

# Introduction

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE REALLY PREPARED FOR TESTS AND DO BETTER IN SCHOOL?**

It means that students know how to play the testing game and come out as winners. It means that students specifically know how to

1. get in the right frame of mind to take a test,
2. use all available resources to study effectively for both objective and essay tests,
3. anticipate the right questions for each test,
4. practice answering those questions before the test,
5. recognize the cues, or clues, given in the test, and
6. use strategies to correctly answer as many questions as possible in the time allotted for the test.

Additionally, test preparation is a good way to study and learn in school. Preparing for tests involves the use and coordination of many study skills, including organization, time management, note taking, and memorization. It also includes the learning and application of specialized strategies for study and learning skills that enable students to prepare for and take essay and objective tests. Test preparation strategies are really good learning strategies as well. Use of these strategies enables many students to do better in school (Flippo, 2002b).

## **HOW DO STANDARDIZED TESTS FIT IN?**

Two up-front but related questions that users of this book are likely to have are “What are standardized tests?” and “How can this book, *Preparing Students for Testing and Doing Better in School*, help students on the

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standardized tests they must take?" Therefore, before we begin using the *Preparing Students* materials, it is important here to address these questions.

### What Are Standardized Tests?

Standardized tests are commercially prepared assessment instruments that are given to those being tested under prescribed and uniform conditions. In 1990, John Pikulski indicated that even though many find fault with standardized tests, it is not likely they will disappear. In fact, he and others, including Sheila Valencia and Karen Wixon (2000), have cited evidence that standardized tests are being used more and for more varied high-stakes purposes than ever. With standardized tests, everyone gets the same test, directions, test information, and time allotment to take the test.

These tests can be further classified as either norm referenced or criterion referenced, referring to how their particular scores have been derived and how these scores will later be reported. Norm-referenced scores are derived by comparing an individual's *raw score* (number of correct answers) to the scores of those in the group on which the test was normed. Therefore, *norm-referenced tests* report the norm-referenced scores of those being tested. Test takers are compared with others who have taken the test. Criterion-referenced scores are test results that have been determined by comparing an individual's raw score to a predetermined passing score for the test or subtest being taken. *Criterion-referenced tests*, then, report whether or not test takers have passed or failed the predetermined criterion of the given test or subtest they have taken. Test takers are not compared to other test takers, just to the criterion.

Consumers of standardized tests often do not realize that norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests can look exactly the same, assess the same objectives and information, and even ask the same questions. This is because the only real difference between them is in how their scores are reported. Those test publishers developing both types of standardized tests build them from specified objectives and then subject them to the necessary procedures either to norm reference them, by first giving the test to others in similar age or grade groups and then using these results to "norm" the test, or to criterion reference them by having knowledgeable persons (for example, experienced experts in the area being tested) review the test questions to determine how many of the answers an individual test taker should be required to get correct to pass the test—thus establishing the "criteria."

Although criticisms of standardized tests and of both types of standardized test scores abound, they tend to concentrate on three major problems and issues. One problem inherent with norm-referenced scored tests is whether the norming groups match those taking the test. A second common complaint, this one against criterion-referenced tests, concerns the arbitrary cut-off scores. A third group of concerns relates to the implications of the high-stakes usage of standardized tests in general. Those who make decisions regarding whether or not to give standardized tests, the

extent to which their results will be counted, and which type of standardized test to use must weigh these issues to make informed decisions appropriate for their testing purposes and the populations they will be testing.

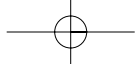
Standardized tests and their scores are commonly used as entrance and exit measures for schools, colleges, graduate programs, licensure purposes, and career advancement and other job-related purposes and to evaluate students and schools, colleges, and teachers. Hence their well-known moniker, *high-stakes tests*. The large array of standardized tests often makes it confusing for those making the decisions to select the most appropriate ones. Matching the test to the purpose is thus a very important concern: The technical manuals and other materials accompanying a test must provide full, accurate, and up-to-date information to allow test users to make their decisions. Also important are decisions regarding what should be tested: Should reading, for example, be tested as a product or a process? If it is regarded as a product, questions usually focus on the testing of the more discrete, isolated subskills. The tendency of standardized tests to focus on these skills targets them for criticism by those who believe reading should be treated as a process; in the critics' view, the tests overlook the more important evaluation of students' strategies (Flippo & Schumm, in press).

Special populations of students, for instance those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those with particular learning disabilities, are not well served by standardized tests: Making students who come from a non-English-speaking background take tests in English has been highly criticized. Misuse and inappropriate interpretations of standardized test scores are another important issue. Publishers and users of these tests have a grave responsibility to ensure that those in the position to use score information understand it. Technical problems with standardized tests also raise major concerns as to their validity (Flippo, 2002a).

### **How Can This Book Help Students Prepare for Standardized Tests?**

The material in this book is comprehensive and inclusive of all subject areas, and it thoroughly covers the preparation for and the taking of all kinds of tests. What's more, the material in this book has been designed to help students be *prepared* and make the most of the information they have learned in their school subjects and courses. In other words, students using the material contained herein not only develop *test-wise* skills (i.e., knowing how to study and successfully take the various required tests), but also as a result of *being prepared*, they learn more and do better in school. To the extent that a standardized test covers and assesses content that has been learned in school (meaning that the standardized test has *content validity*), students using the *Preparing Students* book should do very well indeed!

In fact, *Preparing Students* provides a thorough grounding in specific strategies for preparing and studying for all types of objective questions in varied content areas (see Chapter 5). These are the types of questions that compose most standardized tests. But if the standardized test your



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students must take includes essay questions, your students will be ready, because Chapter 4 provides specific strategies for preparing for all types of essay questions across the range of content areas as well. Furthermore, Chapter 8 provides specific strategies to use while actually taking objective tests, while Chapter 7 does the same with essay tests.

