

Improve Your Odds on High Stakes Tests

By Dr. Ray Huntington

As an annual “rite of spring,” statewide exams like Virginia’s Standards of Learning (SOL) and the Maryland School Assessment become an increasingly important factor in decisions about whether students will graduate or advance to the next grade. Given these high stakes, many students feel anxious as exam day approaches. But with careful preparation and good test-taking skills, all students can take positive steps to improve their scores.

Get Prepared

Step One: Find out in advance about what’s going to be tested.

The guidance office of your child’s school should be able to give you details about state and district “standards” for subject matter knowledge that will be tested in these exams. Reviewing these standards will give you a good idea of the test content, and which skills and knowledge areas should be strengthened before taking the exams. You can also find out more about the standards and tests at the Department of Education website for your state. In Virginia, information about the SOL exams can be found at www.pen.k12.va.us. Maryland students can learn more about the Maryland School Assessment at www.msde.state.md.us. And in Washington, DC, where students take the Stanford 9, information can be found at <http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/home.html>.

Step Two: Talk with teachers.

Chances are, your children’s teachers are already going to great lengths to ensure their students are prepared for these tests. Talking with teachers is another good way to determine how well your child is performing on grade-level material that’s relevant to the tests.

Step Three: Get help.

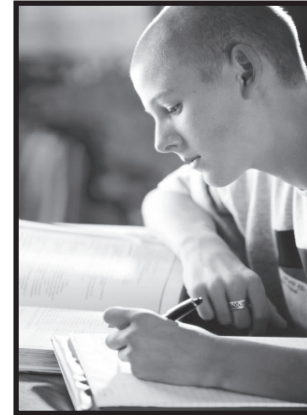
Your child’s teacher should also be able to tell you about test preparation programs that may be available after school or on weekends. If your child’s teacher recommends extra help from a tutor, make sure that you work with individuals and organizations that begin with a diagnostic assessment of your child’s skills and knowledge. This will enable a qualified tutor to create a personalized program of instruction directly tailored to your child’s needs.

Step Four: When reading, think about the 5 “W”s.

Reading comprehension skills are vital for academic success and for top performance on these tests. Students can strengthen these skills by quizzing themselves with questions about “Who, What, Where, Why and When” as they work through homework and reading assignments.

Step Five: Become a better writer.

Writing skills are also key to success on most statewide tests – and for new versions of the SAT and ACT as well. Writing two types of journals can strengthen these skills. A schoolwork journal can help students summarize what has been read or studied. Through a personal journal – in which students write about whatever interests them – students can become more adept at articulating ideas and feelings.



Strengthen Test Taking Skills

Step One: Read the directions carefully.

Students should pay close attention to the directions, and follow them to the letter. If students don’t understand the directions, they should ask the teacher before beginning.

Step Two: Quickly survey the entire test before beginning.

This process helps students get a good overall idea of the material that will be tested and helps identify which questions will be easiest to answer.

Step Three: Answer the easier questions first.

This will help build up points (and confidence!). While answering the easier questions, your child can be subconsciously finding answers for the difficult questions to come.

Step Four: When it comes to multiple choice, take a logical path to the right one.

Students should start by eliminating answers they know are wrong, then carefully consider the others. If your child isn’t sure, he or she should make the best choice, since not answering is usually the equivalent of giving a wrong answer.

Step Five: Get used to the five-paragraph essay.

The five-paragraph essay is a staple of English composition classes at both the secondary school and college level. It’s also a good model for students to follow in writing essays under deadline pressure during major tests. The first paragraph of an essay answer should state the key point and give a succinct overview of the essay. Each of the next three paragraphs should directly support the key point, using examples and specific facts. The essay should end with a short paragraph that succinctly summarizes the essay in two or three sentences. Most students will find it helpful to jot down an outline before beginning.

Step Six: Save time for review.

Students should save at least a few minutes to review answers and to make sure that all questions have been answered. It’s also important to proofread for grammar, spelling and careless mistakes.

The Final Word: Take a healthy approach.

Most parents recognize the connection between rest, good nutrition and everyday academic performance, but these factors are especially important on the day of a big exam. A good night’s sleep and a good breakfast will help your child concentrate. Parents should also do whatever they can to lessen their children’s anxiety about these tests. By planning ahead and getting whatever help might be needed, most students will naturally be more relaxed and confident when their skills are put to the test. ❖

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington is co-founder of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children achieve success in school for 26 years. For more information about how Huntington can help your child, call 1 800 CAN LEARN.