

AMERICAN HERITAGE SCHOOL
STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT FAQ'S
 (UPDATED FEBRUARY 7, 2014)

General Principles and Practices for Standardized Assessment at AHS

1. **What standardized assessments are administered at AHS, to what grade levels, and with what frequency?** A: The school employs a number of standardized assessments: STAR Early Literacy, STAR Reading, STAR Math, EXPLORE, PLAN, Practice ACT, ACT, PSAT and SAT. Each test is administered within a limited sequence and frequency. For example, STAR Early Literacy is administered in Grades K–1 three times per year. STAR Reading is administered in Grades 1–10 three times per year. STAR Math is given in Grades 1–10 three times per year. The total time spent by a student on STAR assessment over the course of a year is approximately 3-5 hours (approximately one-third the time that was spent with the former ITBS tests administered at AHS). EXPLORE is given in Grade 9 once per year. PLAN and Practice ACT are administered in Grade 10 once per year. PSAT-NMSQT is administered in Grade 11 once per year. ACT is optional and made available to students in Grades 11–12 four times per year. A summary of AHS’s assessment sequence and frequency is depicted in the following chart:

	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
STAR—Early Literacy	3	3											
STAR—Reading	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		
STAR—Math	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		
ACT—EXPLORE										1			
ACT—PLAN											1		
PSAT-NMSQT												1	
ACT (Optional or SAT)												1	1
SAT (Optional or ACT)												0	0

2. **How important are standardized assessments at AHS? What are the specific purposes for which AHS uses norm referenced (standardized) assessments, and how much weight do we give them?** A: Standardized assessments carry very little weight at AHS. They are simply one data point and one of various tools that we use. In a study by the Friedman Foundation, only 10% of parents at private schools in Georgia ranked standardized exams in the top five reasons for their choice of a private school. Standardized assessment data are viewed by American Heritage School as data with limited, but potentially important, usefulness in a broader array of holistic approaches to teaching and learning. The most important purposes of standardized tests include communicating actionable information and reports to parents during parent teacher conferences. Standardized tests are used by the school to communicate “percentile ranking,” “grade-level equivalence,” and “scale score”

averages to parents and teachers. STAR, EXPLORE, PLAN, PSAT, ACT, and SAT performance data provide these functions in the grades in which they are used.

3. **How do we assess other “whole child” outcomes that we value at AHS (Christian character, kindness, respect, teamwork, selflessness, humility, etc.)? What are the merits/limitations of using these kinds of measures?** A: We measure most what we value most. Christian character is what we value most at AHS. Thus, assessment of character development is central to our mission as a faith-based and character-focused school. Instead of just three or four times per year as with standardized academic assessments, we employ daily and weekly character measurement standards such as self-government grades, which include a scale for measuring work ethic, respect, humility, and behavior, as well as conduct-based measurement standards related to the AHS Honor Code, which include standards that students uphold on- and off-campus, as well as a uniform standard that students commit to uphold at school. The AHS Honor Code, the AHS uniform standards—and all of the time that teachers, administrators, students, and parents spend measuring performance of students relative to these behavioral standards—constitute the most visible character development assessments that we conduct on a daily and even hourly basis at AHS. Merits of these kinds of measures include the usefulness to parents in teaching their children the value of character and commitment to virtues such as honesty, integrity, self-government, and humility. Limitations of these kinds of measures include the difficulty of measuring the often intangible and subjective nature of intrapersonal growth and character.
4. **Do standardized assessments drive the choices of curriculum or methodologies in AHS classrooms, if at all? Do we “teach to the test”?** A: No. Standardized assessments do not drive choices of curriculum or methodologies in AHS classrooms, but instead function as a periodic “skills checkup” for parents and teachers seeking a “snapshot” assessment of basic reading comprehension skills and basic math computation proficiency. Some parents desire an instrument to measure their children’s academic performance relative to state and national norms. But AHS teachers do not modify curriculum, or adopt other curriculum, in an effort to “teach to the test,” either by modifying content or skills taught. STAR is purely auxiliary in its use. This is not to say that a teacher might not use additional AHS curriculum or concentrate on certain approved AHS methodologies for a specific student or set of students for whom a standardized assessment might highlight a particular strength or weakness. This kind of intervention, and subsequent measurement of the student response to intervention, is an important part of the teaching and learning process when students exhibit certain strengths and weaknesses.
5. **Who decides what standardized assessments will be used at AHS?** The Teacher Development & Curriculum Committee, which is a committee of the AHS Board of Trustees, decides what standardized assessments will be used at AHS and how often. The committee is charged with strategic oversight of AHS curriculum, assessment (including standardized), and teacher professional development (i.e. in-service, Foundations Training). The committee is composed of board members, administrators, teachers, and parents, and the committee meets at least four times per year (often monthly) to discuss curriculum, curriculum modifications, assessment, teacher training, and special curriculum-related events.
6. **Do parents have a choice at AHS about whether their students take standardized assessments or about the frequency of their children’s assessment with standardized tests?** A: Yes. Parental discretion is of paramount importance to us in this matter. AHS parents may choose whether their children participate in standardized assessments, what standardized tests are administered to their

children, and the frequency of their children's assessments with standardized tests. Although teachers benefit from a recommended schedule of standardized assessment, parents wishing to opt out of testing—or to adjust the frequency with which their child is assessed—should communicate directly with the AHS administrator who has been given stewardship over their child's grade level. See “Options for Parents” (Questions 16 and 17 below).

AHS Use of STAR Assessments

7. **What is STAR?** STAR Reading, STAR Early Literacy and STAR Math are standardized, computer-adaptive assessments created by Renaissance Learning, Inc., for use in K-12 education. Each is an assessment of a skill (reading practice, math practice, and early literacy, respectively) that can be used any number of times due to item-bank technology. These assessments fall somewhere between progress monitoring tools and high-stakes tests, but would only be considered high-stakes tests *if used by AHS for purposes other than basic and occasional progress monitoring*—and AHS simply does not use STAR data for high-stakes purposes (such as grade-level placement, curriculum decisions, graduation requirements, etc.)—nor do we ever plan to use STAR assessments for these purposes.
8. **What subjects are tested at AHS using STAR assessment and for what grade levels?** A: The school administers standardized assessments with a very limited scope, sequence, and frequency. STAR Early Literacy is administered in Grades K–1 three times per year. STAR Reading is administered in Grades 1–10 three times per year. STAR Math is given in Grades 1–10 three times per year. EXPLORE is given in Grade 9 once per year. PLAN and Practice ACT administered in Grade 10 once per year. PSAT-NMSQT is administered in Grade 11 once per year. ACT is made available (optionally) to students in Grades 11–12 four times per year. Students spend approximately 3-5 hours total out of the entire school year on STAR tests (each test approximately 45 minutes in duration). Compared to ITBS, which took approximately 12 hours over the course of an entire week, the AHS Curriculum Committee found STAR to be an attractive solution.
9. **When and why did AHS switch from ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) to STAR? What was the process for making this change?** In February 2013, the AHS Teacher Development & Curriculum Committee met to discuss the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). During several years prior to this meeting, some teachers had expressed concerns that the ITBS required too much instructional time, did not measure AHS's curricular goals well, and did not provide feedback that was timely (often received in May or June) or particularly helpful. In addition, like all other national norm-referenced assessments, ITBS was Common-Core aligned. Acknowledging these concerns and balancing them with the desires of some parents to have standardized data points as one of many assessments in the array of qualitative and quantitative feedback provided by the school, the Teacher Development & Curriculum Committee organized a sub-committee to research alternative standardized tests that could provide time efficiency (more curriculum time); cost efficiency; actionable data for parents; actionable data for teachers; norm-referenced or criterion-referenced measures; student-specific, longitudinal performance data; and availability for most or all of K–12. If a non-Common Core aligned exam could be identified, that feature would also be very attractive. The sub-committee was also asked to recommend a scope and sequence for standardized testing at AHS. The sub-committee was composed of teachers, administrators, and parents already on the Curriculum Committee, including Leland Anderson (Chair), Trudy Camp, David Hancock, Deborah Hobbs, Blaine Hunsaker, Elizabeth Jacob, and Sarah McCormick. The sub-committee met collaboratively to divide

research tasks, report their research, and discuss findings and recommendations. Of approximately 10 exams that were considered, all were Common Core “aligned” (see next question regarding “alignment”), and no alternatives could be identified that were not Common Core aligned.

“Common Core Alignment” and Computer Adaptive Testing

10. **What does it mean that STAR is “Common Core Aligned?” Is STAR a Common Core test? Does it contain questions that were written for Common Core standards?** A: According to written correspondence with Renaissance Learning (parent company for STAR assessments):

A: “Yes, STAR is aligned to the Common Core. With STAR being ‘aligned,’ it simply makes it so that schools and districts who choose to follow the Common Core will have access to reports that will allow them to see how well the students are mastering the standards. STAR is not a Common Core assessment, nor does it have questions from the Common Core tests.” (e-mail from Cathy Hunn, Renaissance Learning Reading Coach, to D. Hobbs, AHS Assistant Principal, in response to the question “Are STAR tests aligned to Common Core, and what exactly does that mean?”)

A: “Please know that we have customers in all 50 states and US territories, several of which have not adopted Common Core Standards, we also have a large presence in Canada, and in over 60 countries around the world—including offices in Europe and Asia.” (e-mail from Andrea Galván, District Account Executive for ID/MT/NV/UT, Renaissance Learning, Inc., to D. Hobbs, AHS Assistant Principal)

AHS does not use “Common Core tests” or “Common Core curriculum” in its classrooms.

Given the AHS Curriculum Committee’s concerns about keeping Common Core State Standards and “Common Core curriculum” out of AHS classrooms, the AHS Curriculum Committee continues to search for a good and reliable norm-referenced exam that is not Common Core aligned. If we find one, or if one is created, we will be pleased and excited to consider it.

11. **What is “computer adaptive testing” and why is STAR administered on computers as opposed to with paper and pencil? What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the computer adaptive format versus the paper-based format?** A: According to Wikipedia,

“Computerized adaptive testing (CAT) is a form of computer-based test that adapts to the examinee's ability level. For this reason, it has also been called tailored testing. CAT successively selects questions for the purpose of maximizing the precision of the exam based on what is known about the examinee from previous questions. From the examinee's perspective, the difficulty of the exam seems to tailor itself to their level of ability. For example, if an examinee performs well on an item of intermediate difficulty, they will then be presented with a more difficult question. Or, if they performed poorly, they would be presented with a simpler question. (Wikipedia, “Computer Adaptive Testing,” Accessed 2/5/2014)

Advantages of computer adaptive tests include:

“Compared to static multiple choice tests that nearly everyone has experienced, with a fixed set of items administered to all examinees, computer-adaptive tests require fewer test items to arrive at equally accurate scores. Of course, there is nothing about the CAT methodology that requires the items to be multiple-choice; but just as most exams are multiple-choice, most CAT exams also use this format.” (Wikipedia, “Computer Adaptive Testing,” Accessed 2/5/2014)

Weaknesses and risks of the computer adaptive format include data privacy and security concerns, concerns about bias in the computer algorithms that select questions, and concerns that test programmers could potentially use the adaptive functionality to expose students to a series of questions with controversial content. To assuage the concerns about controversial content, STAR provided the following excerpt from its technical manual setting forth guidelines for test question writers:

Balanced Items: Bias and Fairness

Item development meets established demographic and contextual goals that are monitored during development to ensure the item bank is demographically and contextually balanced:

- *Items are free of stereotyping, representing different groups of people in non-stereotypical settings.*
- *Items do not refer to inappropriate content that includes, but is not limited to content that presents stereotypes based on ethnicity, gender, culture, economic class, or religion.*
- *Items do not present any ethnicity, gender, culture, economic class, or religion unfavorably.*
- *Items do not introduce inappropriate information, settings, or situations.*
- *Items do not reference illegal activities, sinister or depressing subjects, religious activities or holidays based on religious activities, witchcraft, or unsafe activities.*

(From STAR Technical Manual, p. 26, “Balanced Items: Bias and Fairness”)

12. **What information does STAR collect about AHS students who take the STAR assessments, and how is that information used?** A: STAR collects only name, gender, and grade level (required for the report fields); however, STAR is not particularly concerned about full names, and does not collect addresses, ages, parent names, or any other personal identifying information. In fact, STAR will even allow us to provide initials of students in place of names if we or the parents prefer not to provide names (this makes it more difficult for the teacher and school to readily and uniquely identify students when the reports are generated, but it is an option).

Furthermore, we have confirmed in our agreement with Renaissance Learning that they will not disclose our student assessment data to third parties. We also confirmed their adherence to federal privacy laws for schools that accept federal funding (FERPA), even though AHS is not one of those schools:

“We (STAR, Renaissance Learning) absolutely adhere to FERPA regulations (<http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>) and maintain the strictest confidentiality measures within our company. Here is also a link to our business principles: <http://www.renlearn.com/aboutus/missionstatement.aspx>” (e-mail from Andrea Galván, District Account Executive for ID/MT/NV/UT, Renaissance Learning, Inc., to D. Hobbs, AHS Assistant Principal)

13. **Does STAR use school data for any reason other than norm referencing? Does it give or sell its data to third parties?** A: No. AHS has a written agreement with STAR and Renaissance Learning that they will not disclose our school or student data to any third party, and that our information is only used for norm referencing. Representative Andrea Galvan also assured AHS that AHS student information and performance data is not sold or given to any third party and will not be used for norm referencing purposes until the 2014–2015 year. See question 12 above regarding other data privacy issues addressed by STAR and Renaissance Learning.

Teacher and Parent Feedback about STAR Assessments

14. **What do we know about AHS teachers’ opinions concerning the use of STAR assessments?**
A: Elementary school teachers (K-6) at AHS are heavily in favor of using STAR assessments as one of various measurement tools available to them, with a few indicating that although they do not oppose it, they are not sure the benefits outweigh the risks/costs. Those in favor cite the reasons for which the Curriculum Committee approved the change from ITBS to STAR to begin with (primarily: more time-efficient, more curriculum time, more timely and actionable feedback, lower cost).

The responses from AHS middle and high school teachers, however, are more mixed. Several teachers in grades 7–12 acknowledge the usefulness of STAR assessment data: it assists in communication with parents of children with special learning needs who are receiving intensive interventions, it offers the advantage of the testing experience in itself, and it has potential usefulness to better inform teachers concerning individual student needs and class needs.

But some teachers in grades 7–12 expressed concerns that STAR testing, even with less than 3-5 hours per year allocated to it, still takes too much time away from curriculum instruction time. Some indicated that students taking STAR tests were late to Math class because of STAR testing. Other teachers, from their personal study of Common Core, or even in the case of one teacher who took one of the tests herself, are concerned that the tests are manipulative of attitudes and values, and might be designed to achieve social re-norming. Concerns were also expressed about Computer Adaptive Testing as a method, whether STAR testing provides an accurate “picture” in relation to Saxon Math, and the practicality of efficient data management and response to data across a full class.

Some math teachers in grades 7-12 expressed concern with STAR math and the complexity of problems given specific to the level of the test being given. Some math teachers expressed concern about computerized re-looping to re-test concepts in a manner that might not identify math levels as accurately as a teacher. Some math teachers feel they have not yet benefited from STAR testing because they have not yet seen enough (or any) of the test data.

Out of eight surveys completed by Math and Core teachers in grades 7-12, four responded that STAR assessments of reading and math in grades 7-12 did not add much value to the curriculum (two math and two core teachers); two responded that they were not yet prepared to conclude anything (both math teachers), and two responded that they felt STAR clearly outweighed the risks (both core teachers).

15. What do we know about AHS parents' opinions concerning the use of STAR assessments?

A: To date, approximately 10 families out of 350 families enrolled at AHS have opted out of STAR testing. Some of these families have expressed concerns about what "alignment" with Common Core means, where can "alignment" with Common Core lead, what constitutional abuses are presented by Common Core, what impact computer adaptive testing might have on students, and what privacy protections are in place for data collected. Most families have expressed no specific concern with STAR testing. Some have expressed gratitude that STAR testing requires less class time and provides them informative and helpful data.

Options for Parents

16. Is STAR testing mandatory at AHS? A: No. STAR testing is not mandatory at AHS. Parents wishing to opt out of STAR (K-10) or to opt out of any other standardized testing at AHS, including ACT, PSAT-NMSQT, ACT PLAN, and ACT EXPLORE (grades 8-12)—or to simply adjust the frequency with which their child is assessed—may simply make the request to the front office to be placed on the list of families with students excluded from standardized assessments. Currently, approximately 10 out of 350 families at the school have opted out of STAR standardized testing.

17. Who can answer questions or requests about standardized testing at the school? A: For parents of students in grades K-6, please contact the Assistant Principal over elementary school, Mrs. Hobbs, at dhobbs@ahsmail.com. For parents of students in grades 7-12, please contact the Assistant Principal over middle and high school, Miss Jacob, at ejacob@ahsmail.com.