

Incorporating Large-Scale Tests into a Learner-Centered Assessment System

Key Findings from Research on Test Preparation Suggested Guidelines for Quality Test Prep (Miyasaka, 2000)

1. Provide quality instruction, practice, and assessment from the entire domain of content objectives including the test objectives during regular instruction
2. Assess students using a variety of assessment approaches during regular instruction
3. Provide students instruction in and practice of test-taking strategies – the act of transferring knowledge to a particular setting
4. Test preparation immediately before the test should focus on reducing student anxiety, not on improving their scores.

Givens for Framing Test Prep in the Bigger Picture of Student Thinking

1. Test taking skills are independent of content abilities. (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992) Actions like **priming** and reducing **stereotype threat** can supplement students' skills.
2. High stakes, summative tests are not typical performance. (Cronbach, 1990) Part of **test-wiseness** is understanding how different situations require different strategies.
3. It's not enough to just practice taking a test. Students need to **reflect** on the test taking experience, **develop** a plan, **practice** their plan, and **reflect** on how the new plan worked. (Hattie, 2009)
4. **Test prep** (explicit preparation in how to take a particular test) is most effective right before (no farther away than 10-14 days before the test). This is not cramming. It's a strategic shift for the learner from learning to applying what they learned in a particular way. Events like dress rehearsals can help reduce students' anxiety during this period.

Strategies for Integrating State Tests into A Learner-Centered System

1. Engage students in learning about themselves as test takers
2. Introduce students to the concept and benefits of self-priming
3. Help students understand and regulate Stereotype Threat

Common Questions on Integrating State Tests into a Learner-Centered Assessment System

1. What is the difference between learner-centered test prep (what we refer to as test prep done right) and test prep we typically see and often occurs by rote?

At its best, test prep reduces student anxiety and increases their metacognition skills. This means that students are thinking about their thinking, their stress level, and how they manage their anxiety - skills students need beyond the day of the test. Test prep that focuses on rote is more likely to focus the students' attention on the test questions, using one right procedure to answer a question, and seeks to raise students' scores. These are typically the test prep strategies teachers themselves were taught or use. The table below highlights more differences:

Learner-Centered Approach Test Prep Done Right	Traditional or Inherited Approach Test Prep Done by Rote
Focus is on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills that extend beyond day of the test • decreasing student anxiety • increasing sense of control and metacognition 	Focus is on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing students' scores • decreasing reliance on individual thinking • increasing "right" answer thinking
Goal is transferring already taught and learned skills and understandings to test medium.	Goal is finishing workbook activities, "polishing" mastery of an ELA/Math skill.
When teachers ask the students to share their thinking, the goal is to highlight individual student approaches and strategies.	When teachers ask the students to share their thinking, the goal is to ensure all students are doing it the "right" way.
Teacher models the skill transfer concept with phrases like "this is what I'm thinking as I take this test" and "this is what the skill looks like but this is what the skill looks like for the test."	Teacher models thinking around answering a given question with phrases like "This is how you should answer this question" and "here's the right way to solve this problem."
Large school gatherings around the test focus on a sense of community and togetherness - <i>We're in this together. We know how amazing you are.</i>	Large school gatherings around the test focus on communicating a sense of personal responsibility - <i>I know I can count on you to do your best.</i> A particular score (i.e. Level 3) is treated as a target for everyone.
Administration takes the temperature of the school, classrooms, and individual students and answers any and all questions to respond to rumors and speculation.	Administration takes a hands off approach, leaving test prep up to individual teachers. Most frequent response to the students' concern is, "don't worry about the test."
Needs of students from stereotyped groups (i.e. children of color, children who experience poverty, anxious students with high expectations for themselves) are addressed in ways that support reducing stereotype threat, not increasing it.	The needs of students from stereotyped groups are ignored or addressed in front of all students. Teachers of color may be tasked with addressing the needs of children of color.
Leaders walk the walk by making concerted efforts to diminish pressure or stress around the tests. They work to develop a culture in which the State assessments are only one of the many data sources used to determine students' areas of strengths and needs.	Leaders talk the talk by reporting they are diminishing pressure but there is disconnect between their actions and words. The NYS State assessments scores drive many conversations, including local data-driven conversations.

2. What does it look like to “practice” for the state tests? I want students to feel prepared.

A great deal goes into doing well on a test, including how we define what it means to “do well.” When you help students practice, it’s helpful to be explicit about what you’re practicing. Seth Godin wrote “*better is better than more*” when it comes to practicing to master or transfer a skill. Are you helping students practice how to answer a particular item? Then model your think aloud for answering that item and ask for at least two other ways to answer that question or solve the problem. The goal should be to help students identify strategies that work for them on the test so that they are thinking about their test taking process, not just mimicking or copying how an adult answers a particular question.

If you are modeling how to “take a test”, build in time to debrief the act of taking a test. Consider asking questions like:

- *Which question in this practice test were harder than others? What made them hard?*
- *Which questions were easier to you? What made them easier to you?*
- *What’s your process for deciding how long to stay with a problem?*
- *When did you decided to move on?*
- *What’s your process for making sure all of the answers on your answer key were correct?*

If you are modeling how to manage the stress and frustration that comes with testing, it’s important to empower students through self-management strategies. Platitudes and “you can do this” will only get students so far. More importantly, words are easy for us to say but hard for students to hear, especially when they are aware of the controversies around test-taking. After giving a practice test, ask students to assess their frustration level. Encourage discussion around how they managed and re-directed their frustration. If they can’t re-direct, discuss ways they can learn to do so such as deep breathing, centering, or using a mantra. Discuss how these strategies work in situations outside of testing. The graphic organizer on page 4 can help students self-assess their frustration level. Systems Thinking tools like *Behavior Over Time Graphs* (<http://watersfoundation.org/our-resources/>) can also help students see the connection between moments of stress and how can they resolve the stress.

3. How much is too much?

Test prep done right is very much like training to be an Olympic weightlifter. You are asking students to lift a heavy cognitive load in order to train for a particular event. Being good at lifting a particular weight, at a particular time, in a particular way seems like a useless skill. However, by virtue of doing the training, athletes get stronger and healthier. The “weightlifting” of preparing for a state assessment seems like a meaningless task that is only applicable in a certain situation at a certain time, but the benefits of metacognition remain long after the test is over. At the same time, it is possible to over-train. Even Olympic athletes cross train. They work on flexibility and endurance as well. Test prep should not become the center of a student’s learning experience. Our first goal is move students closer to mastery of the NYS Learning Standards. In the weeks leading up to the state tests, our goal becomes helping them shift that mastery to a particular medium. Engaging students in a short cycle of self-study before the test can get at variety of skills including data collection, self-reflection, and understanding cause and effect. See page 5 and 6 for a walk-through of an approach to self-study.

Managing Your Frustration



1

Apathy



2

Boredom



3

Easy
Engagement



4

Productive
Provocation



5

Disciplined
Difficulty



6

Overwhelmed



7

Panic



8

Anger



9

Rage



10

Disconnect

What on the test caused you to feel frustration?	What level (#) from the scale was your stress?	Why do you think it happened?	What will you need in order for your frustration to stay between a 3-5?

Original scale developed by Angela Stockman, used with permission

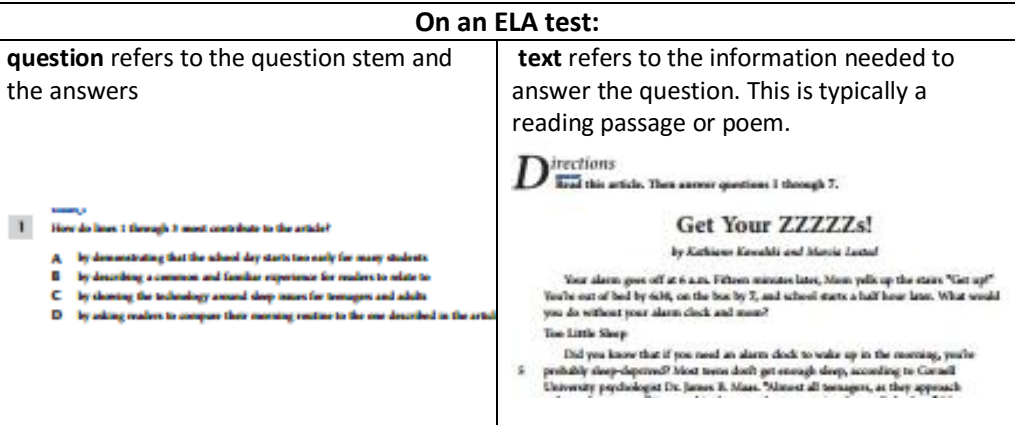
Background Information for Supporting Students with Self-Study

Source for “Practice” Items: Consider using old state assessments from advanced grades (e.g. 3rd takes an old 5th grade test) to model these strategies. The goal of instruction is to reduce student anxiety and help them develop a plan for taking the test that works for them. When presenting students with the practice items, consider letting them know the actual source and why it was chosen. However, for younger students, or those with a high degree of anxiety, this may be too much information. Instead the practice items and passages can be presented as having been picked because they are as challenging as the ones they will experience on the test. Stress that the purpose of the activity is to learn about themselves, not getting a right answer.

What self-study looks like: The goal is to invite students to better understand who they are as a thinker and a test taker. In order to give them time to reflect on what they learned, students should be provided with a way to document their results such as a bar graph or graphic organizer.

Possible structure: One way to consider this self-study is to look at the testing window and plan backwards. If a school has committed to strategic test prep in the week before the test, it might look like:

- *Thursday:* Two practice passages from ELA test or two pages from math test using student strategy of choice; percent correct charted on graph; student generate list of possible strategies
- *Friday:* Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 1; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Monday:* Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 2; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Tuesday:* Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 3; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Wednesday:* Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 4; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Thursday:* Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using strategy of choice based on self-study
- *Friday:* Dress Rehearsal, debrief, and planning

The strategies on the following page describing presenting different parts of an item from a sample test to students at different items.			
On a Math test:		On an ELA test:	
<p>question refers to the question stem and the answers</p>	<p>text refers to the information needed to answer the question such as a grid, graphic, or information table</p> <p>In some cases, this may be included in the question problem and should be covered or removed when presenting the text to students.</p>	<p>question refers to the question stem and the answers</p>	<p>text refers to the information needed to answer the question. This is typically a reading passage or poem.</p>
<p>Arnold’s entire workout consisted of 10 minutes of warm-up exercises, 25 minutes of lifting weights, and 15 minutes on the treadmill. What was the ratio of the number of minutes he lifted weights to the total number of minutes of his entire workout?</p>		 <p>The image shows a sample ELA test item. It includes a title 'Get Your ZZZZZs!' by Kathleen Krushki and Monica Lantieri. The passage discusses sleep deprivation and the importance of an alarm clock. A question asks how the author's purpose is best described, with four options: A) demonstrating that school starts too early, B) describing a common experience, C) showing technology around sleep issues, and D) asking readers to compare routines.</p>	

Sample Multiple Choice Test Taking Strategies

	Question → Text → Question	Text → Question	Text → Tag → Questions	Text → Tag → Question → True/False	Text → Question → Answer without Looking at Choices
	Preview the answer choices, tag the text or solve the problem, return to answers	Read the text or problem, then respond to each question	Read the text, text tag, respond to each question, confirm answer	Read the text, treat each question as a true/false statement	Read the text, read the question stem and write an answer without looking at choices
What are the key points of teaching this strategy?	<i>Do a think aloud of how you would preview the question to inform how you read the text.</i>	<i>Do a think aloud of how you would read the text to prepare yourself for the questions.</i>	<i>Note: this strategy presumes students are familiar with tagging strategies. If not, model first.</i>	<i>Prior to making copies, rephrase one item as a series of four statements. Model thinking of the question with each choice as a true/false statement.</i>	<i>Prior to copying the test, white out or cover up the choices beneath each item stem.</i>
	Hand out the question(s) without the corresponding text.	Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s).	Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s).	Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s).	Hand out the text with or without the questions.
	Give students time to preview the questions and tell them to identify what each one is asking or what math skills will be required.	Give students time to read the text as they normally would.	Give students time to read the text as they normally would. Be sure to remind them of text tagging strategies you've taught them.	Give students time to read the text as they normally would. Be sure to remind them of test text tagging strategies.	Give students time to read the passage the respond to the question. Students should write their answer in the empty space.
	Hand out the corresponding passage or problem. Give students time to read the passage and complete the questions. Prompt them to use their question analysis to inform their reading.	Hand out the questions. Give students time to re-read the text and respond to the question(s).	Hand out the questions and allow students to re-read the text and respond to the question(s). They should be sure to refer to their tagging to confirm that their answers are correct.	Hand out the questions and give students time to read the stem with each answer as a true/false statement.	After they've completed the questions, hand out the questions with the four choices. Students select their answers.
	When students are finished, model for students how to text tag to match question to section of the passage. Be sure to debrief the drawbacks of this approach.	When students are finished, discuss the contrast between strategy 1 and 2. <i>(It's common for students to suggest strategy 3 as a solution)</i>	When students are finished, model a test text tagging strategy. Be sure to discuss the difference between "real" text tagging and test text tagging.	When students are finished, discuss the time challenges posed by the strategy.	When students are finished, discuss the challenges (time, cognitive load) posed by the strategy.
After each strategy, students should score and document their performance. While debriefing any strategy, consider questions such as: What does a test-taker need to be aware of when using this strategy? When might this strategy be ineffective? What are some options if the strategy works well but takes a really long time?					
Additional Debriefing Questions	What are some advantages to reading the questions first?	What are some advantages to reading the text first, and then reading and answering the questions?	What are some advantages to text tagging?	What are some advantages to treating each choice as a true or false statement?	What difference did you notice when you didn't have any choices?
	What are some disadvantages to reading the questions first?	What are some disadvantages to reading the text first, and then reading and answering the questions?	What are some disadvantages to text tagging? What are some important things to tag?	What are some disadvantages to treating each choice as a true or false statement? What is a solution if none of the answers are completely true?	How can you cover up the 4 choices during the test? What if your answer doesn't match any of the uncovered choices?

4. **What does “priming” mean?**

Priming is a psychological effect wherein our exposure to a particular stimulus influences our subsequent thinking. We are primed by the words and images we hear and see, as well as our own thoughts.

One approach to priming is to teach children about self-priming. From Daniel Pink: *Confidence can lead to better performance. There is also a lot of interesting research on interrogative self-talk. If you go into an encounter and try to pump yourself up, saying, “I am awesome!” “I got this!” — it is more effective than doing nothing, but it is less effective than asking yourself, “Can I do this?” Because questions elicit an active response. You prepare yourself. You go over your game plan. You say, “Yeah, I can do this. Last time, I was a little nervous and [rushed through the hard items].” You are preparing. You are like an athlete at batting practice before the game.* Students can and should be taught how to prime themselves before challenging tasks. The state assessments provide an opportunity to practice the skill. Teachers can model this by asking yourself, “Can I do this?” and talking students through their test taking approach. For example: *Can I do this? Yes. I have a plan. My plan is to start with the hard items and then do the easy ones. I’m going to take 3 minutes to look through the test and find 3 hard items (or one hard passage for ELA). I’m going to do those three items (Or one hard passage) and bubble in my answers. Then, I’m going to find an easy one in the beginning of the test and bubble in the answer. Then I’m going to do the rest of the items. I’m going to double-check my bubble sheet when I have 5 minutes left.*

Please see the first column in the chart on Page 2 for examples of language we can use to help positively prime students.

5. **What is Stereotype Threat?**

Stereotype Threat is best understood as the “baggage” that we carry into tests and situations that has less to do with our abilities than how we perceive our abilities. For example, there is a stereotype in America that girls are worse at math than boys are. If girls take a science test moments after being reminded of their gender, they are more likely to perform worse than if they were not reminded of their gender. We need to help students understand and counteract those stereotype as a way to control their own story and manage their own stress. Watching short clips of women, especially women of color, such as Mae Jamison in her TED talk, talk about being smart and her accomplishments can help counteract these stereotypes. More information on the concept including ways to address it, can be found at: <http://www.reducingstereotypethreat.org/>.

6. **What type of questions should be I asking while doing test prep with students?**

The goal is to focus on metacognition, thinking about thinking. There is no one right way to take a test. Questions that focus on the process students used to find the right answer are more effective than ones that focus on an item. For example:

- How do you know answer C is incorrect?
- What makes answer A “more right” or “more defensible” than answer C?
- If I say D is the right answer, where’s the mistake in my thinking? How do I avoid repeating that mistake on other questions?

Whenever possible, teachers should model this kind of thinking in situations unrelated to testing. That is, students should be expressing their thinking processes on a regular basis, not just in anticipation of the tests.

7. **What is a dress rehearsal?**

Lauren Ormsby, a principal in Western NY describes it as: *Once our testing schedule is created, we organize a “dress rehearsal” of the testing day for both Math and ELA. On dress rehearsal day students run through the testing schedule as if it is the day of the test. Sample tests are created and students take these tests in the testing environment. After the students take the sample test each teacher or accommodation provider discusses the experience with the students. During this discussion, children identify what went well, what was difficult for them and students identify strategies they used during while taking the real test. This is followed by a whole class discussion where the students share strategies with each other. Finally, each student creates a testing plan in which they choose strategies they will employ during the test and write them out. When planning the dress rehearsal, we ensure the practice test is rigorous and longer than the students can finish in the time allotted. This allows us to have important discussions with our students about what strategies they used when they did not understand a question and how they felt if and when they ran out of time. Additionally, students receiving accommodations learn who they will be testing with and have the opportunity to meet with that person ahead of time. The dress rehearsal is an important part of setting the stage for the test, demystifying it for the students and working out any bugs in a low stress situation.*

For more information on **Integrating State Tests into a Learner-Centered Assessment System**, please contact:

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