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Accountability – Achievement Tests

In the spring of each year an *achievement test* is administered to each student in 5K through grade 8. There are several achievement tests available to Grace Lutheran School. We, like many Lutheran schools, choose to use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. We chose this test for several reasons.

The Iowa Tests are “standardized” across the nation. The standardization process used includes testing thousands of students in 5K through grade ten. These students are enrolled in all types of schools—urban, suburban, parochial, private, public, large schools, small schools, schools with different organizational plans, etc. Students at each of the various grade levels are asked questions that range in difficulty from quite easy questions to very difficult questions. The standardization process helps to ensure that students are asked questions that are understood by children of their age and achievement levels.

The tests cover a wide range of questions arranged into sub-tests. These tests vary according to the age level of children. Children in grades 5K through Grade 3, for example, are tested in an area called *Word Analysis*. What is tested is the child’s decoding ability, the ability to interpret the symbols that we call words. Word analysis skills should be mastered by the end of the third grade—many students master these skills before that time—so, beginning with fourth grade, this area is no longer tested. Much of early education depends on a child’s listening skills, so these are also tested through third grade but not in the higher grades.

In the area of reading, all of the children are tested in vocabulary and comprehension. Other areas of the language arts, *i.e.*, capitalization, punctuation, and using the proper form of words, are tested in third through the eighth grade. Mathematics is tested already in 5K, but then is broken down into sub-areas of computational skills, problem solving, and understanding of math concepts in grades one through eight. Students in grades one through eight are tested in social studies and science. The final expansion of the tests occurs when third graders through eighth graders are tested in maps and the use of reference materials.

Once the testing has been completed, the answer sheets are sent to a company that not only scores them but also provides the teachers with a wide variety of helps. Teachers receive information about each child’s achievement, information that compares the child’s knowledge with those in the standardization group. Most helpful is the very specific information that gives the teacher information about how the child answered each question in the tests. This information not only helps the teacher to learn about the child but also to learn about the effectiveness of his/her teaching. Individual test results help the teacher to learn how better to challenge the student in areas where the student excels as well identifying areas that show the student would benefit from additional instruction. The staff also uses the test results to analyze the effectiveness of the curriculum as compared to these national standards and to adapt the curriculum and instructional methods accordingly.

A number of factors can influence the test results of any student. To have a proper understanding of the test results they must be understood in the context of the child’s entire achievement at school. Teachers are schooled in psychometrics, the study of measurement techniques. Parents who want to know how their children fared on the Iowa Tests are encouraged to ask the classroom teacher to share and explain the test results.