

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; one of various tools that we use. In one 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 citizenship, work ethic, and behavior, as well as conduct-based measurement standards related to the AHS Honor Code, which include very specific conduct requirements on- and off-campus, as well as dress and grooming standards that students commit to uphold. 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 intrapersonal growth of Christian character—while external manifestations of character at AHS include faith and steadfastness, brotherly love, Christian care, diligence and industry, liberty of conscience, and adherence to the AHS Honor Code, character is also influenced and demonstrated in many ways and places not observable or measurable by AHS teachers.

4. Do standardized assessments drive the choices of curriculum or methodologies in AHS classrooms, if at all? Do we “teach to the test”?

A: 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 math computation proficiency. 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 an AHS methodology for a specific student for whom a standardized assessment might highlight a particular strength or weakness. This kind of intervention, and measuring the student's 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 more) to discuss new curriculum, curriculum modifications, training, and celebrations/assessment.

6. **Do parents have a choice at AHS about whether their students take standardized assessments, or 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 and the frequency of their children's assessments with standardized tests. 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.

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 a high-stakes tests *if used by AHS for high-stakes purposes*. AHS does not use STAR data for high-stakes purposes (such as grade-level placement, curriculum decisions, etc.), nor does it plan to.

8. **What subjects are tested at AHS using STAR assessment and for what grade levels?** A: The school administers standardized assessments with a limited scope, sequence, and frequency. STAR Early Literacy is administered in Grade 1 twice per year. STAR Reading is administered in Grades 1 up to twice per year depending on the individual student's ability to read and in Grades 2–9 twice per year. STAR Math is given in Grades 2–7 twice per year. With parent approval and teacher discretion additional STAR testing is approved. EXPLORE is given in Grade 8 once per year. PLAN is administered in Grade 9 once per year. PSAT-NMSQT is administered in Grades 10 and 11 once per year. ACT is made available (optionally) to students in Grades 9–12 multiple times per year both through optional ACT Preparation classes taught on Fridays when school is not in session or through the ACT Preparation elective currently taught by Mr. Hancock.

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. 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. The sub-committee was also to recommend a scope and sequence for standardized testing at AHS. The committee was composed of teachers and administrators including Leland Anderson (Chair), Trudy Camp, David Hancock, Deborah Hobbs, Blaine Hunsaker, Elizabeth Jacob, and Sarah McCormick. The committee met collaboratively to divide research tasks, report their research and discuss findings and recommendations.

10. **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)

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)

12. What information does STAR collect about AHS students who take the STAR assessments, and how is that information used? A: STAR collects only the school provided student ID number, first initial of the last name, first name, and grade level (required for the report fields and ease of use for classroom teachers) No address, gender, parent, or other personal identifying information is provided.

A: In an e-mail response from Renaissance Learning: "We 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: Renaissance Learning representative Andrea Galvan 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.

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

A: To date, approximately 30 families out of 432 families enrolled at AHS have opted out of STAR testing during the 2018–2019 school year. Some of these families have expressed concerns about what "alignment" with Common Core means, where can "alignment" with Common Core lead, constitutionality of Common Core, impact of computer adaptive testing on students, and privacy of data collected. Some families have opted out their children with testing anxiety – due to the time restrictions given on the test. Many families have expressed no concern with STAR testing. Some have expressed gratitude that STAR testing requires less class time and provides them informative and helpful data.

15. Is STAR testing mandatory at AHS? A: STAR testing is not mandatory at AHS. Parents wishing to opt out of STAR testing (or any standardized testing), or to adjust the frequency with which their child is assessed, may communicate directly with an AHS administrator. Parents are also given an option during application or re-enrollment to opt their child out of STAR testing.