



Returning to Standardised Testing in Primary Schools May 2021

This information leaflet has been prepared to support schools as they return to standardised testing in 2021. It reaffirms the rationale for standardised testing, how it can form part of a broad range of assessment methods to inform the teaching and learning process, how the data can be used and how best to ensure sensitive communication about testing.



Rationale for standardised testing

- Assessment is an enabler of effective teaching and learning. This includes regularly evaluating pupils' work and periodically reporting results to pupils and parents. All forms of assessment, including standardised tests, help teachers to ensure that programmes of learning in literacy and numeracy are tailored to meet the needs of individual pupils/class groups.
- Schools are advised to use a variety of assessment methods from *Assessment in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2007)* to build a picture over time of a pupil's learning progress across the curriculum (*Circular 56/11*). Standardised testing in literacy (English/Gaeilge) and numeracy is an important method used to complement other assessment tools used by teachers, although not necessarily more important than other assessment types.

? Why return to standardised testing this year?

- Information from standardised testing is important given the vital role of literacy (English/Gaeilge) and numeracy in enabling children to access the full curriculum. Following school closures, this data can help teachers identify areas of success and areas in need of further development.
- Standardised tests support the benchmarking of individual pupil's performance against national norms. As schools did not gather data from testing in 2020, data from 2021 will be helpful for decision making about teaching and learning for the coming school year at class and whole-school level.
- The results of standardised testing and other information are shared with post-primary schools to support the transition of sixth class pupils from primary to post-primary.
- Information on administering and reporting on standardised testing in 2021 is available in *Circular 18/21*.

Schools should note that pupils may be excluded from standardised testing if, in the view of the school principal, they have a learning or physical disability which would prevent them from attempting the tests or where the level of proficiency in English (pupils with English as an additional language for example) or Gaeilge (in Irish-medium schools) required in the test would make attempting the test inappropriate. Additionally, certain accommodations can be made during testing for individual pupils. Further information about exemptions is available [here](#), and about accommodations [here](#).



Use of data from standardised testing



In the classroom, this data can:

- Provide a snapshot of unique information about each child's progress, affirming areas of success and detecting possible areas for further development.
- Support the early identification of children who may be experiencing difficulty and require additional support, as well as children who are performing very well and require additional challenge in their learning.
- Support teachers in prioritising certain areas of the curriculum.
- Contribute to and inform the development of aspects of support plans for pupils with special educational needs.



Across the school, this data can:

- Support decision-making about various literacy (English / Gaeilge) and numeracy initiatives, as well as enabling monitoring of the progress of pupils involved.
- Support the review of progress in reading in English / Gaeilge and Mathematics at whole-school level and contribute to school self-evaluation.
- Support communication with parents about individual pupils' achievement in particular aspects of literacy (English / Gaeilge) and numeracy.
- Provide additional information for external professionals, including NEPS psychologists, when appropriate.
- Support school management and support teachers/teams in making decisions about allocation of resources.



In the Department, data from 2nd, 4th and 6th class are used:

- To support evaluation of nationwide progress of various departmental initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
- As part of a range of tools to create a profile of schools' learning support needs when allocating special education teaching resources.



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Communicating about standardised testing: before, during and after the testing period

It is likely that school closures will have impacted on pupils differently. This may impact on pupils' anxiety levels in advance of or during testing as they return to face-to-face learning. It may also be reflected in the results for this year including, for example, in Irish-language learning immersion-education contexts. Results of any one standardised test provide a snapshot in time and should not be used in isolation, nor used as baseline data for predicting future achievements, nor for solely informing decisions regarding the provision of interventions or targets within learning plans for pupils. In particular this year, the following might be useful:

Before the testing period:

- Teachers should ensure the language they use about standardised testing alleviates pupil anxiety and worry.
- Pupils and parents should be reassured that:
 - standardised tests are just one of many tools teachers use to inform the teaching and learning process.
 - test results may vary from year to year for individual pupils.
 - the results can help teachers to identify areas of the curriculum and language learning where all pupils need additional support and to provide more bespoke support for individual pupils.

During the testing period:

- Pupils should be tested in a positive, relaxed environment in the presence of a teacher with whom they are familiar.
- Pupils should be encouraged to do their best. They can be reassured that they may not know all of the answers and that this is to be expected and is not a problem.
- Pupils should be encouraged to try a test item or take a guess and move on without too much delay on any one item on the test.

After the testing period:

- In the interpretation of results, teachers should bear in mind the impact that the school closures may have had on pupils' scores.
- Results should be communicated carefully to parents and explained in the context of educational experiences, including school closures.
- It may be appropriate to discuss the tests with individual pupils and/or parents. The standardised test results should not be the single focus of the discussion and should include discussion of other aspects of learning across the curriculum.

The following examples could be useful as a guide to support communication with parents about standardised test results, either through discussion or in written reports. In cases where a pupil's scores are significantly below average (a score of 1, 2 or 3) and/or have deteriorated significantly since the child was last formally assessed, it is recommended that a discussion with parents is held.

Sample A: Communicating results through discussion with parents

"Angela achieved a STen score of 3 in her reading test this year. STen scores use a scale from 1 - 10, and her score of 3 can be considered well below average. As with all standardised tests, there is a possibility that her performance on another day or test might have been slightly different. This score is consistent with my own assessments of her reading this year. Her score was somewhat lower than the last time she was tested, and therefore, we will provide additional support to Angela in the new school year. We would also encourage her to continue reading over the summer and we will try to link her with the public library so she can avail of a range of books and programmes they have on offer. Her work in other aspects of language learning, including speaking confidently in front of the class, has improved this year."

Sample B: Communicating results in written reports

STen Mathematics: 8

STen English: 6

Mark has performed well on classroom assessments, including standardised tests, since returning to face-to-face teaching. He has made notable improvements in his written work and his comprehension skills have also improved. His outcomes in mathematics indicate he is continuing to make progress, in particular with his problem-solving skills.

Useful resources

The NCCA has produced a range of resources to support schools, including assessment guidelines, information on reporting and transfer, information on standardised tests, report card creators and the education passport. There are also FAQs and information sheets for parents in nine different languages. These resources are available [here](#).