



California's Student Testing Program: STAR

Toward the end of each school year, the state requires its public schools to give a set of tests to all students in grades 2–11. These tests are part of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. While some of the test questions measure students' mastery of basic skills, their main purpose is to see how well schools are teaching and students are learning the state's academic content standards in four core subjects: English language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social science.

What tests are included in the STAR program?

STAR encompasses three different kinds of tests:

- CSTs (California Standards Tests), which are based on the state's standards—what students are supposed to know and be able to do at each grade level;
- CAT/6 (California Achievement Test, Sixth Edition), a test of basic skills;
- SABE/2 (Spanish Assessment of Basic Education, Second Edition), an *additional* test that native Spanish speakers take during their first year in California public schools.

State leaders have put the greatest emphasis on CSTs because they are intended to measure how well students have learned the state's academic content standards. (See: www.cde.ca.gov/standards) Students in grades 2–11 are tested in English language arts and mathematics. Students in grades 8, 10, and 11 also take history/social science CSTs. High school students take science CSTs, and the state plans to add a 5th-grade science test in 2004. CSTs are primarily multiple-choice, but 4th and 7th graders also take a writing test.

CAT/6 tests basic skills. Because it is a national test, CAT/6 was not designed to align with California's standards. It includes multiple-choice questions in reading, English language arts, and mathematics for grades 2–11; spelling for grades 2–8; and science for high school students. California uses the “survey” form of the test, which is shorter than the full test. State leaders are considering offering CAT/6 to only one elementary and one middle school grade.

SABE/2 is a multiple-choice test in Spanish that measures students' knowledge of reading, language arts, and mathematics. Like the CAT/6, the SABE/2 is used by a number of states and is not designed to align with Cali-

fornia's standards. The state uses SABE/2 to test native Spanish speakers who are not fluent in English during their first year in California schools. (Students whose home language is not English and who are not yet proficient in English take an additional test that is not part of the STAR program. The California English Language Development Test, or CELDT, measures their English proficiency and helps determine placement in classes.)

What do student scores mean?

CST scores indicate how well a student has mastered the state's academic content standards. The state has developed performance levels or cut points—scores students must achieve to reach specific levels of proficiency. There are five cut points: far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. California's goal is for every student to score “proficient” or “advanced” in each subject. A test scored this way is called a “criterion-referenced” test.

By contrast, CAT/6 and SABE/2 are “norm-referenced” tests because students' scores are based on how they compare to the scores of a national sample of students (the “norm”). The scores are reported as a national percentile rank. For example, a score at the 60th percentile means the student scored equal to or better than 60% of the students in the national sample. A percentile rank of 50 places the student exactly in the middle of the sample.

How does STAR affect schools?

STAR results form the basis of the state's public school ranking system and are used to determine whether schools are meeting student achievement goals. Schools are ranked based on their Academic Performance Index (API) score, which is a composite number based on student scores on CSTs and CAT/6. Results from the California High School Exit Exam (which is not part of the STAR program) are also included in the API score for high schools. Schools that are taking part in state intervention programs could face sanctions, including the reorganization of the school, if their API scores do not improve.

In addition, the state is relying on STAR scores to measure whether schools have shown “adequate yearly progress,” which is required by the federal government under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Poor student performance on STAR tests has also encouraged educators to change curricula, instructional materials, or teaching methods. For example, some schools have adopted schoolwide reading programs when tests showed that most students were not achieving at grade level in English language arts.

How does STAR affect students?

STAR results can supplement teachers' own methods of measuring student achievement throughout the year and may reveal an individual student's academic strengths and weaknesses. The state also requires school districts to include STAR results when developing criteria for promoting students to the next grade. Each district decides how the tests will be used.

In addition, students in grades 9–11 who perform well on CSTs in English language arts and math (Algebra I or higher) can earn scholarships for post-secondary education. If students score in the top 5% statewide or in the top 10% in their school, they receive \$1,000 for each year of high scores (\$3,000 maximum). In 2004, state policymakers will decide whether to continue this program.

Why do grades and STAR results sometimes tell different stories?

In the fall, parents and teachers can use STAR results along with other information from the previous year to develop an academic plan to help students in areas where they are struggling. STAR results typically reflect grades: students who score well on STAR also earn good grades and vice versa. But there can be a mismatch. Sometimes test questions are not well designed, and some students suffer from test anxiety that can affect their performance. Students who are not fluent in English may not be able to read

the questions and therefore cannot demonstrate their knowledge of a subject.

The STAR program also does not measure everything a student knows or can do, and report cards often reflect more than academic achievement. Teachers typically consider a wide range of factors for final grades (such as effort, leadership, and creativity) and rely on a variety of tools for measuring these factors (such as classroom tests, class participation, and student work samples). In addition, some teachers may put less weight on students' academic mastery or may—by choice or unwittingly—be teaching subject matter that is not based on state standards.

Because STAR does not always tell the whole story, many school districts also administer their own assessments to measure student achievement.

What about Special Education students?

Special Education students may or may not participate in the STAR program according to requirements in their individualized education programs (IEPs). Special Education students are broken into three testing categories:

- Students needing accommodations, which do not fundamentally alter what the test measures (such as the use of a large-print version). These test results are included in a school's API score.
- Students needing modifications, which changes what the test measures (such as using a calculator for a math test). These test results are not part of a school's API score.
- Severely disabled students do not participate in the STAR program. Instead, they take the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA), in which teachers observe and record student performance.

Can parents request that their children not participate in STAR?

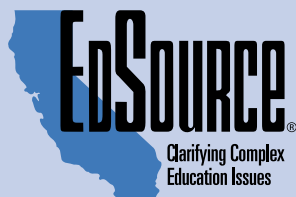
Yes, parents can direct that their children be exempted. However, federal regulations require that schools test at least 95% of their students to substantiate that the students as a whole have made adequate yearly progress. School principals can discuss with parents the pros and cons of exempting their children from STAR. [\[1\]](#)

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How can I find out more?

For additional information:

- Visit the California Department of Education (CDE) websites: <http://star.cde.ca.gov> or www.cde.ca.gov/statetests
- Reach CDE by e-mail: star@cde.ca.gov
- Call CDE's Standards, Curriculum, and Assessments Division: 916/445-8765
- Visit EdSource's website: www.edsource.org



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