



PREPARING FOR THE TEST WITHOUT TEACHING TO THE TEST
A SIMPLE GUIDE TO HELPING YOUR STUDENTS
SUCCEED ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

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Like them or not, standardized tests will probably be part of your professional life for the remainder of your teaching career. Many agree that it is important to evaluate what students know in key subjects at various grade levels in a standard way, but the use of standardized testing has expanded in unprecedented and alarming ways since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002.

In 2015, The Council of Chief State School Officers¹ released the results of a survey conducted with the Council of the Great City Schools that showed students in large districts are taking an average of 113 standardized tests in their school career from pre-K through grade 12. Yes, you read that correctly—one hundred thirteen is the average, meaning the typical kid takes almost nine standardized tests per school year each year of school, starting with preschool. That doesn't begin to include the quizzes, chapter tests, unit tests, and other assessments being given by teachers in classrooms around the country each day.

In this guide, discover specific strategies you can use to prepare students for standardized tests, ways to help students deal with test anxiety, and even ideas of things to do after the dreaded testing season is over so that there are no wasted days in your classroom. Many of these ideas have foundations in revelations from former Teacher of the Year winner Rafe Esquith's book "Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56,"² If you haven't read it, add it to your book wish list. His accomplishments and insights are inspiring and made me want to be a better teacher, parent, and person in general.

I hope that this guide helps you navigate the stressful, daunting world of high-stakes testing and gives you actionable strategies you can implement in your classroom today. Thank you for trusting STEM Jobs to help you along this crazy, wonderful, exhausting, passion-fueled journey we call teaching.



Preparing for the Test—Not Teaching to It

Developing the right mindset.

We've all heard the saying "Attitude is everything," and it rings especially true when talking about preparation for high-stakes testing. So how can we help students have the right attitude about testing when even we have mixed feelings about it?

I think it's safe to say that we all want students (and children, and administrators, and leaders, and citizens) who believe that anything worth doing is worth doing well. The culture of your classroom is a great place to start developing that attitude in your students. Kids are often capable of much more than we give them credit for, like reflecting upon their own attitudes and motivations.

I first encountered Lawrence Kohlberg's Six Levels of Moral Development in Esquith's "Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire." They now serve as the foundation of his classroom, and he summarizes them like this:

Level I. I Don't Want to Get in Trouble

Students operating at Level I are completely motivated by avoiding trouble. They do what they're supposed to do so that they won't get yelled at or punished. Sounds disturbingly like most of the classrooms you were a part of during your own education, doesn't it? Do we really want to run our classrooms on fear, or do we want more for our students?

Level II. I Want a Reward

Students operating at Level II develop the "what's in it for me?" mentality. They work hard for sticker charts, class parties, and other competitions that result in some sort of reward. There is no tangible reward for doing well on a standardized test, so students at this level are not motivated to do their best during stressful exam times.

Level III. I Want to Please Somebody

Students operating at Level III are pleasers. They want to make others happy, which isn't a bad thing in and of itself, but can lead to resentment and bitterness once they realize they can't please everyone. It's also not a sustainable code of conduct. As Esquith teases his students, "Do you brush your teeth for me? Do you tie your shoes for me? Do you see how silly that sounds?" He asserts we can and should do better for our students than the Level III mentality.

Level IV. I Follow the Rules

Pleasers become rule followers. Following the rules is extremely helpful in a classroom, but what happens to Level IV students when there are no clear rules or they encounter a situation in which the rules should be broken in order to do the right thing? We can and should do more for our students than teach them to follow the rules.

Level V. I Am Considerate of Other People

Level V students are unfortunately rare, but perhaps that is because we as teachers tend to stop pushing them once they reach Level IV. If we can help our students reach Level V, we are doing something right and have accomplished something worthwhile. Will this level help them on standardized tests? Maybe not, but it will help them considerably in life, and that's something to strive for each and every day.

Level VI. I Have a Personal Code of Behavior and I Follow It

Can you imagine a world full of Level VI thinkers? I would describe those operating at this level as having integrity. They do the right thing even when no one is looking because they are being true to who they are and the person they want to be. But there is more to Level VI than doing the right thing—Level VI thinkers are also humble. That means you can't teach students to operate at this level by saying "You should act like me" and citing your own moments of greatness. Esquith uses literary examples like Atticus Finch from "To Kill a Mockingbird," Phineas from "A Separate Peace," and Bernard in "Death of a Salesman" to help his students understand Level VI thinking. Perhaps you can find your own examples in your curriculum, through current events, or share an instance when you were witness to Level VI behavior in your own life. Once students know what they are capable of being, they might decide to change who they are. Not every student will be ready to reach Level VI at the moment you introduce this hierarchy, and that's OK. Raise your expectations and most students will rise to meet them.

But how do Kohlberg's levels help us with standardized testing? Survey your class about why they want to do well on tests, and most will likely respond that it's because they're afraid of what will happen if they do poorly. Level I at its finest. Maybe your school or your students' parents have promised a reward for high test scores, which is all the motivation Level II thinkers need. Those at Level III will want to do well to please you or their parents, hoping that getting a certain number on a piece of paper will make someone happy. They're doing better than those at Level I, but are still far from where you probably want your students to be.

Level IV thinkers will want to do well because someone told them they have to try their hardest. Those who have reached Level V may understand that their scores have the potential to impact their teachers and their school, so they are considerate enough to do their best. They care about their teachers' evaluations and school's budget and the other things that are likely tied to test scores in their state.

But I want my classroom to be full of Level VI thinkers when those bubble sheets go out. Not because standardized tests are the most important thing in the history of the world, but because Level VI students understand that anything worth doing is truly worth doing well. They will try their best because that's who they are and they are being true to themselves. Thinking like that can truly change a classroom, a school, a life. Reaching Level VI is a journey, and not all of your students will get there before testing, no matter how hard you try. Level VI is rare, even in adults.



So what can you do to help students have the right mindset beyond teaching them about Kohlberg's levels? Talk to them about the test like rational, intelligent beings. Explain what the test is designed to measure—as well as all the things it can't measure. An incredible teacher in Indiana brought some of her students to tears with a letter₃ she wrote to them about an upcoming standardized test, which, in part, reads:

The people who create these tests and score them do not know each of you like I do, and certainly not the way your families do.

They do not know that some of you speak two languages, or that you love to sing or draw. They have not seen your natural talent for dancing. They do not know that your friends count on you to be there for them, that your laughter can brighten the darkest day, or that your face turns red when you feel shy. They do not know that you participate in sports, wonder about the future, or sometimes you help with your little brother or little sister after school. They do not know that you are kind, trustworthy, and thoughtful... and every day you try your very best.

The scores you will get from these tests will tell you something, but they will not tell you everything. These tests do not define you. There are many ways of being smart. YOU are smart! YOU are enough! You are the light that brightens my day and the reason I am happy to come to work each day. So, in the midst of all of these tests, remember that there is no way to "test" all of the amazing and awesome things that make you, YOU.

There are lots of examples like this out there because there are so many amazing teachers in this world. Talk with your students about what these tests measure, but assure them that they don't measure all the things that make them valuable or unique. Mean it. Repeat it. Make them understand. They might not be at Level VI, but that's OK. They will understand and approach the test with the right mindset, which is half the battle.

Setting clear expectations is another key. We all fear the unknown to some degree (darkness, death, new food combinations), but setting clear expectations for your students about standardized testing can help alleviate that fear.

Explain to your students what the schedule will be like the week before testing. Are they allowed to bring a book to read if they finish a section early? If so, provide a suggested reading list based on the age, reading level, and interests of your students. Funny, easy-to-read books are ideal as they will help students unwind and relax. Have selections available in your classroom if possible, or head to the library as a class before testing sessions begin.

What are the behavior expectations during the test? Will the layout of the classroom change during standardized testing sessions? When will there be opportunities to use the restroom? These changes in routine can be disorienting or stressful for many students, so make sure you outline procedures and answer any questions they have about these mundane details prior to the first session.

What are your performance expectations for your classes? Obviously you want all of your students to do well, and there are those Level III thinkers who will want to do well to please you, so carefully evaluate your own intentional and unintentional messages about performance. Are you increasing students' stress levels by mentioning how well past students have performed or reminding them that your evaluation results hinge on their scores? Make it clear that you expect students to do their best because they owe it to themselves, not to anyone else.

Set high, realistic expectations and watch your students rise to meet them.

Teach Them How to Study.

We all assume that students—especially those in middle and high school—know how to study, but what if they’ve never been taught how to do it properly?

This is another subject in which Esquith has some great insights. He taught his fifth graders that in order to study in an effective way, they need to “create the conditions of the test.” So what does that mean?

It means that flashcards and reviewing a chapter are ineffective means of studying because that’s not what they’ll be asked to do on the test. Esquith advised his students to find problems in the book that were similar to the ones they were likely to see on the test and make sure they know who to contact (other students, himself) if they struggled to complete them.

But he also gave them some much-needed advice about the environment in which they studied. Students knew to find a quiet place—free from music, television, and other distractions so they could truly create the conditions of the test. He emphasized what we all know to be true: Cramming on the bus, looking at your notes over breakfast, or having a friend quiz you in study hall are all ineffective means of preparing. By spending a few seconds to review this concept at the end of the class, he not only reminded them of the upcoming test, but gave them actionable ways to be successful on it.

Preparing your students to study effectively and reminding them about the importance of sleep are some of the most important things you can do for them leading up to standardized testing periods. It will also help them develop the skills that will serve them well throughout their entire lives.

Teach Them How to Take a Test.

Most experts agree that standardized tests measure students’ test-taking abilities as much as they measure their content knowledge. That means we’re doing our students a serious disservice if we’re not teaching them basic test-taking skills.

Even younger students are able to understand the basics of how standardized and other multiple choice tests are designed, and it’s something that you’re able to easily teach them while you’re teaching the content in your classroom. Give the students a problem on the board, and ask them to find the correct answer. Write it on the board. Ask whether anyone in the class got a different answer, write that answer on the board, and have the student share how he or she got it. (If your students are afraid of being wrong, work on creating a classroom where failure is seen as an important part of the learning process, not the opposite of success. [This article](#) can help you get started.) Continue in this way until you have four potential answers on the board. If everyone got the correct answer initially, have them create three distractors that test makers might use based on common errors and misconceptions.

Esquith used this method in his classroom, and said that he would actually see his students smile and even hear them giggle while taking tests because they knew exactly what the test makers were up to when they read each of the answer choices. Becoming detectives and thinking about why the wrong answers were wrong in addition to why the right answer was right turned taking the test into a type of game for his students, which greatly reduced their anxiety levels in addition to improving their performance.



Separating Results from Consequences

Standardized tests are extremely stressful for students. So stressful, in fact, that most moderator handbooks now include directions for what teachers should do with a test booklet when a student vomits on it⁴. Let's think about that for a minute. Testing companies received enough inquiries from teachers whose students actually vomited on their test booklet that they decided it was worth including directions about it in the teacher handbook. As host of "Last Week Tonight" John Oliver noted, "Something is wrong with our system when we just assume a certain number of students will vomit. Standardized tests are supposed to be an assessment of skills, not a rap battle on '8 Mile' Road." How can we expect students to do their best when they are literally throwing up on the test questions?

Esquith has some powerful ideas to help reduce students' test anxiety that he shared in "Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire." The first is to actually talk to your students about what the consequences will be if they do poorly on standardized tests. For the majority of grade levels, there are no actual consequences for the students themselves. Yes, the funding of the school may be affected, or a teacher's evaluation may suffer if all students' scores are low enough, but experts agree that these should not be tied to test results in any way, so hopefully they will not be issues in our country much longer. Regardless, these are not consequences for the individual student. One student's poor scores will not cause the school to be taken over or a teacher to be fired. Make it clear to your students what the actual consequences are.

If they are in high school and taking an end-of-course exam, there are some real consequences that they should be made aware of, along with their options. Just like the SAT or ACT, students are allowed to retake most end-of-course exams, so a poor score is not a failure, but rather an opportunity to gain familiarity with the format of the test and a chance to discover the content students were unfamiliar with before taking it again. Students can get easily discouraged if they have to take the same test over and over, so working on the proper mindset is incredibly important at the high school level, which is where we typically spend the least amount of time on it.

Esquith also recommends talking to your students about how others will react to their test scores if they perform poorly. Will you, their teacher, punish them in any way? Will you like them less as a human being? Will you give up on them? Will their parents, siblings, guardians, and friends disown them if they don't achieve a high enough score? The answer to all of those questions is obvious to us, but it can be a huge relief to students to have someone give voice to their fears and reassure them that they're being silly. This is especially true of students operating at levels I, II, and III, which is another reason discussing Kohlberg's stages with your students is key.

Finally, be very intentional about how you will view the scores. If you're teaching grades K-9, for instance, you might want to use scores as a health check for your instruction. If you see that all of your students are scoring lower in one section of the test, that's a good indication that you're either not spending enough time on the content being tested there, or you need to hone your approach to make the concept clearer to students. If you teach a subject for which end-of-course exams are given, choose your reactions carefully. Instead of being disappointed that a particular student failed the test again, discuss that student's growth with him or her. Show the student how much his or her scores improved each time the test was taken. If no improvement happened, use it as an opportunity to revisit study skills and stress levels leading up to the retest.

Governments and other entities may use standardized testing as a way to compare one class, one school, one district, one county, or one state to another, but that doesn't mean you have to focus on comparison as well. Remember that your attitude has a huge influence on the attitudes of your students, so make sure you're modeling the right one.

After the test—no wasted days!

Teachers (myself included) feel like there is never enough time to do everything in the classroom we need to do and want to do to cover the standards, prepare for testing, teach our students the skills they need to be successful, and help them become better human beings. But let's be honest for a minute. There are many wasted days in the school year. Not all of them are within our control, but some are. Think about the days spent throwing parties or showing movies as a reward. Or the day your substitute teacher had to show a movie or give your students a free period because you had an unexpected absence and your lesson plan was with you instead of waiting neatly on top of your desk.

Now think about all of those days—about a month and a half for most districts—between the final testing session and the last day of school. Are you using those days to their full potential? Do you feel like you make the most out of every one of those precious minutes?

I doubt any of us could say yes to each of those questions with a clear conscience. Use that time when there's a little less urgency and a little more laughter to help your students remember that learning is fun and worthwhile. Unlock their creativity and challenge them in new and exciting ways. You no longer have to worry about what could be on the test, so choose a few concepts to explore in greater depth. Here are some basic ideas to get you started.

Utilize Project-Based Learning

That pressure to cover everything that could possibly be on the test in the months leading up to it causes us to rush through content, removing opportunities for our students to be creative problem solvers. Project-based learning activities allow your students to work on those all-important soft skills—things like communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and data analysis—that employers are looking for in applicants while deepening their content knowledge. Visit our [free guide to project-based learning](#) for a breakdown of its benefits and some ideas about activities to try with your students. They are guaranteed to leave your students more engaged and excited to come to school than a month's worth of pizza parties and G-rated movies.

Explore Careers

You don't have to be a guidance counselor to discuss career options with your students. The fact is students in kindergarten are more likely to know what they want to do when they grow up than high school seniors. Students can't pursue jobs they don't know about, so take a few days to do a little guided discovery about what careers are out there besides the ones they encounter every day. Career fairs are wonderful if you have the time and resources to organize them. Inviting parents or professionals from the community to speak to your students requires less planning and can still be very effective. If your time and resources are limited, start by having your students take the [free STEM Type quiz](#). It typically takes students about 10 minutes to complete, and will give them their scores for each of the eight STEM Types. Each STEM Type is then connected to careers that students might actually enjoy doing based on their current interests. Students can then explore those careers, the training required for them, and the schools that offer that training in greater depth. The results and resources are accessible directly online, meaning they can continue to explore at home or anywhere they have internet access. Taking one day to explore careers in your classroom could change the course of students' lives as you open their eyes to the incredible opportunities available to them. Seems like a better use of everyone's time than locker clean-out day, doesn't it?

Discover the Right Training Option for Your Dream Job

Many students think that “college” is the only real option for them after high school graduation. Whether they got that impression from their parents or society as a whole, that pressure can feel overwhelming for some teens who know they’re not cut out for another four (or six) years of schooling to get a bachelor’s degree. The truth is that there are many types of postgraduate training available to students. Not every option will be right for every student, and that’s OK. A four-year degree is not the proper training for every career, so it isn’t the proper route for every student. Encourage your students to first decide *what* they’d like to do, then research the appropriate training for that career. There are many high-paying, high-demand careers that require an apprenticeship or associate degree, but too few students realize those options are available. Have students do some guided research and explore the recommended training for their ideal career, the cost of that training at local institutions, and the average starting salary for those professionals in their area. How long will it take them to recoup their education expenses if they earn the average starting salary? Are there ways for them to lower the cost of their education, like applying for scholarships or taking their general education classes at a community college before transferring to their dream school?

As teachers, we often feel unequipped to have these types of conversations with our students. For many of our students, however, there is no one else to have these conversations with in their lives. Maybe their parents don’t listen or don’t care, their friends have no clue, and their guidance counselors are so busy pulling transcripts and completing other rote tasks that they have no time to actually provide counseling.

It is never too early to discuss education and career options with students. It’s OK if you don’t have all the answers—discover them together. I promise students won’t complain about missing yearbook signing day (a real thing at my alma mater) as they get some much-needed guidance, information, and reassurance about their futures.

Final Thoughts

Thank you for sticking with me through the whole guide! Standardized testing is stressful for both students and teachers, which is why I’m so passionate about doing everything we can to help our students prepare without sacrificing the quality of their education.

If you got bored and skipped to the final thoughts, I get it. Life is busy. Here are the key takeaways I’d like you to hold on to:

1. Remember what the test measures, and especially what it doesn’t. Share that with your students.
2. Teach your students how to take a test, but also teach them how to study.
3. Remind them that the world will keep turning and the sun will continue shining even if they don’t perform as well as they hope they will.
4. Review the test results to make meaningful changes in your classroom. Teaching without making time for reflection hurts your students and robs you of opportunities to be the best possible version of yourself.
5. Don’t waste a single day of instruction when it’s within your control. Create meaningful experiences for your students. That’s why we’re here.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. Standardized testing is stressful, but it doesn’t have to be scary. I hope you have found something new within these pages to try with your students. Please feel free to share your successes and challenges with me on our website or by emailing me directly at ellen.egley@STEMJobs.com.

Remember: Test scores do not define your students, nor do they define you. Use them as they were intended—to help you measure, learn, and grow.

Sources

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