K12 ACADEMICS — REFERENCE SERIES

A Guide to Standardized Testing

SAT, ACT, AP, NAEP, PISA, state tests & more — what every test is, who takes it, and how to read the scores, in plain English.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

START HERE

The Testing Landscape

Before the alphabet soup, four distinctions explain almost every test your child will take. K12 Academics has helped families make sense of education since 2004 — this guide is your decoder.

Formative vs. Summative
checks along the way vs. a final measure of what was learned

Criterion vs. Norm-referenced
measured against a standard vs. ranked against other students

Standardized
given & scored the same way for everyone, so results compare

High-stakes
tied to real consequences — graduation, admissions, accountability

The pages ahead cover the tests families meet most — from the annual state test to the SAT to how the U.S. compares to the world.

1 TEST 01 OF 9

State Accountability Tests

The yearly tests every public school gives

WHAT IT IS

Federally required (under ESSA) standardized tests every state gives in reading and math — annually in grades **3–8** and once in high school, plus science a few times.

KEY FACTS

Grades 3–8 + HS	Criterion-based	Proficiency levels
reading, math, some science	measured against standards	e.g. basic → advanced

WHY IT MATTERS

They drive **school accountability** — results feed report cards, ratings, and identify schools needing support. They also show whether your child is meeting grade-level standards.

GOOD TO KNOW

Names differ by state (STAAR, CAASPP, FSA, etc.), so scores aren't comparable *across* states — that's what NAEP is for.

2 TEST 02 OF 9

NAEP – The Nation's Report Card

The one test that compares all states

WHAT IT IS

The **National Assessment of Educational Progress** — the only assessment given the same way in every state, so results *are* comparable nationwide.

KEY FACTS

Grades 4, 8, 12	Sample-based	No individual scores
reading, math & more	not every student	schools & states only

WHY IT MATTERS

NAEP is the gold standard for **comparing states** and tracking national trends over decades — it's why you can say one state outperforms another.

GOOD TO KNOW

Because it's a **sample**, your child won't get a NAEP score — it measures the system, not the student.

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TEST 03 OF 9

The SAT

The classic college-admissions test

WHAT IT IS

A college-admissions test from the College Board measuring reading, writing, and math. Now fully **digital** and adaptive, and about two hours long.

KEY FACTS

400–1600	Digital	Superscore
two sections, 200–800 each	adaptive, ~2 hours	best sections often combine

WHY IT MATTERS

One of two main tests colleges use in admissions — though most are now **test-optional**, a strong score can still strengthen an application.

GOOD TO KNOW

You can take it multiple times; many colleges **superscore** (use your best section from each date). See our **Admissions Playbook** for strategy.

4 TEST 04 OF 9

The ACT

The SAT's equally-accepted rival

WHAT IT IS

An alternative college-admissions test with four sections — English, Math, Reading, and Science — plus an optional Writing essay. Every U.S. college accepts either the ACT or SAT.

KEY FACTS

1–36	Has Science	Optional essay
composite = average of 4	unique reasoning section	Writing section

WHY IT MATTERS

Fully interchangeable with the SAT for admissions — colleges have **no preference**. Some students simply score better on one format than the other.

GOOD TO KNOW

Take a practice test of **each** to see which suits you; the ACT is faster-paced and includes science reasoning the SAT doesn't.

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TEST 05 OF 9

PSAT/NMSQT

The practice SAT that pays off

WHAT IT IS

The Preliminary SAT — a lower-stakes practice run for the SAT, taken in sophomore or junior year, that also qualifies juniors for **National Merit** scholarships.

KEY FACTS

320–1520	October	National Merit
the PSAT score scale	given in the fall	top juniors qualify

WHY IT MATTERS

It's both practice and opportunity — it previews the SAT and, for high scorers, opens the door to National Merit recognition and scholarships.

GOOD TO KNOW

PSAT scores **don't** go to colleges — it's purely a practice and scholarship-qualifying test, so treat it as low-pressure.

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TEST 06 OF 9

AP – Advanced Placement

College-level courses in high school

WHAT IT IS

College-level courses and their end-of-year exams, scored **1–5**. A qualifying score can earn college credit or advanced placement — in nearly 40 subjects.

KEY FACTS

Scored 1–5	~40 subjects	Each May
3+ often earns credit	from Calculus to Art	exams administered

WHY IT MATTERS

AP shows colleges you've taken **rigorous coursework**, and a 3, 4, or 5 can translate into real college credit — saving time and tuition.

GOOD TO KNOW

Each college sets its own credit policy — a "3" earns credit at many schools but not all, so check each college's AP policy.

7 TEST 07 OF 9

IB – International Baccalaureate

A rigorous global diploma

WHAT IT IS

An internationally recognized program and set of assessments scored **1–7** per subject. The full IB Diploma requires six subjects plus core components (max 45 points).

KEY FACTS

Scored 1–7	Global	Holistic
per subject; 45 max diploma	recognized worldwide	essay + service + theory

WHY IT MATTERS

IB signals rigor and international-mindedness, and strong scores earn college credit or placement — it's especially valued for its writing and research demands.

GOOD TO KNOW

IB is a full **program**, not a single test — you can take individual IB courses or pursue the whole diploma.

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TEST 08 OF 9

International Assessments

How the U.S. compares to the world

WHAT IT IS

Three tests benchmark countries against each other: **PISA** (15-year-olds; math, reading, science), **TIMSS** (grades 4 & 8 math & science), and **PIRLS** (grade-4 reading).

KEY FACTS

PISA	TIMSS	PIRLS
OECD, every 3 years	IEA, every 4 years	IEA, every 5 years

WHY IT MATTERS

These are how we know where U.S. students stand **globally** — the source behind "Singapore leads the world" headlines and our International Assessment Atlas.

GOOD TO KNOW

Like NAEP, these are **sample-based** system measures — no individual student, school, or (usually) state score.

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TEST 09 OF 9

English-Learner Proficiency

Measuring progress in English

WHAT IT IS

English learners take an annual English-language-proficiency test — most commonly **WIDA ACCESS** — measuring listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English.

KEY FACTS

Levels 1–6	4 domains	Annual
entering to reaching	listen, speak, read, write	tracks yearly growth

WHY IT MATTERS

It's how schools measure an EL student's **progress toward proficiency** and decide when they're ready to exit language-support services.

GOOD TO KNOW

This is separate from academic tests — it measures **English proficiency**, not grade-level content knowledge.

MAKE SENSE OF IT

How to Read a Score Report

A score is only useful if you know what it means. Four terms unlock almost any report you'll get.

Percentile

How a student ranks vs. others — "75th percentile" means they scored higher than 75% of test-takers. It is **not** a percent correct.

Proficiency Level

A category (below basic / basic / proficient / advanced) showing whether a student met a standard — the key number on state tests.

Scale Score

The raw score converted to a common scale so it's comparable across test versions and years.

Growth / Percentile

How much a student **improved** vs. peers who started at the same level — increasingly the fairest single measure.

The big picture: no single test defines a child. A score is one snapshot — read it alongside grades, growth over time, and everything a number can't capture.

BEYOND THE SCORE

Find Your Community.

See the scores in action — our **SAT & ACT**, **NAEP**, and **International Assessment** data volumes, plus **1,297 free guides** at our resource library.

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