

# CLASSROOM



## The new state tests in grades seven & eight What families need to know

This school year, children in grades seven and eight will take new state tests in English language arts and math. Similar exams have been in place for eighth graders for a number of years, as have tests in second languages, science, social studies and technology.

Although testing at all levels can provide useful feedback about how well children are learning their lessons, testing during the junior high school years is considered particularly important.

The pre-teen years are a time of rapid change for kids. Physically, socially and emotionally, the years between 10 and 13 rival the first three years of children's lives in terms of growth. Often, all this upheaval can leave kids less self-assured and less interested in academics.

However, demanding state and national learning standards don't allow students the luxury of taking a break from academics during junior high school. Everything about school today—from the courses students take to the tests they need to pass in order to graduate—is more demanding than ever before. Success with their junior high lessons now will help students excel later on.

Testing children regularly throughout junior high school is one way of ensuring that they are on track academically. Such tests help show whether children need additional help to confidently move ahead in school. These tests will also help teachers identify where the curriculum might need to be fine-tuned to better meet students' needs.

### A LOOK AT THE NEW JUNIOR HIGH TESTS

The new state tests are carefully designed to reflect the types of information and skills that children are expected to learn at their respective grade levels. Although students will be given opportunities throughout the year to become familiar with the format of these tests, the school year will not be spent drilling for these exams. Instead, the primary focus of junior high school education is on expanding children's knowledge in many subject areas, teaching them to be more self-reliant and preparing them for the academic challenges ahead.

### The English language arts (ELA) tests

The English language arts tests are administered in two sessions for students in grade seven and three sessions in grade eight. These exams are designed to measure students' abilities in reading, listening and writing. The tests contain a variety of questions including multiple choice, short- and extended-response and editing tasks.

### Math

The junior high school mathematics tests are administered in two sessions in grade seven and three sessions in grade eight. They are designed to assess how well students have mastered the newly proposed mathematics learning standard.

At each grade level, students will apply the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom in order to answer three types of questions: multiple-choice, short-response and extended-response.

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

#### Sample editing question (grade seven)

There are some mistakes in this paragraph. Some sentences may have more than one mistake, and other sentences may contain no mistakes at all. There are no mistakes in spelling. Read the paragraph and find the mistakes. Draw a line through each mistake in the paragraph. Then write the correction above it.

When you look up at the night sky, you see the beautiful stars shining, you see a full moon. The view from space can be quite another matter, though. From Earth you cannot see none of the nuts, bolts, paint chips, and other assorted pieces of space debris orbits Earth every day. The worst thing about space debris is not it's ugly appearance; space debris can be extremely dangerously. These bits of metal and other junk travels through the air at speeds greater than 20,000 miles an hour and can create serious damage.

#### Sample reading question (grade eight)

After reading an essay about the life of socialite Molly Brown, a woman who survived the sinking of the Titanic, students will answer questions, such as the following:

1. The author of "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" writes that Molly Brown was so famous that people wrote tall tales about her. Why do you think people were so interested in her? Do you think her fame was deserved? Write an essay in which you explain your opinion of Molly Brown. Use details from the article to support your answer. In your answer, be sure to tell:

- why Molly Brown was so famous;
- whether Molly Brown deserved to be famous;
- logical reasons to support your opinion;
- details from the article to explain your answer.

Check your writing for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

#### Sample math question (grade seven)

After reviewing a table that shows the favorite breakfast foods of 20 classmates, students will use a protractor to make a circle graph that displays the data from the table. They will need to title and label each section of their graphs.

#### Sample math question (grade eight)

The regular price of a CD is \$18.00. If the CD is on sale for 15% off the regular price, what is the sale price?

- A \$2.70
- B \$15.30
- C \$16.20
- D \$16.50

## Helping Students Succeed

Teachers have been involved in ongoing professional development training sessions to prepare for the upcoming grades 3-8 New York State Testing Program. In addition to content and structure workshops, and aligning the curriculum to the state standards, staff members have been assisted with interpreting test results data. "This system of disaggregation of information enables teachers to focus on areas that require more concentration," according to Katherine Sullivan, Assistant Superintendent. Academic Intervention Services (AIS) and targeted instructional strategies are in place to facilitate student learning, said Sullivan. These AIS services are offered during the school day, as well as after-school for students in need of extra assistance.

### A little extra help goes a long way

Math and English Language Arts (ELA) are the areas where students usually require the most assistance. In addition to the highly qualified classroom teachers at Knox Jr. High School, additional support personnel include Patty Smicinski, math lab teaching assistant and Eric Schneider, English AIS/English as a second language (ESL) teacher who help pupils with daily lessons, assignments, and tests, ultimately preparing them for what lies ahead — the state assessments.

Ms. Smicinski commented, "We are reinforcing basic skills for each grade level on a daily basis." In math lab, students learn through hands-on activities, such as using building blocks or coloring quilt squares as a tangible way to learn fractions. "The extra help is for students who are somewhat struggling," says Smicinski.

As the exams grow closer, Mr. Schneider helps his students prepare using materials outside of the traditional textbook. "On a daily basis we add to the information in the textbooks by providing supplemental materials to students," he said. Schneider continued, "For example, a poem may be used to connect a common theme of a novel. The parallels drawn from both the novel and the poem help students to understand the theme in a different way. This style of thinking is what will help prepare students for these tests."

### Practice, Practice, Practice

Most students — whether in a regular classroom setting or in a learning lab — will become familiar with the structure of state assessments by taking exams administered in previous years. "We walk through the open-ended questions of past tests, step-by-step," said Smicinski. She reported that she has found that one of the difficulties students have is in understanding the wording on the math tests. Smicinski assists students in selecting the necessary information that they need to answer the question.

## What do the test scores mean?

The results of the state assessment are reported with a performance level from 1-4, as described below:

**Level 4-** Student has exceeded state academic standards

**Level 3-** Student has met state academic standards

**Level 2-** Student has fallen short of state academic standards and needs help to meet those expectations.

**Level 1-** Student is in academic jeopardy and needs significant remediation/extra help.

Following the scoring process, the State Education Department is responsible for releasing test result information to school districts.



For the latest Greater Johnstown School District news and happenings as well as more information on state testing, go online to the District's website. [www.johnstownschoools.org](http://www.johnstownschoools.org)

# After School

## P · R · O · G · R · A · M

### 21st Century Community Learning Center After-School Program

Beyond the comprehensive instructional school day program, the Greater Johnstown School District has become a partner with the Board of Cooperative Educational Services in offering the 21st Century Community Learning Center After-School Program. This federally funded initiative is housed at Knox Jr. High School and provides academic assistance, as well as recreational outlets. It is available to sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. Schneider, a certified English teacher, is one of the many qualified professional staff members assisting students after school.

"I tutor in all academic areas at the after-school program," Schneider said. One of the strategies used is cooperative peer learning. Schneider commented that he observes students while they are helping to tutor each other, which reinforces the learning process even further.

## Easing test anxiety

To ensure children are prepared for their testing experience, it is suggested that they...

- ▶ Get a good night's sleep;
- ▶ Eat a healthy breakfast;
- ▶ Dress comfortably;
- ▶ Are on time or a little early for the exam;
- ▶ Bring all necessary materials (pens, pencils, calculators, etc.); and
- ▶ Avoid stressful situations (arguments, rushing around on the day of the exam, etc.).

Parents and guardians can also calm their child's apprehension by offering words of encouragement. If your child(ren) do not seem to be taking the tests seriously, let them know that you view the tests as important. Also, communicate that you have confidence in them and that you will be proud of their test results as long as they do their very best.

## MARK YOUR calendar



### State 2005-06 test schedule for junior high students

These assessments are part of New York State's move toward higher learning standards for all students in public schools. The state exams will be given on the following schedule:

- ▶ **GRADES 7 & 8 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:**  
Tuesday, January 17-Friday, January 20\*
- ▶ **GRADES 7 & 8 MATHEMATICS:**  
Monday, March 13-Friday, March 17\*
- ▶ **GRADE 8 SCIENCE (PERFORMANCE TEST):**  
Monday, April 10-Friday, May 12\*
- ▶ **GRADE 8 SCIENCE (WRITTEN TEST):**  
Monday May 1-Friday May 12\*
- ▶ **GRADE 8 SOCIAL STUDIES:**  
Wednesday, June 7 - Part 1 • Thursday, June 8 - Part 2

\*Students will not be tested for all of these days. Depending on the grade level, tests run two to three days. This range of dates is given so school districts can stagger tests for different grades throughout the testing week(s).