

The ITBS and TAP Tests

What every CPS Parent needs to know

- Parents, do you believe that either the Iowa (ITBS) or the high school TAP tests alone accurately measure your child's abilities?
- Do you believe that, if your child works hard enough, he or she should be able to "pass" the ITBS or TAP?
- How much do you really know about the ITBS and TAP tests, on which so much of your child's future depends?

This booklet was written especially for Chicago Public School parents by the LSC Summit, a coalition of Chicago parent and school reform groups together with FairTest, a nationally-recognized organization specializing in issues of student testing.

FairTest is at 342 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139;
(617) 864-4810;
email to fairtest@aol.com;
internet website at <http://www.fairtest.org>

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Chicago Association of Local School Councils
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Designs for Change
Lawyers' School Reform Advisory Project
Parents United for Responsible Education
Schools First
Teachers' Task Force

ITBS refers to the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills given to 3rd through 8th grade students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

TAP refers to the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency given to CPS 9th and 11th graders.

The ITBS and TAP tests are published by **Riverside Publishing Company**.

Overemphasis on ITBS and TAP tests may lower the quality of your child's education.

⇒ ITBS/TAP tests do **not** test many important educational areas.

Just as you may be a good driver even if you do not know the way to the airport, children may be good students in reading and math and still choose wrong answers to ITBS/TAP questions. There is a lot more to reading and math than multiple-choice questions— such as those on ITBS/TAP tests— can measure.



Also, ITBS/TAP tests do not test writing, science, social studies, the arts, or other areas of state and district educational standards.

Multiple choice tests cannot test most higher-level thinking skills. They do not test skills students need to get into college or qualify for a job.

These tests cannot determine if a student can write a research paper or a short story, use history as a context for understanding current events, construct tables and charts to show the results of a science experiment or interpret those results, discuss the differences in poetic writing styles, or debate important issues. They don't test problem-solving, decision-making, judgment, social skills, or citizenship.

In other words, **they do little to test your child's ability to function and succeed in their real-world environment.**

⇒ Schools may be forced to “dumb down” education when these tests are overemphasized.

Overemphasis on ITBS/TAP tests encourages schools to “teach to the test,” that is, to spend lots of instructional time having students practice how to answer questions like those on ITBS/TAP tests. Many educators believe that teaching to these tests results in inferior teaching and a weakened curriculum which do not serve our children.

Research shows that students make stronger long-term achievement gains when the emphasis is on improved teaching methods which engage and challenge children and not on multiple-choice or short-answer testing.

But CPS schools are being pressured to narrow the curriculum and spend weeks in test-preparation activities. The CPS summer school bridge functions largely as a test-coaching program.

High-achieving school systems do not narrowly teach to tests like the ITBS or TAP. These schools offer their children a rich, challenging curriculum which prepares them for college and career.

Research shows that teaching practices in high-minority classrooms are affected more by these tests which emphasize low level thinking and knowledge.¹

Much of the work assigned to Chicago students fails to go beyond reproduction of information, such as filling in blanks with vocabulary words.... if students are exposed only to such assignments, it is unlikely they will learn to succeed in the more demanding intellectual challenges posed by the modern workplace and by civic and personal affairs.

From Report Abstract for
*The Quality of Intellectual Work
in Chicago Schools:
A Baseline Report*
Consortium on Chicago School Research,
November 1998

⇒ There are better, more **educationally sound** ways to assess children's learning.



Isn't the road test you take behind the wheel of a car, which is a practical performance test, a better indicator of how well you can drive than any pencil-and-paper exam? Many educators believe that this kind of performance-based test provides much better information about what students know and are able to do than the ITBS/TAP tests by themselves.

There are better ways to assess student learning and school quality.² For example, many CPS teachers are using portfolios — collections of student work— to assess student learning in subjects all across the curriculum.

Effective student assessment can include observation, samples of student work, essays, lab experiments, public presentations and exhibitions, group projects focused on solving real-world problems, and the kinds of quizzes and tests teachers already use.

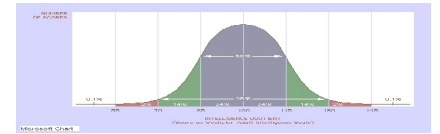
Experts agree that tests such as ITBS and TAP are used properly only when they are used as **one piece of information in a comprehensive system of assessment.**

ITBS and TAP tests have significant limitations.

⇒ ITBS/TAP test scores do not tell you what students know or are able to do; they only tell you how your child compares to other students.

The ITBS/TAP tests are **norm-referenced tests**. This means that they are designed to sort and rank students on a curve (see illustration).

Norm-referenced tests like the ITBS and TAP are not made to measure if students have learned what they have been taught in their school's curriculum. **ITBS/TAP test scores can only tell you how your child compares to a national reference group.**



This is a bell-shaped or “normal” curve. Questions on norm-referenced tests are carefully selected to produce a **score curve** like this, in which only a few students score very high, only a few students score very low, and most students score in the middle. These tests are also designed so that half of the students taking the test will end up below the middle score - which is called the “**average**” - and half will end up above. **This guarantees that half of the students will always score “below average” on such tests.**

⇒ Half the ITBS/TAP test-takers will **always** score below average.

The ITBS and TAP tests **do not have a “passing” grade**. They are not the same as the written test you take to get a driver’s license. On that test, it is possible for everyone to get enough answers right to pass, if they learn the information. But ITBS/TAP tests are made so that one-half of the students in the nation who take them always score below average. On other words, one half of those students will always score below the grade equivalent (GE).³

⇒ ITBS/TAP tests use obscure or tricky questions to sort or rank students.

If the driver's test were used to sort or rank people, it would have to include some questions not everyone would get right. It might ask, "How do you get from Union Station to O'Hare Airport?" or "What is the chemical composition of diesel fuel?," facts which are not taught in the standard drivers' education classes and which are not relevant to good driving.



To sort or rank students, ITBS/TAP tests also include some questions which are designed to sort kids out. A close look at these kinds of questions shows that they may have more than one answer which many people would consider correct.⁴

For example:

Choose the word that best completes this sentence — **A sage individual is**
 touchy testy old
 wise

Children often select "old". The test maker says the right answer is "wise".

This kind of question could trip up many students, including those from cultures strongly identifying wisdom with age.

⇒ The **margin of error** of ITBS/TAP test results is too great to use those results alone to make important educational decisions.

Test scores are an estimate, they are not exact. Every test has a margin of error. Different versions of the test, the number of questions on the test, simple mistakes like filling in the wrong bubble, or even a child's mood on a given day can affect his or her score.

This margin of error is one reason that the Riverside Publishing Company tells school districts not to use the ITBS/TAP test scores as a single basis for making decisions like grade retention.⁵ "Single basis" means a situation where a certain test score must be reached or a student will be held back, regardless of other factors. **One wrong answer on these tests can make the difference in whether your child is promoted or retained.**

⇒ The way CPS uses the ITBS/TAP tests to make important decisions about students is a **violation of the rules** for using these tests.

The lead author of the ITBS for Riverside Publishing Company, H.D. Hoover, recently said that “a single test should never be used as the sole basis to make decisions such as promotion and retention.”⁶

CPS signed an agreement with Riverside Publishing Company to use the ITBS and TAP tests. **This agreement states that CPS will not label students based on a single test score.**

Because CPS requires students to reach a certain score on a single test— the ITBS or TAP— to be promoted, CPS has broken their agreement with Riverside and violated professional testing standards.

The ITBS and TAP test manuals state clearly that it is inappropriate to use ITBS results to decide to retain students at a grade level.⁷ Using ITBS/TAP tests to make such high-stakes decisions also violates the measurement profession’s *Standards*.⁸

Experts agree that other information including **teacher and parent input must be considered** when making to such an important decision as retaining a student.

Retention hurts, doesn’t help student achievement

Research has shown repeatedly that grade retention - holding students back for another year in the same grade - does not work and actually harms students. These studies show that after a couple of years, students who were retained do less well than similar students who were not retained. There are few educational practices proven to be as damaging to students as retention.⁹

Retention also hits hardest on low-income and minority children. Ernest House, a noted educational researcher, stated, “Chicago would not have its retention program if its student population were not 89% minority. By contrast, a survey of fifteen Chicago suburban school districts indicated that (they) retained fewer than one percent of their students. It is the inner city with large minority populations where these harmful programs are implemented en masse.”¹⁰

So CPS is using an inadequate measure - the ITBS/TAP - as the basis for carrying out a policy which has been proven to damage children - grade retention.

What is better than retention? Real, long-term improvements in student achievement occur when schools provide supports to children as soon as they begin to fall behind, regularly assess programs for their effectiveness, offer early childhood education, use resources to attract more qualified teachers, lower class size, fund better materials, and provide more high-quality teacher training and support.¹¹

Parents, now that you know more about the ITBS/TAP tests, what can you do?

- ▶ Talk to your child's teacher and your school principal about the information in this pamphlet.
- ▶ Ask your Local School Council to hold a school-wide discussion on the topic of the ITBS or TAP tests and how they are used in the Chicago Public Schools.
- ▶ Call the Mayor and inform him about this issue and how it affects your child.
- ▶ Learn more about this topic by calling any of the sponsoring organizations or using this form.

Office of the Mayor
Richard M. Daley
121 N. LaSalle Street, 5th floor
Chicago, IL 60602
Tel. 312/744-4000

YES! I would like more information about this issue!

Name	Telephone
Address	Zip Code

I am also interested in having a speaker come to our school to talk about this topic.

School

Send this form by **fax:**
or mail to the **LSC Summit**

(Archival material- for more information call or e-mail
PURE at 312-491-9101 or pure@pureparents.org

Notes:

- 1) Madaus, G.C., et al. (1992). *The Influence of Testing on Teaching Math and Science in Grades 4-12*. (SPA8954759). Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy.
- 2) Neill, M., et al. (n.d.). *Implementing Performance Assessments: A Guide to Classroom, School and System Reform*. Cambridge, MA: FairTest.
- 3) FairTest. (n.d.). *Standardized Tests and Our Children*. Cambridge, MA: Author.
- 4) Meier, D. (1981). "Why Reading Tests Don't Test Reading." *Dissent*, Fall.
- 5) Hoover, H.D., A.N. Hieronymous, D.A. Frisbie, S.B. Dunbar. (1996). *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills Interpretive Guide for School Administrators*. Itasca, IL: Riverside Publishing.
- 6) Black, Curtis, (September 3, 1998). "Questions Mount Over CPS's Use of Standardized Tests." *News Tips: A Publication of the Community Media Workshop*, Chicago
- 7) [same as note 5]
- 8) American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education. (1985). *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- 9) Shepard, L.A., and M.L. Smith (eds). (1989). *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*. London: Falmer Press. Owings, W.A., and S. Magliaro. (1998). "Grade Retention: A History of Failure." *Educational Leadership*, September.
- 10) House, E. (1998). "Retention in Chicago." *Presentation to Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed*, November 14.
- 11) Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). "Alternatives to Grade Retention." *The School Administrator*, August (V. 55, N. 7).

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