

The Nitty-Gritty of Testing

Karen Skelton, Annandale

Ah, spring. A time of longer and warmer days just right for gardening, field trips—and testing or evaluation to meet state homeschooling requirements. Is this your first year and maybe you're unsure how to proceed? Are you looking to try a different test this year or switch to using an evaluator? Or are you just curious about the matter in general and not even sure what questions to ask? Whatever the case may be, VaHomeschoolers is here to guide you through the process, starting with a general overview before getting to some of those pesky, confusing details.

“Testing...What kind can I use?”

What do I have to do and when do I have to do it?

Let's start with the easy question. All test scores or evaluation letters should be submitted to your local school division office—the same place you submitted your Notice of Intent (NOI)—by August 1st. According to the 2016 annual member survey, the majority of homeschooling parents do something like this:

- They order tests at least six weeks ahead of their intended testing time
- They administer the test at home
- They send it back to the testing company for standardized scoring—which may take another couple of weeks
- They mail a copy of the results to their local school division office

And that is why April and May are the peak months for testing. This is not the only avenue for standardized testing, however.

- Some of the more established groups or co-ops and some of the larger regional homeschool groups provide testing opportunities.
- Some evaluators also offer testing services, as do many private tutoring and test-prep companies.
- Some counties, like Chesterfield and Loudoun, offer free, end-of-year testing for resident homeschoolers with the Stanford 10 or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Be sure to check with your school division to see if something like this is available for you.
- In the past few years, online testing has become available for some (but not all) tests. The details about online testing can be quite different from the paper booklet counterparts; each test provider should be consulted for accurate information about their testing procedures.

Can I hire an evaluator?

If you're interested in having a portfolio evaluation done instead of administering a test, chances are high that the evaluators are fully booked for this year by the time you receive this magazine. That's because evaluators are in low supply, high demand. Also, evaluators like to consult with families in advance, if possible, to offer guidance on what kind of portfolio to compile. The goal is to have material that spans the school year (or the amount of time you've been homeschooling if you started mid-year) that shows evidence of progress. If you're able to

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Method of Providing Evidence of Progress

(from the 2016 Annual Member Survey)

Nationally normed standardized testing: **60%**

Evaluator: **16%**

Increase in using PSAT, SAT, or ACT scores due to the change in law: **8%**

The 411 on Commonly Used Tests

Stanford 10

- Considered a top-rated national test
- Normed in 2007
- Untimed
- Administrator must hold a bachelor's degree
- May administer the test to one's own children only as part of a group
- The total composite score is equal to the average of the scores in most sections; math computation scores are excluded

The Stanford 10 has recently become available as an online test. This method does not require a parent to hold a bachelor's degree or to test one's children as part of a group.

California Achievement Test (CAT)

- Parents can administer the test to their own children
- The CAT/5 was normed in 1992 and has long been the most widely used by homeschoolers (note that two online providers use a version from 1970)
- Available as a Survey, a Core Battery, and a Complete Battery
- Available for grades 2–12 (use the TerraNova for K–1st)
- Timed test
- Booklet format (note that one provider offers an untimed version "For students needing special accommodations")

The CAT is out of print and is no longer supported by the publisher. Some testing outlets still provide support for the CAT, while others are moving homeschool parents over to its replacement, the TerraNova.

TerraNova

- Replacing the CAT; expect this to become the most widely used test
- Scoring is unique: it tests all the main subjects, but then gives a Total Score based just on the reading, language, and math composites (social studies, science, and spelling are not factored into the Total Score)
- Homeschoolers use the 2nd Edition, which was normed in 2005

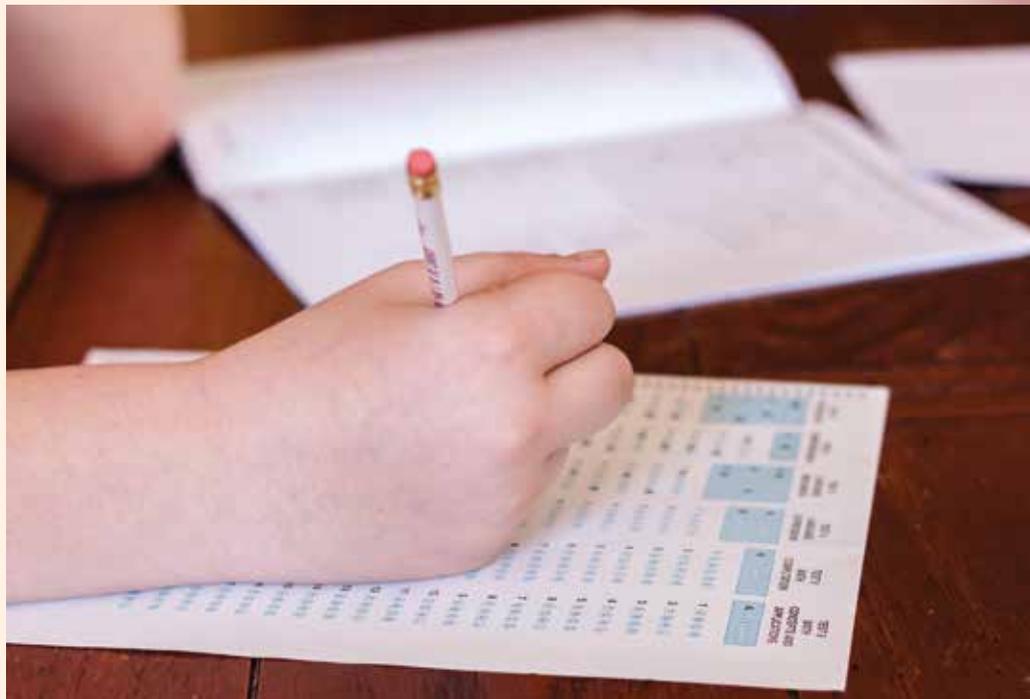


Photo by Michele Kendzie

Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for grades K–8

Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) for grades 9–12

- Normed in 2005
- Parents can administer the test to their own children without having to be part of a group
- Parents must hold a bachelor's degree and go through a very brief process to be a test administrator
- The total composite score is equal to the average of the scores in most sections; math computation scores are excluded

Basic Achievement Skills Inventory (BASI)

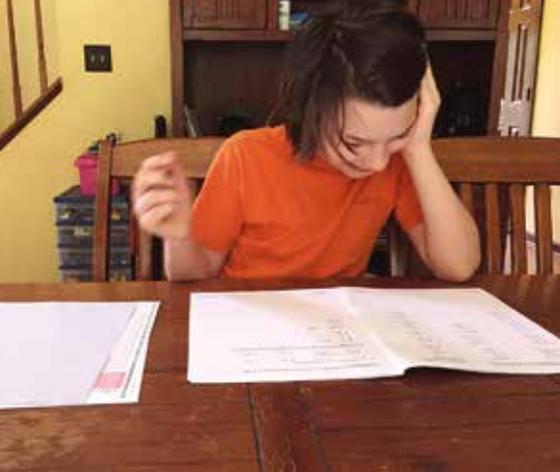
- This test is not as well known, perhaps because it is only available for grades 3–12
- Covers language arts and mathematics and can be completed in just two hours
- The test administrator must be familiar with testing, be a teacher, or have experience administering a standardized test
- Normed in 2003 and 2007

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)

- Nationally normed standardized test used in many public schools and now available to homeschoolers
- Computer-adaptive: it adjusts to fit your child's learning level in each subject
- No degree requirement for parent administrators
- Test over two days, have results back within three days
- Reports include information on what students are ready to learn next, based on their test results.

Personalized Achievement Summary System (PASS)

- It is not considered a nationally normed standardized test
- An untimed test developed specifically for homeschoolers, to be administered by parents at home, without a degree requirement
- Available only for grades 3–8
- It is recognized by six states, including North Carolina
- ***It does not meet evidence of progress requirements in Virginia***



Ian Kendzie doing his annual evaluation.

Photo by Michele Kendzie

find an evaluator for 2018—great! If not, this might be something to explore for next year. In that case, contact one or more evaluators in early fall 2018 to find someone you'd like to hire, and so you can get a sense of what to keep over the coming school year; then book an appointment for spring or summer 2019.

Please note that if your child is enrolled in a distance learning or correspondence school, or dual enrolled in community college, you may submit a report card or transcript in lieu of testing or evaluation.

Starting mid-year: is evidence of progress still required?

Those of you who started homeschooling in the past few months might be wondering if you also need to do this testing or evaluation thing. The answer is *yes*. Compare it to transferring to a private school in March: that new school will still need to provide an end-of-year test, assessment, or report card. And so it is with homeschooling.

Do I need to test my kindergartner?

The simple answer: it depends on age, not grade. Did he turn 6 years old on or before September 30th? Then, *yes*. If your child turns 6 after September 30th, then you are not required to submit evidence of progress in accordance with the home instruction statute.

Now about those tests—What kind can I use? Where do I find it? What's a stanine? What if my child doesn't pass? What happens then?

“Where do I find tests?”

How does a standardized test show my child's progress?

Some homeschoolers wonder if they need to test their child at the beginning of the year and then again at the end in order to show “progress” during the school year. The evidence of progress statute is not that literal.

A single test at the end of the year is unlikely to give much realistic information about everything your child has learned; homeschoolers do not need to worry about “teaching to the test.” The standardized test is meant to show that your child has gained skills and knowledge comparable to other students of their grade. Thus the phrase “nationally normed, standardized test.”

Nationally normed describes a test that has been given to large numbers of students at specific grade levels across the country and whose scores go through a complex norming process which makes it possible to compare students. It means testing the basic skills that any student at a particular grade should know, anywhere in the nation. It means these tests are not based on any specific or local curriculum, the way Virginia's SOLs are (which is why the curriculum-based SOLs are not accepted as evidence of progress under the home instruction statute).

The *standardized* part refers to testing conditions: things like reading the instructions from the test booklet for each section and following the time allotment for each section. If some students were given 30 minutes to do a section on spelling or vocabulary, but other students were given unlimited time, this would skew the results for all because the results are not just for an individual child but are part of the whole scoring system.

The four most common tests are the California Achievement Test (CAT), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the Stanford Achievement Test (better known as the Stanford 10), and the TerraNova that is slowly replacing the CAT/5. In fact, the TerraNova is a combination of the old CAT, which hasn't been published since 1992, and

the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), which hasn't been published since 1990. This is why you'll sometimes hear the TerraNova called the CAT/6, or the Terra Nova/CTBS. Private schools and homeschoolers are the only ones using these out-of-print tests; they do not use the most current versions which are being used in public schools all across the country.

While it's nice to have this kind of choice in testing, it can add to the confusion of deciding where, when, and how to test. You can find a list of testing service providers on our website (VaHomeschoolers.org/resources/testing-directory-pro), or ask other homeschoolers for their recommendations.

Most importantly, be sure to call the testing service providers with any questions you may have. You'll find the phone lines staffed by some lovely, helpful people whose purpose is to guide you through this process.

“What's a stanine?”

Submitting test scores: understanding stanines, percentiles, composite scores

Okay, you've ordered and administered a test, received your results, and now you're supposed to submit “a composite score in or above the fourth stanine, or the 23rd percentile.”

Why is the percentile so low? What the heck is a stanine? And what makes a composite score?

Percentile rankings are based on a norming process and should not be confused with percentages. Most students will fall between the 25th and 75th percentiles. A percentile rank of 75 means the student scored better than 75% of the other students in the normed group. It does not mean the student got 75% or 3 out of 4 answers correct. Also, be advised that adding and averaging all the subtest scores in, say, Language Arts, does not get you to the percentile rankings you'll see on the test results—because it's all about the national norm-

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ing, not just your child's individual scores. This should all be explained in your test results packet; always feel free to call your testing service provider with any follow-up questions.

Most, but not all, tests include a breakdown of scores by stanine (the word *stanine* is simply a combination of *standard nine* because it consists of nine levels). The fourth stanine is level 4 out of 9, so it's a bit lower than half. Any *composite score* in levels 4 through 9 satisfies the state requirement for evidence of progress. So even if your child has some subject scores in the 3rd stanine, that's okay. As long as the composite score is level 4 or higher, it's all good. *Please do not feel the need to black out any individual scores that appear on the test results.* This is not necessary, and it looks suspicious because it involves altering an official test document.

Time to address the question: what subjects need to be covered in testing?

To be clear, the law does not define what subjects should be evaluated to show evidence of progress. Some nationally normed achievement tests cover only math and language arts—this is usually called a Core Battery. Others include additional subjects such as science and social studies—this is usually called a Complete Battery. You can also find a shortened version of a complete battery called a Survey. All of these versions meet the standard for providing annual evidence of progress.

So, then, what makes a composite score?

You will no doubt hear or read words to the effect that “composite scores are only made up of the reading, language arts, and math sections of a test,” or even more simply, “math and language arts.” That *can* be the case, and with a majority of homeschoolers choosing to use the CAT/5 Core Battery, that's all they're getting tested on, so that is what makes up their composite score. The TerraNova is a little different in that it tests all the subjects, but then gives a Total Score based just on the reading composite, the language composite, and

the math composite scores. Between the results of the CAT Core Battery and TerraNova, it's not surprising that people believe math and language arts alone “make up a composite score.”

However, even the CAT/5 Complete Battery (except for kindergarten) covers science and social studies, as do the Stanford10 and the ITBS. Some of these tests also cover library, reference, and map skills and can be quite useful for your own purposes to gauge your child's progress. So the bottom line is, *the composite score is based on the test you use; answers will vary.*

“What happens after testing?”

Are these tests aligned with Common Core?

The Common Core Standards for math and language arts began in 2010 as a means to set consistent educational standards across the states. Homeschoolers are generally using older versions of assessment tests that were normed between 1970 and 2007, so the tests predate the new initiative.

Standardized Testing for Homeschooled High Schoolers

It should be noted that once your homeschooled student reaches high school, other options become available for use as annual evidence of progress.

- PSAT—Given to 11th graders to determine National Merit Scholarships, this test was intended to give students an experience before taking the SAT. Nowadays, some students are taking both tests before junior year. But only junior-year PSAT scores will count toward the National Merit Scholarship program. Results from the PSAT 8/9 and PSAT 10 are also accepted as evidence of progress.
- SAT—Usually taken at the end of 11th grade and/or the beginning of 12th grade as an admissions requirement for many college applications.
- ACT—The other option (sometimes requirement) for college

applications, taken in a student's junior or senior year.

Are all the tests timed?

Like much in this arena, the simple answer is—it depends on the test. The vast majority of achievement tests, understandably, are timed: the CAT, TerraNova, ITBS, and of course the PSAT, SAT, and ACT. Without a standard amount of time for all students to complete a test section, the test would not be standardized and the norming would be compromised, thus skewing the results for all.

Two tests that were developed as untimed tests are the Stanford 10 and the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). In the past, a parent needed to hold a bachelor's degree to administer the Stanford 10. That still holds true for the booklet version. Four years ago, the Stanford 10 was made available as an online test, which took away the need for the parent/administrator to hold a bachelor's degree, since the parent is not actually administering the test in this case.

If you happen to come across a testing service provider that offers an untimed version of a test such as the CAT, be advised that this is intended *only* for students who have been assessed as needing special accommodations. The versions of the CAT used by private schools and homeschoolers were not designed to be taken online or untimed; any such version is using the 1970 edition of the CAT.

“What if my child doesn't pass?”

Failure To Provide Adequate Evidence of Progress

Every summer, the VaHomeschoolers Helpline (866-513-6173) fields numerous calls with versions of these two questions: “What if my child doesn't

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score well enough to meet the evidence of progress?” and “What if life got in the way and I just plumb forgot to order tests before August? What kind of trouble am I in?”

If evidence of adequate progress is not submitted, the home instruction program of the child may be placed on probation for one year. That means you can still continue to homeschool, but the superintendent may ask you to provide more information regarding what you plan to do to meet the requirements, such as a remediation plan.

If you are submitting test scores late, by all means submit them as soon as you can, with a sincere apology and a promise not to make a habit of it. Most superintendents aren't looking to hassle you; a little grace and courtesy can go a long way to keep things running smoothly.

On the other hand, if you've not submitted adequate evidence of progress and are on probation for the next year, and *again* do not submit an evaluation or test scores, then the superintendent has the legal right to end home instruction for your child. I assure you this rarely happens; this is truly a worst-

case scenario. And if it comes down to this and you disagree, you have the right to appeal. You do this by notifying the superintendent within 30 days that you want to appeal the decision to an independent hearing officer. The superintendent then must make arrangements for the hearing. You do not need an attorney to make such an appeal.

What if my child has learning disabilities? Do I still need to test or evaluate?

In a word, *yes*.

Two things to keep in mind when testing if your child has special needs or a learning disability: the statute requires progress, not mastery, and there is no legal requirement that a child be “at grade level.” If your 12-year-old is working on third grade material, that's okay as long as you're able to show adequate progress. Note that public school systems are required to assure an adequate education to the children in their districts, so making an exception to the rule for your family would put them at risk for legal trouble. So for the sake of your child—no matter their handicap—it's in their best

interests for you to set learning goals and to track their progress. That said, it may be easier to work with an evaluator than to do standardized testing. Some parents have had good luck submitting evaluation reports (summaries of goals and outcomes of therapy plans) from behavioral or occupational therapists, since those therapists are already determining needs and abilities and tracking progress. This also means not having to hire another evaluator, so it saves you time and money.

Testing doesn't have to be stressful! Keep it low key and encourage your kids to show off what they know. You'll learn a lot about your student in the process, which will help you to further tailor their schooling to their needs and interests.

Karen Skelton homeschooled her two children through high school and now devotes her time to supporting others through VaHomeschoolers. She currently serves as director of Government Affairs and is the immediate past president of the board of directors.