



Standardized Tests During a Pandemic

By Educator Barnes – February 26, 2021

When the coronavirus pandemic began and school buildings were closed last school year, at first, it was not clear if standardized testing would occur. Governor Holcomb gave daily press conferences, and my husband and I watched them. Sometimes, we would have our boys join us because we believed it was important for our children to be exposed to the current events.

During one of the press conferences our sons watched with us, Governor Holcomb shared that standardized testing would be canceled. My son Jeremiah jumped off of the sofa and screamed, "Yes!" His brother had zoned out and was not paying attention. "We don't have to take those tests, James." Once James tuned back in, he also began cheering. We told them to settle down because we were trying to watch the rest of the press conference.

Last year, my sons were in third grade. In Indiana, third graders get their warm welcome to standardized testing. They take the IREAD-3 and the ILEARN assessment. Jeremiah had the IREAD-3 test date circled on his assignment notebook. He would come home worried about the test. James, on the other hand, thought the IREAD-3 test was a waste of his time.

His opinions about reading assessments are nothing new. He is also the student who told a teacher he knows how to read so he doesn't need to take the Fountas & Pinnell (F & P) reading assessment which gives teachers the reading level of students. Every year, including this year, we have this battle. After his F & P assessment this year, his teacher sent me a message which partly said, "I think he honestly could have moved up another level but he didn't seem very invested in answering the questions." All I could do was shake my head. I made him read the message and he mumbled something about the book not being interesting and how he still went up a level.

In August 2020, the IDOE sent Corporation Test Coordinators (CTC) the following information:

Participation Survey: IREAD-3 Fall Assessment due 8/14

Per the Indiana State Board of Education resolution, an optional IREAD-3 window for grade 4 students in Fall 2020 is available. The window for the fall IREAD-3 will be November 2-6. This optional test window is not connected to accountability measures and may not be used to retain students. All CTCs must complete this survey to indicate their intent to participate in the optional window no later than August 14.

My sons, who are now in fourth grade, did not have to take the assessment this school year. I decided to ask them how they felt about this. Jeremiah said, "Before the test was canceled, I was happy to take the test. I knew the test would show I was smart. When I found out it was canceled, I was happy but still disappointed." As Jeremiah shared his thoughts, James rolled over on my bed and let out a large sigh. I inquired about his thoughts. James said, "Those tests are long and boring. You have to sit there in silence. You can't talk. All you hear is tap,

tap on the computer keys and the teacher walks around and stares at you." When I asked if he thought he should have to take it this year, he sighed again. "They canceled the test. Canceled! You don't get to go back and change your mind and make us take it," said James. Jeremiah disagreed. "I think we should have taken the test. What if I didn't get all the questions right? I want to know how I did so I can get better." James interjected, "Then what are all those reading level (F&P) tests for?"

Since this conversation was getting a little heated. I told them I had heard enough and directed them to exit my room. Just like adults are divided about the standardized tests, so are the children living under my roof. My sons have always read above the level they need to be on for their grade level, so I was not terribly disappointed about them missing this test. The IREAD-3 test does have the consequence of a student possibly being retained in third grade, so I believe the students who made it to 4th grade like my sons without having to pass the test were relieved.

This does make me wonder why our current third graders, like my niece, will have to take the test. These students had their second-grade year interrupted by the pandemic when they were still in the midst of solidifying those learning to read skills. The test scores will not lead to consequences for school districts which I am glad about, and at least districts will get a snapshot in time of how students are doing. However, if teachers know what they are doing, they should already know this information based on assessments they have given students. I am as divided as my two sons.

I live in Washington Township, the school district sent the following information in its newsletter:

Despite multiple efforts on behalf of education leaders and teacher associations across the state to eliminate federal and state-mandated testing due to Covid-19 implications this school year, Indiana's statewide summative assessments, like ILEARN and IREAD-3, must still be administered to students in person. Here are three things you need to know about statewide testing for Spring 2021:

- 1. Schools are STILL required by state and/or federal legislation to administer assessments, such as ILEARN, ISTEP+, I AM, and WIDA.*
- 2. Statewide summative assessments are considered high-stakes and may not be given to students remotely since doing so would pose a risk to the accuracy of test data. Upcoming state tests include:*

1. *IREAD for 3rd Grade students (begins March 9)*
 2. *ILEARN for 3rd through 8th Grade (begins April 19 – May 14)*
 3. *ILEARN Biology (For HS Biology students April 19 – May 21)*
 4. *I AM (For students with individualized education plans not taking ILEARN April 5 – May 14)*
3. *Currently, under Indiana Code, Indiana Administrative Code, or federal regulations, **there is no current option for parents/guardians to remove their children from required accountability tests.** Therefore, requests by parents to remove their children from accountability tests will be handled on a case-by-case basis at the child's school. Please contact your child's principal if you have health or safety concerns with on-site testing as we may be able to accommodate after school or alternative testing times.*

Point three stood out because parents are being told they can't opt their children out of testing. Some children, like my sons, have been remote the entire school year. We have had too many people close to us have COVID and the outcomes weren't always good. Since we are Black, and outcomes for Black people who test positive for COVID haven't been great, we are at a heightened level of wanting to keep our sons and our family safe. Although they did not have to take IREAD-3, they are supposed to take ILEARN for the first time. I am conflicted about sending my sons to campus just to take this test ... that's not going to count. I am confident my sons, who are in the same class this year, have a great teacher. I believe she is well aware of their abilities. Standardized tests do provide accountability to the public about how students are doing in the schools their tax dollars are supporting. Again, we are in a pandemic, so is the data going to tell us anything we already didn't know?