does tell us where the students needs help or in what ways schools could do better. Just a side note, Nebraska students are well prepared. Seventy-six percent of our high school seniors took the ACT last year and, of the states with 70 percent or more taking the test, Nebraska ranked -first in the nation.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Then there are the standardized tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the Metropolitan Achievement Test. Every public school in Nebraska is required to give one each year. Standardized tests compare students to their peers. Last year, the results showed 67 percent to 61 percent scored better than their peers nationally in reading and 70 percent to 63 percent were above the national average in mathematics. While these tests are effective for comparisons, they don't help public school teachers address the needs of an individual student since teachers typically don't see the scores of the tests students take in the spring until after students have left school for the summer. The information is not timely. Commercial test makers write these paper/pencil tests so half the students score above the midpoint and the other half below it. These test results may or may not help schools determine whether and how to improve instruction and curriculum for the coming year.

NAEP

Another national, general knowledge, paper/pencil test, is the National Assessment of Educational Progress. School districts typically don't like to participate in the NAEP since only a small sampling of the state's students take the test, and no one student takes the entire test. This information isn't useful to teachers or to schools, yet it takes students out of the classroom to participate in it. The NAEP scores are used at the national level to make judgments about education. While that is a laudable goal, some educators argue that those judgments are flawed because of the test itself. Recent research supported by the Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University, in summary said NAEP had fatal flaws, its definition of proficiency was arbitrary and the accountability system was open to continued political manipulation. The truth is that the accuracy and validity of test scores diminish as the distance between the classroom and the assessment increases.

While all of these tests and exams tell us something, teachers are left with a huge gap in knowing how well our students overall are learning and in knowing how individual students are or are not learning.

STATE ASSESSMENTS, READING AND MATH

Our state assessments are intended to fill that gap by giving classroom teachers *timely* information so they can help students learn at a higher level. Please emphasize *timely*. As you will note, the student scores from national tests are rarely helpful to the classroom teacher or students.

In the second and final part of this series, we will look closely at how the state system bridges this gap, the difference between a test and an assessment and why that is important as well as how you can compare school districts and even school buildings in your backyard to those across the state.

PART II

Student test scores in Nebraska and those for students in every other state can be confusing and misleading. Key to using these scores effectively and appropriately is an understanding of the tests themselves. The first part of this two-part series focused on national, general knowledge, pen and pencil tests such as the ACT, standardized tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. All of these tests tell us something about student learning in Nebraska but the information typically is not timely or helpful to classroom teachers or their students.

Before we focus on how the state assessments are different from national exams, let's start here by noting first why educators insist on calling our state system an "assessment" rather than "test" or "exam." Simply put, a test or exam typically is a pencil/paper test while an assessment means that students may have demonstrated their knowledge or skill level through a presentation or project rather than, or in addition to, a paper/pencil test. Why is this important? Students learn differently. They also demonstrate what they know differently. You've probably seen that in your own family. Assessing rather than testing knowledge and skill levels has become increasingly important in recent years considering the growing number of students from different cultures.

So, how do Nebraska students do on the state assessments that measure whether they meet the state standards? According to the latest results, 86 percent meet or exceed Nebraska's writing standards, 85 percent are proficient in math; and 87 percent meet or exceed our reading standards.

As you can see, Nebraska students score better on the state assessments even though they are more difficult overall than the general knowledge tests.

Why? Because first, they are assessed rather than tested, second their teachers actually teach to the state's reading, writing and mathematics standards and third, the teacher assesses what the student has had an opportunity to learn. The state system also encourages and helps teachers assess learning frequently so teachers know immediately which students did or didn't learn what they taught them the first time.

It is simple, but it is not magic.

An opportunity for students to learn the material and then to demonstrate what they know in a way that is appropriate for them is important. If our students weren't doing better on the state assessments than they were on general knowledge tests such as the ACT, the NAEP and the standardized tests developed by commercial test makers, we would have considerable reason for concern. Fortunately, that is not the case.

Again, the purpose of the state assessments is to bridge a gap in the world of testing by measuring learning in our classrooms where instruction takes place and to give teachers *timely* information about how individual students are doing so they can re-teach a student or students who need it. That way *no child is left behind*.

STATE ASSESSMENT, WRITING

Nebraska's writing assessment is the state's only single statewide assessment. Students at specific grades write on the same topic and their actual writing is graded by teachers other than their own. This tells us not only how well students write in the narrative, persuasive and descriptive styles, but also gives us information about their overall education, since writing well is dependent on the depth of our general knowledge of other subjects. We know we can trust the state assessment results. To prove that, the state system has been studied, analyzed and restudied by experts across the country for years. I'm happy to say it passed. In one study Susan Brookhart of Duquesne University found the quality of the majority of the mathematics assessments used in Nebraska schools were of high quality and had the characteristics required for validity. And the National Council on Measurement in Education focused an entire edition of its publication *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices* on Nebraska's system, stating that it is beneficial by increasing the assessment literacy of teachers, and it has a

positive impact on classroom instruction. For more information, visit this web site: <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/stars/STARSTechnicalReports.htm>.

You also have heard a lot about whether groups of students are making Adequate Yearly Progress under the federal law No Child Left Behind. This is determined by the scores racial and ethnic student groups receive on the state assessments. This is important information that encourages our schools to look at the learning styles and cultural differences, if there are any, and to find whys to help students achieve as high as other students. Nebraska schools have made progress but there is much more work to do in this area, especially, considering the growing number of students with significant learning challenges that come from poverty, special needs, high mobility rates and the difficulty of competing when you are just learning English for the first time in school.

COMPARING YOUR SCHOOL TO OTHERS

Yes, you can compare your school district, and even your neighborhood school building, to any other across Nebraska. All the data is just a click away. Go to <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/> and click on the Report Card on Nebraska Schools 2005-2006 to view student performance on reading, writing and mathematics. And if you drill down on the reports, you can even see the percentage of students who have or do not have the specific skills and knowledge required. Just a word of caution: In fairness, you should compare schools similar to your schools. To make that determination, look at the percentage of students with significant learning challenges. It is all on the electronic report card.

In the end, the individual student scores on classroom assessments are of the greatest value.