

Questions and Answers

Achievement Tests

1. **What do I do if the superintendent has a “no exemptions” policy and I feel that some of my students are not capable of writing the test?**

The policy for excusing students clearly states that it is the teacher’s responsibility to make recommendations about possible exemptions through the principal to the Superintendent of Schools. The final decision rests with the Superintendent. The documentation for such a decision must be in place, and the Superintendent must make a decision for individual students based on the evidence with which he/she is presented. This information must be kept on file in the school in the event that it is requested by Alberta Education. There are two provisions for exemption, which are outlined in the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program*. The information bulletin is available on Alberta Education’s website at <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/testing/achievement/achievementbulletin.aspx>, in the *Administration and Directives* section.

2. **Why are there so many absences from the tests? I thought that everyone had to write them.**

The absentee rate is in fact very low. For a large-scale assessment program, Alberta has high participation rates. However, instances do exist where the absentee rate is higher than expected. In these cases, Superintendents of Schools may wish to discuss the differences with specific schools. The idea is that students who are absent on the day of testing should be given the opportunity to write the test(s) when they return to school. We know, however, that because of extenuating circumstances, this does not always happen. There have been unusual circumstances, such as a measles outbreak in a Grade 3 population or a school burning down, that would call for the students to be coded as absent. These are rare occurrences, but some happen each year.

3. **Do First Nations students attending band-operated schools write the achievement tests?**

All students in Alberta are required to write the achievement tests, including those in band-operated and federally operated schools.

4. **What about students who transfer mid-year from another school, province, or country?**

The results of students who transfer from School A to School B during the year are attributed to School B, regardless of when the transfer was made. If transfer information is forwarded to Alberta Education before March 1st, these new students are entered into the SIS system and appear on the List of Students that comes with the achievement test packages. Names that are not on the List of Students must be added manually by the principal.

Transferring students who cannot speak or read English at the time of testing may be excused by their Superintendent of Schools if the superintendent judges that the students are not capable of responding or if participation would be harmful to them.

5. **What about students on Individual Program Plans (IPPs)? Do they write? Are they marked as being absent or excused? If they write, do we send in the results, or do we keep them?**

Students who have Individual Program Plans are expected to write the achievement tests. According to what is called for in their instructional plans, testing accommodations can be approved for individual children, in accordance with the accommodations provided on a regular basis in their classroom. (See the Accommodations section of the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program*, at <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/testing/achievement/achievementbulletin.aspx>.) Their tests are to be returned to us with all the others. They are coded to note the special accommodations that the students receive because some special provisions affect scoring.

- 6. In the language arts achievement tests, will students continue to have scribes for the writing section and readers for the reading section?**

The answer to both questions is yes. For those students with specific learning disabilities, the use of a scribe or reader is called for in their Individual Program Plans (IPPs) and helps “level the playing field” because the students would not be able to write the tests without these provisions. The guidelines for using these provisions, as well as guidelines for the conduct of scribes and readers, are clearly outlined in the *General Information Bulletin, Achievement Testing Program*. Students who have a scribe will have their written-response papers marked differently to reflect this provision. Specifically, the Convention category is not marked, and the student’s score is pro-rated.

- 7. If a child has a CD version of the language arts test, how can you report a reading score for him/her? Isn’t it auditory comprehension that is being tested?**

Part B: Reading of the Language Arts Achievement Test is designed to find out how well students perform a number of reading skills. These include understanding explicit and implicit ideas and details, associating meaning of words and phrases in context, recognizing various writing techniques, and synthesizing and drawing conclusions from entire passages. Students who are assisted by a CD version of the test are still required to demonstrate these skills even though they do not have to decode print. Some students would not have an opportunity to demonstrate their achievement in these skills without the CD.

- 8. Why and how would you code an ESL student when there is no funding?**

There is funding for ESL (non-Canadian born) students, but only for five years. The funding is based on the number of years in the program, not on the age of the student. Once students have had five years of specially funded programming, they may continue with ESL classes, but they do not have the designation code for funded students. They are part of the regular funding that is given for all students in the system. The codes for funding classification are part of the Student Information System (SIS), and the information that each school provides via SIS is the information that is used to code the achievement tests.

- 9. Why should home-educated students who write the tests in a school have their results factored into the school results? They should be part of the Home Education report.**

Home-educated students’ results are part of a Home Education report and not included in the results for the school where they wrote the achievement tests.

- 10. Is it noted anywhere that several of our students did the language arts written-response part using a computer?**

Alberta Education’s *Word Processor Policy* allows whole classes of students to use word processors, provided they have used them for instruction throughout the year. This is not a special provision, and it does not appear on the Individual Student Profile.

- 11. On the Grade 9 mathematics and science tests, why is there no difference in marks between multiple-choice and numerical-response questions?**

The two styles of questions assess outcomes that are of equal importance, so there is no mark differentiation.

- 12. In areas such as Grade 9 Mathematics, where school and provincial results are significantly below expectations, what adjustments in the test or curriculum are planned?**

When results are significantly below expectations, a careful review of the expectations represented in the curriculum and the test is conducted. If standards are confirmed, as they have been in Grade 9 Mathematics, no changes are made to the test or curriculum. Instead, effort is devoted to helping students improve achievement.

- 13. Why are results for students in French Immersion tabulated separately from those in regular programs, even though the students are in the same school?**

The results for students writing in French are reported separately from students writing in English because the students write different versions of the tests. We cannot be certain that results from an assessment in a student's second language are equivalent to those in the student's first language. Therefore, we cannot report results from French Immersion and the English program together as one report for a dual-track school.

- 14. Don't achievement tests in the different subject areas test English reading ability and reasoning ability rather than student knowledge and learning?**

Reading is an important aspect of every achievement test. The five subjects tested in the achievement program all use the printed word as an important communication tool. Through the development process, teachers ensure that the reading level in all tests is appropriate for the grade. Students for whom reading level is a serious issue may be given special provisions for the tests.

Throughout the instructional year, teachers and students make use of many facts and details in order to build important skills and concepts in each subject area. It is these major skills and concepts that are addressed in the achievement tests. Many test questions deliberately require students to exercise their reasoning abilities within the context of the subject matter. Students who have memorized facts and details but have failed to grasp the essential concepts of a subject will be at a significant disadvantage.

- 15. What are adjustable cut-scores, and what is their value to educators?**

The cut-scores identify the number of correct answers a student needs to demonstrate the acceptable standard and the standard of excellence. The tests are designed so that the cut-scores are 50% (acceptable standard) and 80% (standard of excellence). Part of the design procedure includes having the test questions and standards validated by teachers before the test is administered. In the first years of a new or revised curriculum, a committee of teachers goes through standard-setting procedures that give an indication of what cut-score would represent performance at the standards. Statistical procedures are also applied to the tests to determine their equivalency in difficulty with previous achievement tests.

Cut-scores vary on different tests by one or two points because different tests are not perfectly equal in difficulty. Changes in cut-scores are designed to ensure that the standards of performance required of students at the acceptable standard and standard of excellence are consistent from one year to the next.

- 16. Why is there a great deal of figuring following the scoring of writing instead of adjusting the raw score at the outset to reflect the weighting? The relative weighting could affect program emphasis.**

Rather than having different scales to reflect the weighting, areas of marking are weighted after scoring to make scoring easier and more reliable. If all scales have the same number of points, markers do not need to constantly shift their mindset when marking. The relative weighting of the areas is communicated in the subject bulletins so that teachers have this information early in the school year when they are program-planning.

- 17. Why weren't the corrections that I made to students' names on the answer sheets applied to the results?**

Student information comes to us from the Student Information System (SIS), which gets its data directly from the schools. It is each school's responsibility to ensure that the information for individual students is accurate. SIS gets data at the beginning of each school year, as of September 30. These data can be updated on March 1 of each school year. Students who transfer to a school after March 1 will not have updated information in the system. Any errors in the system cannot be corrected by the Assessment Sector analysts. Their job is to analyze and report the data based on the information that they get from the SIS system.

18. Why is there a large difference in the number of students writing the tests across the province?

Students in Francophone and French Immersion programs also have to write the English Language Arts achievement test. Therefore, the number of students writing the English Language Arts achievement test in grades 3, 6, and 9 is larger than the number writing the tests in other subjects. There is no appreciable difference between the numbers of students writing the Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies achievement tests.

19. How does someone obtain students' results when the results have been withheld?

When there are possible anomalies in the administration of an achievement test, results are withheld while an investigation takes place. After the investigation, the results are either declared invalid, or declared valid and transmitted to schools. Withheld or invalid results are not available to anyone.

20. What percentage of achievement tests are marked locally?

Alberta Education collects information about how many tests are marked locally but not about how the marking is organized at the school or jurisdiction level.

The percentage of tests marked locally whose marks were reported to Alberta Education is shown below.

Course	Percentage of Part A: Writing Marked Locally
Grade 9 ELA	77%
Grade 6 ELA	71%
Grade 3 ELA	74%
Grade 9 FLA	80%
Grade 6 FLA	50%
Grade 3 FLA	74%

Tests whose local marks are reported are automatically marked twice—once locally and once centrally.

21. What kind of achievement test instruction preparation are school jurisdictions giving their teachers? How are they helping teachers to instruct their students to write the achievement tests and be successful?

The type of instruction is as varied as the school authorities. However, Alberta Education gives all teachers the subject bulletins that contain sample questions, blueprints of the tests, and helpful hints for helping students prepare for the tests. We further suggest that the very best way to prepare students for the achievement tests is to teach the curriculum well. Excessive practicing is of little benefit to the students. They should be familiar with the multiple-choice format, and this can be accomplished easily with [QuestA+ practice tests](#), the practice questions from the [subject bulletins](#), and [released items](#).

22. What kind of achievement test information should schools make public to their communities?

Schools should share a variety of information. Schools are in the best position to interpret the results from the achievement tests based on their local context. Administrators should outline for parents, and the community at large, all of the factors to be considered. They should tell them about the various programs at the school. It is important for parents to understand what the goals for the school are and how programs are meeting the individual needs of the students. If there are areas that need improvement, most people expect a plan for improvement and a consistent effort by all staff to follow this plan.