

Questions and Answers

Achievement Tests

1. **What do I do if the superintendent has a "no exemption" policy and I feel that some of my students are not capable of writing?**

The policy for excusing students clearly states that it is the teacher's responsibility to make recommendations about possible exemptions through the principal to the Superintendent of Schools. The final decision rests with the Superintendent. The documentation for such a decision must be in place and the Superintendent must make a decision for individual students based on the evidence with which he/she is presented. This information must be kept on file in the school in the event that it is asked for by Alberta Education. There are two provisions for exemption which are outlined in the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program*. The information bulletin is available on Alberta Education's Web site at http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k%5F12/testing/achievement/ach_gib/, in the *Administration and Directives* section.

2. **Why are there so many absences from the tests? I thought that everyone had to write them.**

The absentee rate is in fact very low. For a large scale assessment program, Alberta has high participation rates. However, instances do exist where the absentee rate is higher than expected. In these cases, Superintendents of Schools may wish to discuss the differences with specific schools. The idea is that students who are absent on the day of testing should be given the opportunity to write the test(s) when they return to school. We know, however, that because of extenuating circumstances, this does not always happen. There have been unusual circumstances, such as a measles outbreak in a grade 3 population or a school burning down, that would call for the students to be coded as absent. These are rare occurrences, but some happen each year.

3. **Do First Nations students attending band-operated schools write the achievement tests?**

All students in Alberta are required to write the achievement tests, including those in band operated and federally operated schools.

4. **What about students who transfer mid-year from another school, province, or country?**

The results of students who transfer from School A to School B during the year are attributed to School B, regardless of when the transfer was made. If transfer information is forwarded to Alberta Education before March 1st, these new students are entered into the SIS system, and appear on the List of Students that comes with the achievement test packages. Names that are not on the List of Students must be added manually by the principal.

Transferring students who can not speak or read English at the time of testing may be excused by their Superintendent of Schools if the superintendent judges that the students are not capable of responding or if participation would be harmful to them.

5. **What about students on Individual Program Plans(IPP)? Do they write? If they write do we send in the results or do we keep them, or are they marked as being absent or excused?**

Students who have *Individual Program Plans* are expected to write the achievement tests. According to what is called for in their instructional plans, testing accommodations can be approved for individual children, in accordance with the accommodations provided on a regular basis in their classroom. (See the *Accommodations* section of the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program* at http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k%5F12/testing/achievement/ach_gib/.) Their tests are to be returned to us with all the others. They are coded so the special accommodations that they receive are noted because some special provisions affect scoring.

6. **Will scribes continue to be used for students in the writing section of the language arts achievement tests and readers for the reading section?**

The answer to both questions is yes. For those students with specific learning disabilities, the use of a scribe or reader is called for in their Individual Program Plans (IPP), and helps "level the playing field" because the students would not be able to write the tests without these provisions. The guidelines for using these provisions, as well as guidelines for the conduct of scribes and readers is clearly outlined in the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program*. Those students who have a scribe, will have their written response papers marked differently to reflect this provision. Specifically, the Convention category is not marked, and the student's score is prorated.

7. **If a child has a CD-version of the language arts test how can you report a reading score for him/her? Isn't it auditory comprehension that is being tested?**

Part B: Reading of the Language Arts Achievement Test is designed to find out how well students perform a number of reading skills. These include understanding explicit and implicit ideas and details, associating meaning of words and phrases in context, recognizing various writing techniques, and synthesizing and drawing conclusions from entire passages. Students who are assisted by a CD version of the test do not have to decode print, but are still required to demonstrate the skills just mentioned. Some students would not have an opportunity to demonstrate their achievement in these skills without the CD.

8. **ESL funded/non-funded. Why and how would you code an ESL student when there is no funding?**

There is funding for ESL (non-Canadian born) students, but only for three years. The funding is based on the number of years in the program, not on the age of the student. Once students have had three years of specially funded programming, they may continue with ESL classes but they do not have the designation code for funded students. They are part of the regular funding that is given for all students in the system. The codes for funding classification are part of the Student Information System, (SIS) and the information that each school provides via SIS, is the information that is used to code the achievement tests.

9. **Home-educated students who write in a school should not have achievement results factored into the school result's results. They should be part of the Home Education report.**

This is true, and this is exactly what happens. Home-educated students' results are part of a Home Education report, and not part of the results for a school where they wrote the

achievement tests.

10. Several of our students did the LA writing using a computer. Is this noted anywhere?

Alberta Education's *Word Processor Policy* allows whole classes of students to use word processors, provided they have used them for instruction throughout the year. This is not a special provision, and does not appear on the Individual Student Profile.

11. On the Grade 9 mathematics and science tests, there is no mark differentiation between multiple-choice and numerical-response. Why?

The two styles of questions assess outcomes that are of equal importance, therefore there is no mark differentiation.

12. In areas such as Grade 9 mathematics, where school and provincial results are significantly below expectations, what adjustments in the test or curriculum are planned?

When results are significantly below expectations, a careful review of the expectations represented in the curriculum and test is conducted. If standards are confirmed as they have been in Grade 9 Mathematics, there are no changes made to the test or curriculum. Attention and energy are placed in efforts to help students improve achievement.

13. Why are results for students in French Immersion and regular programs tabulated separately, even though all students are in one school?

The results for students writing in French are reported separately from students writing in English because the students wrote different versions of the tests. We do not have procedures in place to determine the equivalency of the results for students taking the assessments in their second language. Therefore, we cannot report results from French Immersion and the English program together as one report for a dual track school.

14. Achievement tests in the different subject areas test English understanding and not student knowledge and learning. Students are unable to study for the tests, as they test reasoning ability rather than knowledge. Is this what you want?

Reading is an important aspect of every achievement test. The five subjects tested in the achievement program all use the printed word as an important communication tool. Through the development process, teachers ensure that the reading level in all tests is appropriate for the grade. Students for whom reading level is a serious issue may be given special provisions for the tests.

Throughout the instructional year, teachers and students make use of many facts and details in order to build important skills and concepts in each subject area. It is these major skills and concepts that are addressed in the achievement tests. Many test questions deliberately require students to exercise their reasoning abilities, within the context of the subject matter. Students who have memorized facts and details but have failed to grasp the essential concepts of a subject will be at a significant disadvantage.

15. Explain adjustable cut-scores and their value to educators.

The variation of cut-scores on different tests by one or two points reflects the fact that different tests are not perfectly equal in difficulty. Changes in cut-scores are designed to ensure that the standards of performance required of students at the acceptable standard and standard of excellence are consistent from one year to the next.

The cut-score identifies the number of correct answers a student needs to demonstrate the acceptable standard and standard of excellence. It is established through a series of procedures, starting at the design stages of the test. The tests are designed with the intention that the cut-scores would be at 50% (acceptable standard) and 80% (standard of excellence). Part of the design procedure includes having the test questions and standards validated by teachers before the test is administered. In the first years of implementing a new or revised curriculum, a committee of teachers goes through standard setting procedures that give indication of what cut-score would represent performance at the standards. Statistical procedures are also applied to the tests to determine their equivalency in difficulty with previous achievement tests. All these procedures contribute to the final judgement of where the final cut-scores are placed.

16. Why is there a great deal of figuring following the scoring of writing instead of adjusting the raw score at the outset to reflect the weighting? The relative weighting could affect program emphasis.

Areas of marking are weighted after scoring, rather than having different scales to reflect the weighting, because scoring is easier and more reliable. If all scales have the same number of points, markers do not need to constantly shift their mind set when marking. The relative weighting of the areas is communicated in the subject bulletins so that teachers have this information early in the school year when they are program planning.

17. I noticed that the corrections that I made to students' names on the student answer sheets were not corrected on the results. Why not?

Student information comes to us from the Student Information System (SIS) which gets its data directly from the schools. It is each school's responsibility to ensure that the information for individual students is accurate. SIS gets data at the beginning of each school year, as of September 30. This data can be updated on March 1 of each school year. Students who transfer in to a school after March 1, will not have updated information in the system. The errors that are present in the system cannot be corrected at Learner Assessment by our analysts. Their job is to analyze and report the data based on the information that they get from the SIS system.

18. Why is there a large difference in the number of students writing the different tests across the province?

Students in Francophone and French Immersion programs also have to write the English Language Arts achievement test. Therefore, the number of students writing the English Language Arts achievement test in Grades 3, 6, and 9 is larger than the number writing the tests of other subjects. There is no appreciable difference in the number of students writing the mathematics, science, and social studies achievement tests.

19. How does someone obtain results of students when results have been withheld?

When there are possible anomalies in the administration of an achievement test, results are withheld while an investigation takes place. After the investigation, the results are either declared invalid or declared valid and transmitted to schools. Withheld or invalid results are not available to anyone.

**20. What percentage of achievement tests are marked locally
- by school authority in a central location?
- by individual teachers?**

Alberta Education collects information about how many tests are marked locally, but not about how the marking is organized at the school or jurisdiction level.

Teacher questionnaires show that the actual number of teachers marking locally is greater than the number who submit their marks to Alberta Education. The percentage of tests marked locally whose marks were reported to Alberta Education is shown below.

| Course | Percentage of Part A: Writing Marked Locally |
|-------------|---|
| Grade 9 ELA | 49 |
| Grade 6 ELA | 32 |
| Grade 3 ELA | 33 |
| Grade 9 FLA | 46 |
| Grade 6 FLA | 22 |

Tests whose local marks are reported are automatically marked twice-once locally and once centrally.

21. What type of achievement test instruction preparation are school jurisdictions giving their teachers? How are they "helping" teachers to instruct their students to write the achievement tests and be successful?

The type of "instruction" is as varied as the school authorities. However, Alberta Education gives all teachers the subject bulletins that contain sample questions, blueprints of the tests, and helpful hints for helping students prepare for the tests. We further suggest that the very best way to prepare students for the achievement tests is to teach the curriculum well. Excessive practicing is of little benefit to the students. They should be familiar with the multiple choice format and this can be accomplished easily with the practice questions from the subject bulletins and released items.

22. What type of achievement test information should schools publicize to their community?

Schools should share a variety of information. Schools are in the best position to interpret the results from the achievement tests based on their local context. Administrators should outline for parents and the community at large, all of the factors to be considered. They should tell

them about the various programs that reside in the school. It is important for parents to understand what the goals for the school are and how programs are meeting the individuals needs of the students while working toward these goals. If there are areas that need improvement, most people expect a plan for improvement and a consistent effort by all staff to follow this plan.