

Educational Records Bureau

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The school that your son or daughter attends uses a testing program called CTP 4, obtained from the Educational Records Bureau (ERB). As a means of informing you about CTP 4, ERB offers the following dialogue.

Parent: I'd like to know what CTP 4 is, but I'm already dealing with more test abbreviations than I can possibly keep straight. SAT, PSAT, and AP come to mind.

ERB: We understand how you feel. CTP 4 is the latest revision of the Comprehensive Testing Program, a reasoning/achievement test that ERB makes available to the more than 1,700 schools, public and independent, that comprise the ERB membership. It is a challenging test designed to distinguish learning among students at the highest level.

Parent: ERB constructs the test?

ERB: No, not exactly. CTP 4 was developed for ERB by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey. As you may know, ETS is a leading developer of tests, including all of those you just mentioned. In the process of applying for admission to a college or university, your son or daughter is likely to take the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT) or the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or perhaps both. He or she may also take one or more Advanced Placement tests.

Parent: What kind of a test is CTP 4?

ERB: Actually, CTP 4 is not one test, but a battery consisting of a series of multiple-choice and open-ended question tests administered to groups of students over the course of several days, either in the spring or the fall. CTP 4 has 10 levels; a different level is used with each grade from 1 through 11. Students in the early grades take the test under untimed conditions and mark their answers in the test booklet. Students in the middle and upper grades take CTP 4 under timed conditions and mark their answers on a separate answer sheet. The time limits are generous, and most students are able to complete the test in the time allowed.

Parent: Yes, but what does the test measure?

ERB: All 10 levels of CTP 4 include achievement tests that measure what the student has learned in the areas of reading and mathematics. In addition, levels 1 and 2 test word analysis and listening skills. Beginning with level 3 (introduced in the spring of grade 3) there are also tests that measure verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, certain kinds of writing skills, and vocabulary.

Parent: Why is it necessary to have two reasoning tests in addition to the achievement tests?

ERB: Achievement test questions and reasoning test questions sometimes appear similar, and both measure what the student knows and is able to do. Yet taken as a whole, each provides a distinct view of his or her learning profile. In general, achievement tests, such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, and mathematics, measure mastery of skills and knowledge acquired directly from instruction in the classroom. Questions in the reasoning tests, intended to describe the student's facility with subtle, abstract relationships expressed in words or numbers, yield measures of his or her ability to recognize logical relationships in unfamiliar contexts. Having both reasoning and achievement tests in the same battery enables the school to compare the results as a guide in working with individual students. In these comparisons schools look especially for students whose reasoning test results are not consistent with their achievement test scores to decide if either corrective or enrichment action is necessary. Taken together, these scores help determine if a student is working up to potential or falling behind.

Parent: How does CTP 4 compare with the high standards tests we hear so much about?

ERB: In theory, norm-referenced tests like CTP 4 and standards-based tests like those in many state testing programs are quite different; in practice the two types of tests are more alike than different. Teachers and curriculum experts determine the content and advise test specialists on the actual questions of both. As a result, the questions always use the same formats and cover much the same material. Both focus on two objectives: determining whether students have met, at a fixed point in time, the expectations of the curriculum and what relative degree of mastery they have demonstrated. On this final point, the two types differ. Norm-referenced tests report scores by comparing them with the scores of other groups of students and ranking scores from highest to lowest. Standards-based tests establish pre-determined categories of mastery, usually three or four, and then distribute all scores among the various levels of mastery.

Educators see the value in both kinds of test, but in identifying specific and often important differences in performance, even among students in the same standards-based category, they use the more complete diagnostic profile provided by CTP 4 or other norm-referenced tests.

Parent: You referred to test scores. How accurate are the scores on CTP 4?

ERB: The scores on CTP 4 are more than accurate enough to be useful, but no test measures perfectly. Test scores are subject to error...in part because many factors affect a student's test performance, including motivation, energy, level of concentration, and understanding of directions. Moreover, the test questions are merely samples of all the questions that might be asked about a particular subject. Users of CTP 4 should think of a test score not as a fixed amount, or a single point on a graph, but rather as a midpoint of a band of scores...within which one can be reasonably confident that the student's "true score" lies.

Repeated testing of the student with comparable questions would produce somewhat different scores, but these scores would also tend to fall within the same band. As is true for any series of samples, the greater the number of samples the more accurate the results. Accordingly, several consecutive years of test results usually provide a better estimate of a student's knowledge and abilities than the scores obtained in any one year. The CTP 4 provides schools with data to access patterns or trends in student achievement within and across grades.

Parent: You haven't said anything about fairness. Is CTP 4 fair to all students, or are some at a disadvantage because of race or gender?

ERB: Fairness is something that was given careful attention in the development of CTP 4. Editors and others specially trained to identify bias in text or illustrations reviewed each CTP4 question to ensure that it would not offend or be unfair to members of minority groups or either gender. In addition, statistical tests were performed to determine for each question whether significant differences existed between the performance of girls and boys. Any questions that were flagged as a result of these tests were again reviewed and, when necessary, changed before CTP 4 was released for use.

Parent: But why give up hours of classroom teaching time and spend school dollars to test with CTP 4? Are there worthwhile things that can be done with the test results?

ERB: CTP 4 test results enable teachers to pinpoint very specific areas of instruction where special assistance may be needed. The scores may also reveal exceptional abilities that deserve recognition. This information benefits the individual student. The test also helps teachers to measure the educational progress of groups of students. Classroom instruction can be adjusted to meet the needs of the group. The test results allow school administrators and teachers to compare the performance of their students to the performance of students in a similar school or school systems. In this way the test scores provide a meaningful measure of student

achievement, and a "reality check" on how well students are learning the curriculum and teachers are covering it.

Parent: I sometimes have trouble understanding reports of test results sent home to parents. What can ERB do for me in this regard?

ERB: Many of the score reports for parents, teachers, and administrators have been redesigned to make them easier to read and understand. We believe that the CTP 4 parent reports are especially good in this respect. But even so, we strongly urge parents to meet with school personnel. They will be pleased to assist you in interpreting test results. A school conference affords the best means of learning how your son or daughter is doing in school, and how you may be able to help him or her do even better.

Parent: That seems like sensible advice.

ERB: We'd like to leave you with a thought or two that may help to put the role of CTP 4 in proper perspective. CTP 4 norms provide a basis for comparing the educational progress of your son or daughter with the progress achieved by students at the same grade level in schools similar to theirs. Comparisons of this kind are not possible with assessment techniques that lack norms. At the same time, parents need to be aware that CTP 4 test results should be considered in combination with teacher appraisals, samples of writing, portfolios of science reports, artwork, and the like. Only when information from a variety of sources is assembled can one begin to appreciate the myriad abilities, traits, and fine qualities that every child possesses.