

# FairTest

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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

## Achievement Tests for Young Children

During the 1970s and '80s, the pressure for students to attain high test scores on standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests spread to the primary grades. Tests such as the California Achievement Test (made by CTB/McGraw-Hill) or Metropolitan Achievement Test (Psychological Corporation), which are supposed to measure students' skills in specific areas like math or reading, are now given as early as grades 1 and 2.

### Problem

As evaluation tools for young children, achievement tests are not adequate for showing how or what students are learning, the kinds of help they need, or the quality of teaching they receive. Because they fail to measure much more than test-taking ability, they should not be used to make important educational decisions about young children.

There are many reasons for this. Among them are:

- Achievement tests usually do not measure what they are said to measure. For example, a standardized "reading" test may really only test a child's ability to spell or recognize words, rather than actually read;
- The multiple-choice format of these tests allows only one "right" answer per question. But poorly-written, unclear test items have frequently been proven to have more than one "right" answer (or even *no* correct answers). More importantly, this type of simplistic test undermines higher-order-thinking skills we expect our children to develop during their formative years;
- To take the tests, children must sit for long periods of time. This kind of pressure is difficult for young children and can cause them to perform poorly;
- Factors such as whether a child is well-nourished, had a good night's rest, or trusts the person who administers the test can strongly influence test performance;
- To help young children learn, assessment must be a part of the regular classroom program, in which teachers who know the children are the primary assessors. Standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests, however, are developed by large publishing companies which have no connection to local curricula and which are not accountable to local communities;
- Achievement tests tend to be biased in terms of culture, gender, socioeconomic status and language. Often, schools use achievement test scores of children from minority and low income families, or children whose first language is not English, to label and track them into "slow,@, "learning disabled,@ or "remedial" classes, where they fail to make good progress.

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## **Solution**

The use of achievement tests conflicts with "developmentally appropriate" educational practices that promote growth and learning for young children. Some states and districts, recognizing this, have begun to change from relying on these tests to using practices and assessments that provide fuller, more in-depth pictures of children's development. These include:

- teacher and administrator training in developmentally appropriate teaching methods;
- portfolios that contain documentation of student progress over time, e.g., written or art work, notes on teacher observations of students, notes from parent conferences, or lists of the books children read;
- written reports of children's work/development, instead of report cards with number or letter grades;
- ungraded, multi-age classrooms;
- "activity centers" within classrooms focused on reading, art, math, music, etc.

By eliminating the use of standardized tests for evaluating students and using appropriate methods instead, we can significantly improve the quality of education for young children.

## **Resources**

Kamii, Connie, ed. *Achievement Testing in the Early Grades: The Games Grown-Ups Play*. (Washington, DC, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1990)

National Association for the Education of Young Children. ANAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the Primary Grades, Serving 5- through 8- Year-Olds, @ NAEYC, 1134 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009.

National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Department of education. A Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through Ages 8. @ Position statement of NAEYC and NAECS/SDE. *Young Children* (March 1991), pp. 21-38.

National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest). *Standardized Tests and Our Children: A Guide to Testing Reform* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) *Implementing Performance Assessment: A Guide to Classroom, School and System Reform*. (Cambridge, MA 1995).