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# Introduction

## Purpose/Rationale

There are always vigorous discussions among teachers about tests, testing and 'test prep'. About the tests themselves, teachers talk about which tests and what kind of tests are on the schedule, how many tests there will be, when the tests will occur and, of course, how they think their kids will go when they take the tests.

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About the testing itself, they talk about the testing day, how the kids react on test day, how troublesome the testing is on test day and how they, as teachers in the system, respond to the turmoil of the dreaded testing situation. It is often a premier agenda item in the staffroom and in the corridor conversations of any school.

And, about 'test prep', the conversation takes on a renewed vigour as teachers wonder if it is wrong to teach to the test; if teaching *for* the test is the same thing as teaching *to* the test; if taking time to teach the content of the test or the process skills for taking the test takes precious time away from their demanding curriculum; or if test prep is worth it in the long run. After all, some ask, are teachers teaching for the test or are they teaching for lifelong learning?

Bottom line answer! As far as teaching the content of the test, that's a no-brainer. The content should match the standards-driven curriculum. If test results are part and parcel of what kids – and teachers – are judged on, then

it just makes sense to teach kids about how to take tests to do their best. There should be no guilty feelings about helping students prepare for test performances. In fact, this preparation should coincide with the instructional goals of the school or district.

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**Don't kids practise, rehearse and repeat sequences over and over again to achieve skill and grace under pressure?**

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Don't teachers, coaches, instructors and counsellors prepare these very same students for every other kind of performance in music, in athletics, in computer technology and in skillful interview etiquette? Don't kids practise, rehearse and repeat sequences over and over again to achieve skill and grace under pressure? If the answer is, 'Yes, of course they do,' then a very real justification for test prep is made.

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**'Test prep' is part of what teachers do as they coach kids in the skills and strategies of sound study habits.**

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However, the overriding caveat, naturally, is that 'test prep' must be reasonably integrated into the existing curriculum. 'Test prep' must not overwhelm the other priorities of an already overcrowded, standards-based curriculum that dictates time and energy in the instructional day. Instead, 'test prep', at its best, supports and enhances the existing curriculum needs as it intertwines with the essential content of the various subject areas. In essence, 'test prep' is not an add-on to this already busy curriculum, but rather correlates with the agreed curriculum priorities and the instructional components of learning and learning to how learn. 'Test prep' is part of what teachers do as they coach kids in the skills and strategies of sound study habits. Test prep is about process, not about content.

## Methodology

To coach kids in the art and science of test-taking, teachers move directly into the essentials of the curriculum and indirectly into the essence of learning-to-learn strategies. These learning-to-learn strategies are sometimes referred to as 'study skills'. Yet, a more robust approach to learning how to learn is captured in the concept of metacognitive or reflective learning.

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**These learning-to-learn strategies are sometimes referred to as 'study skills'.**

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When the students are in metacognitive mode, they are stepping outside the learning experience and reflecting on it. They are thinking about their thinking and learning ... before, during and after the learning occurs. Interestingly, in the course of moving between the cognitive learning experience and metacognitive reflection about the learning experience, students actually anchor their learning with deeper understanding.

An example of this kind of metacognitive reflection during the learning experience is obvious when students work on a complex maths problem in physics and then discuss the strategies they used to solve the problem. In the course of the conversation, they examine the approaches used, the expediency of each approach and the resulting accuracy of the actual sequence used.

Teachers using these reflective, learning-to-learn tools marvel at the transfer power of this kind of debate when these same students address a complex maths problem on a high stakes test. Kids who use metacognition, explicitly and on a regular basis, are

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**Kids who use metacognition, explicitly and on a regular basis, are empowered with these learning-to-learn strategies.**

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empowered with these learning-to-learn strategies. They understand how to employ them in their class work and on the tests.

In addition, the reflective approach to maths problem-solving illustrates, quite clearly, how these reflective threads weave, naturally, into the essential concepts and skills of the curriculum. Both the curriculum and the test are in dual focus.



# Chapter 1: Before the test

This book is organised around three themes: things to do before the test, things to do during the test and things to do after the test. Chapter 1, the exploration of what is appropriate to do before the test, is further divided into long before, sometime before and just before. Chapter 2, 'What to do during the test', includes three specific types of tests and/or test questions, with protocols for approaching each one. Chapter 3, 'What to do after the test', addresses two ideas: self-assessing techniques and whole group debriefing strategies. Finally, Chapter 4, 'Anytime', discusses comfort and care kinds of things teachers can do to create a safe and accepting climate in the classroom.

## Long before the test

There are a number of essential things teachers can do long before 'the test' that create the necessary structures for students to succeed in the testing situations they inevitably encounter. They can create the environment for learning and, at the same time, they can create the environment for accountability.

One of the essential elements to ensure successful test-taking and lifelong learning is a safe and caring emotional climate; a viable learning environment that invites kids to try their best. This nurturing climate allows kids to

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try and to fail and to eventually succeed. Kids know that in this classroom they are encouraged to learn in their own ways and in their own time. They feel safe and confident that effort is valued as much as achievement.

A second necessary element in this nurturing environment is the occurrence of frequent and quick reviews of newly learned material. The teachers in these student-centred classrooms understand the power of revisiting ideas, over and over again. They set expectations for students to 'test themselves', and to re-test themselves, often, through surprise quizzes, daily checkups and weekly tests of various kinds. These teachers put a price on learning and that price is called accountability. The kids know the expectations and they rise to the occasions, not once, but often ... in fact, all the time. These kids are ever-ready batteries, always on alert, ready to test their own learning. When 'the big test' comes along – and it will – these students are not thrown off guard. It is just part and parcel of their learning repertoire.

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**These teachers put a price on learning and that price is called accountability.**

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**These kids are ever-ready batteries, always on alert, ready to test their own learning.**

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**They need to learn how to, literally, 'unpack the language of the tests'.**

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## Sometime before the test

Sometime before the test, students need explicit instruction in understanding the language of tests. They need to learn how to, literally, 'unpack the language of the tests'. They need to know what to do when the test questions says, 'Compare and contrast...' or 'Explain





your answer ... ' or 'Justify your thinking ... ' and they need to practise doing the things the test questions ask them to do. It sounds so simple, yet many students lose points or get an answer incorrect because they do not understand what they are supposed to do.

To expose and to clarify the test vocabulary, so that every student has a sense of security about answering the questions competently, there are explicit heuristics that can be taught. As depicted below in Figure 1, the acronym I CAN DO THIS is used to make these protocols not only simple, straightforward and easy to use, but, also, easy to remember.

## **Unpacking the language of the test**

**I**dentify ... recognise, name, label

**C**ompare with synonyms

**A**nalyse ... take apart, evaluate details

**N**ame ... list, delineate

**D**efend ... justify, present an opinion and support it

**O**ffer proof ... show the rationale

**T**race ... delineate, follow the sequence

**H**elp define ... differentiate

**I**llustrate ... draw, show, sketch

**S**ummarise ... give the main idea or a synopsis

Figure 1