

Guidance for Developing District Policy and Rules on Test Use, Test Preparation, and Test Security for the Iowa Tests

Iowa Testing Programs

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to offer guidance to Iowa schools and districts regarding the appropriate use of the *Iowa Tests* for both instructional and accountability reporting functions. The document identifies key components that written policy might incorporate, and it offers a rationale for adopting certain practices with respect to test preparation, test administration, and access to test materials. The recommendations offered are intended to be consistent with the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Although this guidance is directed toward the use of the *Iowa Tests*, local policy and protocols might be developed to address the use of all assessments.

Each section of this guidance document covers one general aspect of test use for which policy or rules should be in place. Frequently asked questions are posed to highlight key issues, and responses incorporate positions based on state law, best practice, or standards adopted broadly within the profession. Iowa Testing Programs recommends that each district adopt or create policies and rules that are consistent with these positions.

Purposes of written policy. The primary intent of written policy on test use is to help ensure the integrity of the information obtained from the use of educational assessments. If scores become tainted because of inappropriate practices in either preparing students or in administering tests, the meaning of the scores will be distorted and their value for their original purpose will be diminished or lost. Some educators may not be aware of the consequences of their actions, so policy helps to inform and to create awareness of the potential negative impact that certain practices might produce.

Written policy and rules on appropriate use of tests is essential for communicating the expectations of the district to staff members, for outlining the processes to be followed, and for identifying the potential consequences of violating the policy. Thus, written policy and rules need to be distributed to all administrative, teaching, and support staff, and the district or building procedures associated with using testing materials need to be provided to them as well. It would be appropriate for districts to obtain assurances from staff members that they have read the policy and rules and agree to abide by them.

Key components of written policy. A comprehensive policy would cover activities associated with acquiring testing materials and storing them in the district, preparing students for testing prior to the test administration (including practice), administering tests, accessing test materials after testing is completed, and using test reports in either paper or electronic form.

Ideally, procedures for investigating reported violations of policy should be included, as might reference to actions to be taken with those who are found to be in violation of the policy.

For purposes of this document, a test is a printed test booklet, an audiotape recording of a test, a large-print test booklet, or a Braille test booklet. Testing materials also include answer folders and *Directions for Administration* manuals.

A. Acquiring and Storing Testing Materials

In most school districts, administrative responsibility for testing-related functions is delegated to an individual who is readily identifiable as the District Test Coordinator, and in some cases there is subsequent delegation to building test coordinators. Having an identifiable administrative structure for assessment activities is beneficial in defining lines of communication and in providing authoritative sources of information about assessment policy and procedures for staff members who use tests.

A1. Who is authorized within the district to request and receive testing materials from Iowa Testing Programs?

The number of individuals authorized to obtain materials should be limited so that aspects of storage and accessibility can be monitored. But depending on district size and configuration, it may be appropriate to delegate authority to any of several individuals: principal, curriculum coordinator, counselor, ELL coordinator, or TAG coordinator. In addition to regular annual testing, materials might be needed for new students, students being considered for special programming, or professional development with the instructional staff.

A2. For what purposes are school districts authorized to obtain testing materials from Iowa Testing Programs?

Test booklets are needed for annual testing as well as for testing new students who arrive after annual testing is completed. Some students may be tested for special programming selection (e.g., TAG program) during the year. Occasionally test booklets are a helpful reference when members of the teaching staff are interpreting information from selected score reports or conducting alignment-checking activities. Test booklets should be provided to individual staff members only when they have a professional need to use the materials. In addition, tests should not be given to or shown to parents who request to see the tests, except under direct supervision of a district administrator. Test booklets should not be loaned to individuals outside the district staff.

A3. How should testing materials be stored within the district prior to and during testing?

When materials arrive from Iowa Testing Programs for annual testing, they should be stored in a secure area, according to local policy requirements, with access restricted. Procedures will need to be formulated for each building regarding the distribution and collection of materials prior to and during testing. Test booklets should not be readily accessible to teachers, other district staff members, or students other than during actual test administration sessions.

A4. How should testing materials and test results that remain in the district be stored once annual testing is completed?

Provision should be made for storing materials that might be retained once annual testing is completed and testing materials have been returned to Iowa Testing Programs. Tests retained for late testing, professional development work, or use with score reports need to be stored securely with limited access. (See section D below on accessing materials after testing.) Policy or rules should indicate that those who provide unauthorized access to materials are themselves in violation of district policy.

B. Test Preparation and Practice Activities

Test preparation incorporates a broad array of activities that should be intended to prepare students to exhibit their true achievement when they take an assessment. Some activities may be legitimate in helping students understand the assessment process so that the process itself does not interfere with obtaining a true measure of students' achievement. These kinds of activities should represent a good use of instructional time. Some other activities may be completely inappropriate, especially those that are designed to boost test scores without a corresponding lasting increase in actual student achievement. Such activities are regarded as unethical because they distort test scores, rendering them useless for describing true achievement or improvement. The distortions form "falsified" records of student achievement, which can lead to erroneous decisions about students and schools.

One legitimate preparation practice involves ensuring that students are familiar with common test taking strategies that involve topics such as the use of time, the role of guessing, and responding to unfamiliar test item formats. (This kind of preparation should be directed toward a type of test rather than toward a specific test.) As students move through the grades and gain experience with taking the *Iowa Tests*, however, the need for such activities should diminish greatly. Preparation also could involve informing students of the purposes of testing and how scores will be used so that students are sufficiently motivated to perform well. (The *ITBS* and *ITED*

Directions for Administration manuals provide some guidance about appropriate and inappropriate practices.)

The role of policy with respect to test preparation is (a) to identify appropriate activities to carry out with students in preparing them to demonstrate their true achievement, (b) to identify activities that are likely to interfere with desired score interpretations, and (c) to establish boundaries on the kinds of activities that are worth the instructional time they require.

B1. What specific activities are appropriate to use with students in preparation for testing?

Even the most comprehensive policy cannot anticipate all of the activities that might be created for test preparation purposes. Consequently, explicit procedures need to be in place for gaining approval for the use of any test-preparation materials prior to their implementation. (All materials used for test preparation should be retained by the person who used them.) All inappropriate practices should be delineated in the policy, to the extent possible, to communicate specific actions that are deemed in violation and to describe generally the class of inappropriate approaches to preparation.

B2. What specific activities are prohibited from use with students in preparation for testing?

Written policy should indicate that providing students with actual test questions or specific test content prior to testing is unethical and is a violation of district policy. (Currently, these are questions on Forms A and B of the *Iowa Tests*.) In addition, questions from forms of the *Iowa Tests* previously used should not be incorporated in test preparation. (These are questions in Forms K and L of the *Iowa Tests*.)

It may be helpful to distinguish “teaching the test” from “teaching to the test” in concrete terms. For example, teaching a strategy for solving math story problems in general would be an appropriate way to teach *to the* test, and simultaneously, teach to the district’s standards/benchmarks. But practicing solving math story problems that appear on the *Iowa Tests* (or nearly identical problems) would be teaching *the* test. Some educators seem not to understand the implications of using the test items from the current forms of the *Iowa Tests* as instructional material. Some others do not see why prepping with a previous form of the tests is inappropriate or illegitimate practice. The appropriateness of any proposed practice should meet either of the two following standards:

- It will promote the learning and retention of important knowledge and content skills that students are expected to learn.
- It will decrease the chance that students will score lower on the test than they should due to inadequate test-taking skills or limited familiarity with the item formats used on the test.

Activities that do not meet one or the other of these criteria are more likely to be unethical, to promote only temporary learning, or to waste instructional time. To the extent that they involve purchased materials and teacher preparation time, these activities also are probably a waste of financial resources. When ineffective or unnecessary test preparation activities are used, valuable instructional time is lost as well.

B3. How far in advance of testing should test preparation activities be used, or for how long prior to the start of testing should each activity be used?

Ideally, test preparation should be an integral part of the regular instructional program rather than an add-on activity. In that way, instructional activities that support test preparation likely would occur throughout the year rather than in a concentrated block of time just prior to the test administration. Activities that occur just prior to the testing tend to have a short-term effect, whether the temporary impact was intended or not. Also, intense practice or attention to testing during the weeks immediately before testing tends to put undue pressure on some students, causing them to be less prepared psychologically for performing at their best.

B4. Is it ever appropriate to use the actual test forms (those used in the current year or subsequent year) for test preparation?

No, providing students with test items or test answers in advance of the test is highly unethical. Such activity puts the focus on getting particular test questions right rather than on measuring student achievement in the subject area represented by the questions. It is highly rare that a given test item is so important that its content should be learned by all students or taught to students directly. The questions on a test represent only a small sample from all the questions that could be asked when measuring achievement in, say, science or math. When the exact test is the focus of instruction, the test scores lose their meaning, and they portray an achievement result that is dishonest.

B5. Is it ever appropriate to use previous forms of the assessment (e.g., Forms K and L of the *Iowa Tests*) for preparation purposes?

No, the use of previous forms of the accountability tests for practice or preparation purposes also is unethical. Different forms of the same test are designed to be similar in content and skill level so that scores from them can be used relatively interchangeably to estimate growth and improvement. Although the content on a previous form is not exactly the same as that of the current form under use, the similarity is great. Preparation with the previous test form narrows the focus of student learning and restricts the ability of the user to generalize broadly in interpreting the students' scores.

B6. Is it ever appropriate to develop practice tests locally that are similar in content or format to the actual test forms currently in use?

No, when practice materials that essentially “clone” the operational test that is in use are developed, the situation is somewhat akin to using a previous form of the test, as described above in B5. Limiting the focus of instruction to such materials, even for a brief but intense time period just before testing, creates limits on the generalizability of the test scores. Furthermore, such “practice tests” move the focus of instruction to isolated bits of content instead of the broader skills that should be the target of student learning.

B7. Should district staff be required to obtain approval in advance of using test preparation materials and activities?

Yes, the purposes of advance approval are to ensure that unethical practices are not implemented inadvertently and to ensure that students who need assistance will have the right help available in a timely manner.

Consequently, a designated staff member—school administrator or testing coordinator—should be given responsibility for reviewing the procedures and materials that any teachers may want to use. (Teachers should ask whether certain practices are acceptable rather than assuming that they are.)

Approvals and denials should be documented in case questions arise at a later time about the legitimacy of any activities.

B8. Is it appropriate to provide students with a review of content covered by the test as a form of test preparation?

It depends. A review of content is a common instructional strategy used prior to many forms of classroom assessment. But when the review is narrow and limited to the exact skills that will appear on the accountability assessment, the practice is more questionable. And when such reviews are conducted during the period immediately preceding the administration of the assessment, the practice is unethical. Some forms of review are ethical, but the more closely the focus is on the subskills to be assessed and the more likely the goal is to enhance short-term learning, the more inappropriate the activity would be. Content review geared toward enhancing retention of skills learned previously, however, is a form of sound instructional practice.

The distinction between appropriate and inappropriate subject matter preparation is not always clear. Activities directed toward specific content known to be on the test and conducted shortly before testing time are probably inappropriate. When the purpose is drill for short-term retention, as cramming typically is, the practice is inappropriate. When the purpose is an additional opportunity to review and learn material for which instruction was provided previously, and the focus is on skills that may or may not be covered directly by the upcoming test, the practice is more appropriate. Here are two relevant questions to ask in trying to make the distinction:

- Would the same content-oriented test preparation activities be used if the current accountability assessment tool were replaced by another that aligns with the district’s content standards?

- Would these same content-oriented test preparation activities be used as scheduled even if the date for administering the assessment were to be moved to two months later?

If the test preparation is designed primarily to fit the accountability assessment tool, or if it needs to be given just before the assessment is scheduled to be given, the activities are probably too narrow in content focus and directed too much at short-term effects. They would be considered inappropriate on either basis.

B9. Should all students be provided an opportunity for test preparation in advance of the actual test each year?

Not necessarily. Test preparation activities probably should be limited to assisting those who need help rather than for use en masse. Younger students may need more help than older ones, lower achieving students may need more than higher achieving ones, and some students in special programs may need more than those in regular programs. Just as general instruction often is individualized, so test preparation (which is a form of instruction) should be individualized. It should be based on need. In addition, the potential negative consequences of test preparation should be considered. Outcomes such as elevated test anxiety or overconfidence about the easiness of the test tasks can result from poorly designed test preparation emphases.

B10. Isn't test preparation for accountability testing essential so that students will score just as high as they can?

Not really. Obtaining the highest possible test score is not necessarily the primary goal. The notion of test preparation is often associated with students preparing to take a college admissions test such as the ACT or SAT. On such tests, students want to maximize their score to optimize their chance of being admitted or being eligible for scholarship aid. Test taking strategies that promote the highest possible score are used in conjunction with practice tests to foster greater confidence in anticipation of taking the actual test. However, the purpose of using an achievement test, like the *Iowa Tests*, is to find out just how well a student has achieved. Trying to get the highest possible score, at seemingly any cost, is not consistent with that purpose. There are no particular consequences for the student (no admission decision, for example); the test score should represent what the student knows. Scores that are artificially high are likely to cause some students to get less teacher attention than is needed and to keep the students from various instructional programs that might help them improve. Thus, scores that misrepresent a student's performance are more likely to be harmful than helpful to that student. Test preparation or test-taking practices that promote artificially high scores could harm the students who need extra instructional attention. The use of inappropriate preparation practices may keep a school off the "Watch List" or from being designated as "in need of assistance", but it will not serve the interests of low achieving students whose scores disguise their

actual level of achievement. Nor will it serve the needs of the school or district to understand the true achievement of all students so that instructional programs can be modified based on student needs.

C. Test Administration

The *Directions for Administration* manuals for the *Iowa Tests* provide explicit guidance about preparing for a test administration. They also include directions for administering each test along with instructions that should be read verbatim to provide a standard testing situation for all students, no matter who gives the test, where it is given, or when it is given. District policy should be clear that all tests should be administered exactly as the publisher's manual specifies. The use of accommodations or modifications also is outlined in the *Directions* manual, but each district needs to establish its own policy regarding the use of accommodations, especially by those who do not have an IEP or 504 plan.

C1. What kind of assistance or advice can be provided to students during the test administration?

It should be made explicit to all who give the tests that assistance during the test administration is not permitted (unless accommodations specified in the IEP or 504 plan call for a certain type of assistance). Students should never be told during the test administration which answers are correct or whether they have answered an item incorrectly. The test administrator should not provide hints, word meanings, pronunciations, or rephrased questions.

Expectations for students also should be addressed by the district policy, and these expectations should be communicated to all students. Students should not engage in any practice that could artificially impact the score of any student. Prohibited behaviors include communication with one another in any form during the testing sessions, copying from others, and using electronic devices other than approved calculators or assistive technology.

C2. What are the district's expectations regarding the use of the time limits provided in the *Directions for Administration*?

All time limits given in the *Directions for Administration* should be adhered to strictly (except in the case of an accommodation for an individual student that calls for extended time). Time limits should not be modified at the discretion of the test administrator. Furthermore, the *Directions* for the *Iowa Tests* do not provide for warnings about time remaining or a need to guess at final answers. Thus, these activities are inappropriate.

C3. What are the acceptable and unacceptable accommodations or modifications that might be considered for use with students who have an IEP or 504 plan?

District policy regarding the use of accommodations during testing should be developed in conjunction with policy about including assessment accommodations in IEPs and 504 plans. That is, there should be a list of accommodations from which developers of IEPs or 504 plans might choose, as needed, and a list of changes or modifications that should not be made. For example, a reading comprehension test should not be read to students who struggle with reading. Such a change would modify what is being measured (listening comprehension rather than reading comprehension in this case). Thus, a read-aloud accommodation for reading comprehension should never be permitted and should not be written into an IEP or 504 plan. The use of a dictionary on the Vocabulary test or the use of a calculator on the Math Computation test are additional examples of changes that should not be permitted. The *Directions for Administration* manual for the *Iowa Tests* has additional details about the use of accommodations and modifications.

C4. What procedures should be used in deciding whether a student who has no IEP or 504 plan should be given any accommodations?

Some students who have not been identified for special education services, and thus have no IEP or 504 plan, may have skill levels that require an accommodation. District policy is needed to decide what procedure will be followed in determining whether a request for accommodations can be granted for use with a student who has no plan. The decision should not be left to each individual test administrator. The procedures should include a list of acceptable and unacceptable accommodations, an indication of who decides, and a description of the type of information needed to make a final decision. Each decision, and the procedures leading up to it, should be documented. Decisions should be based on individual student needs and be consistent with accommodations needed and used during instruction. In other words, if a student does not require a certain accommodation during regular instruction, the student probably doesn't require the accommodation during testing either.

C5. Which accommodations are permitted or not permitted with English Language Learners?

The rationale for using accommodations with an English Language Learner (ELL) is the same as the one that applies to a student with a disability. For an ELL, competence in the English language is regarded as a form of disability because the student's low skill level in English interferes with measuring achievement in areas such as science, reading, and math problem solving. To reduce the impact of the language on measuring the student's achievement, changes in the administration might be made. Specific accommodations that could be considered are identified in the *Directions for Administration* for the *Iowa Tests*. Any accommodation that could change the nature of what the test is measuring should not be used. Thus, a read-aloud could be appropriate in math but not for reading comprehension. The use of a translation dictionary would be appropriate in science if meanings of scientific words were not given in the dictionary.

D. Using Test Materials After Testing

There are some legitimate reasons for a school district to have test materials in its possession well after testing has been completed and the bulk of testing materials have been returned to the scoring center. For example, several score reports can be used most effectively if the user has access to the exact test items to which students responded. (The *Group Item Analysis* and the *Class Item Response Record* are both examples.) Curriculum work involving alignment checking is also a situation in which access to the test booklet may be needed. Districts may request copies of tests from Iowa Testing Programs for such uses. (See section A above, also.)

D1. What kinds of alterations to a student's answer document are permissible by individuals other than the student once testing is over?

In preparing answer documents for scoring, it may be appropriate for a staff member to erase smudges or stray marks on student documents. But no changes should ever be made to student responses to test items except by a student during testing. If demographic coding of answer documents needs to be completed by a district employee, explicit directions should be given about how to code and which existing marks should not be changed. Student answer documents should be stored temporarily in a secure area to prevent unauthorized access to them.

D2. Who should be permitted access to testing materials during the year?

Individuals who are authorized to acquire test materials from Iowa Testing Programs should be vested with the responsibility for making tests accessible to staff members who have a professional need to use them. Procedures regarding who has access privileges, the purposes for which access can be granted, and the duration of possession should be developed for policy implementation purposes. It is inappropriate to disclose the contents of test materials to students, parents, or others who do not have a professional need for such information. Thus, sharing correct answers to questions or reviewing test items with students after testing is over are both inappropriate.

D3. What procedures should govern the use of test materials outside of the test administration window (e.g., for what purposes or uses can access be granted, for how long can materials be kept, and can materials leave the building)?

Once annual testing is completed, test materials need to be stored until they can be organized for return to the scoring center. Care must be taken to provide the same type of secure conditions as should have been provided when materials first arrived in the district.

For materials that remain, the custodian of test booklets should maintain a log of booklet use: name, date, intended use, due date for return, and actual date of return. Everyone who is authorized to check out a test booklet needs to

be advised about the rules associated with the professional use of the tests. Legitimate uses involve interpreting information on selected score reports and conducting alignment checks between the district content standards and the assessment content. Typically this work is done by groups rather than by individual staff members. Generally, test booklets should be checked out for a day only, and they should not be removed from district buildings where they are intended to be stored securely.

D4. What test materials may be photocopied and with whose prior approval?

Policy should state explicitly that no test pages may be photocopied for any reason by any district personnel. (These are copyrighted materials for which Iowa Testing Programs does not provide permission for copying.) Other testing materials, such as answer sheets and pages from manuals may be copied based on prior permission from Iowa Testing Programs and authorization from the superintendent or designee.

E. Use of Score Reports and Data Files

Results from the *Iowa Tests* are provided to each district in the form of printed paper reports and electronic data files. District policy should specify who has responsibility for the distribution of reports for internal staff use and for external reporting purposes. In addition, the policy should provide for maintaining the integrity of electronic files, both in their original CD-ROM format and within whatever database (local or AEA) the data may have been imported.

E1. Who should receive, store, and distribute test results in their paper and electronic forms?

Many district staff members have legitimate professional needs for possessing and using various printed score reports. Consequently, written policy should recognize those needs. At the same time, test scores of individuals need to be handled confidentially, consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). However, there is good reason to limit the individuals who are permitted to release district-wide test data to external groups. Few district staff are close enough to the testing process to recognize when a given report is a comprehensive, complete, and accurate representation of district-wide or building-wide performance. In addition, many are unable to provide the interpretive guidance that would be required for promoting sound use of the test results. Thus, the external distribution of a district's test results should be limited to those who are prepared to certify their completeness and offer interpretive assistance to the recipient.

E2. To whom may test results be distributed and for what purposes?

Certainly students and their legal guardians have a right to see their individual scores, but those scores should be treated as confidential, consistent with FERPA. Thus, the scores of individuals may not be shared, on paper or in electronic form, with others without written permission. (That permission probably should be granted only by the superintendent.) The scores of grade groups (e.g., averages or other summary data) are subject to the provisions of the open records law, but their release or distribution should be handled by individuals who are capable of providing the type of interpretive assistance that is likely to reduce the chances that the data will be misused or misunderstood.

E3. Who should be permitted access to the electronic data files?

Electronic files can be modified easily to change test scores or demographic information associated with individual students. Access to the original data file should be limited so that the file can be maintained as the primary source against which checks can be made for establishing the integrity of analyses that might have been performed with the data. When the data file is the source for mandated reporting (i.e., to the state), limited access also should be maintained so that final results can be certified by the district readily.

E4. Under what circumstances should an electronic data file be modified, and how should such changes be documented?

Occasionally errors occur in preparing data files containing demographic information about individual students. When such data are joined with test data, there may be a need to make corrections in the demographics so that accurate subgroup reporting can occur. Procedures for modifying the data file to correct such errors should specify who has responsibility for making changes, how such changes will be verified, and how the work will be documented so that future users will be aware of the changes and the reasons for them. Of course, when a data file is modified, no changes should ever be made to test scores or student test-item responses.

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