

Addressing Test Anxiety

Federal and State requirements for measures of students' academic performance have become a regular part of the school experience. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is an example of this kind of measure. The results of MCAS help to identify for each student, school, and school district areas of proficiency and opportunities for improvement. The intent of this practice is to ensure equal access to a quality education and that all students are held to the same high standards of academic achievement. Other assessments have different uses. These assessments provide teachers with information that helps them tailor instruction to better meet the needs of individual students as they move toward reaching established standards. In either case, it is not unusual for some students to feel nervous prior to, during or after testing. According to research, low to moderate levels of anxiety can act as a motivator and actually enhance performance. However, high levels of anxiety can interfere with a student's ability to perform their best. Parents and educators are encouraged to take active steps in helping students manage their anxiety if it occurs. Below are some practical strategies parents, teachers and students can use to manage test anxiety.

For students:

- *Be aware of the signs and symptoms of test anxiety.* If you are feeling nervous about an upcoming test, talk to your teacher, parent or another adult with whom you are comfortable.
- *Learn about the test.* One way to ease test anxiety is to make sure you know the basic facts about the test. Your teacher can spend some time explaining what the test will be like and what you will be asked. Be sure to ask your teacher about other ways to learn about the test. For example, students participating in AP exams can find practice questions [here](#).
- *Make an organized study schedule and stick to it.* The better prepared you are on test day the more confident you will feel. You may find it useful to create a study plan that outlines what you are going to work on, where you are going to find helpful resources, and when you are going to undertake each step.
- *Keep negative thoughts at bay.* Counter them with positive thoughts and actions. Negative thoughts can interrupt your test preparation and may even distract or cause you to freeze up on test day.

For parents:

- *Talk to your child about testing.* It's helpful for children to understand why schools give tests and to know the different kinds of tests they will take. In your explanation you might compare the test to another measure. For example, you could tell your children that tests are used like yardsticks to help teachers, schools and even states measure what and how they teach and how well students are learning what is taught.
- *Keep in close contact with your child's teacher and school faculty regarding academic progress and performance.* Ask your child's teacher to suggest activities for you and your child to do at home to help prepare for tests and to improve your child's understanding of the curriculum.

- *Note test dates on your home calendar.* General information about MCAS and when testing will occur can be found on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's [website](#). Your child's school can provide more specific information about when MCAS and other tests are scheduled.
- *Encourage your child to do his/her best work possible, rather than focusing on a specific score.* Too much pressure can affect her test performance. In addition, he/she may come to think that you will only love her if he/she does well on tests. Also, try not to place too much emphasis on a single test score. There are many things that can affect a child's performance on a given day. Remember, one test is simply one test.
- *Encourage your child to prepare for tests ahead of time.* Assist your child in constructing an organized study schedule and stick to it. Explain that preparation and confidence can be linked. You may find it useful to create a study plan that outlines what you are going to work on, where you are going to find helpful resources, and when you are going to undertake each step.
- *Ensure your child attends school regularly.* On testing days, ensure your child arrives at school on time and is relaxed. Do not send your child to school if illness is apparent.
- *On days of testing, ensure that your child is well rested and eats a balanced breakfast.* Students who are well rested and have eaten a balanced breakfast have the "fuel" needed to do their best work.

For educators:

- *Notify students of the test in advance.* Consult your school's testing schedule and communicate this information to your students and their parents early in the school year. You may need to send out additional reminders as certain test days approach.
- *Provide students with general information about the test* (ex: format, length, time requirements). As appropriate, also direct students to additional sources of information about the test, such as other school staff and other resources.
- *Teach students to avoid cram sessions.* Encourage students to plan ahead and leave adequate time to prepare for testing. Help students develop useful study skills and habits.
- *Provide students an opportunity to take practice tests and items.* This will provide students an opportunity to become familiar with the testing process and procedures as well as test content. Sample MCAS questions can be found on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's [website](#). Many other tests, such as [AP exams](#) and the [PSAT](#), offer practice questions as well. The best preparation is regular participation in high quality, classroom instruction, rather than rehearsing practice questions.
- *Provide extra support for at-risk students.* For students who will receive test accommodations, make sure students have experience using the accommodations they will receive during testing. Be sure to check each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) well before testing and be aware of the specific accommodations your students will receive.
- *Model a positive attitude toward testing.* Students take cues from the behavior of adults. Adults who communicate confidence and positive attitudes are good supports for students.

- *Teach students to recognize signs of anxiety and how to manage such feelings.* For example, some students may benefit from relaxation techniques such as deep breathing.

Additional resources:

- Helping Your Child with Test-Taking (Source: U.S. Department of Education)
- High Stakes Testing: Managing Test Anxiety (Source: The School Board of Broward County, Florida)
- Writing about worries eases anxiety and improves test performance (Sources: University of Chicago News)
This article describes a potentially promising practice using a writing exercise to lessen student test taking anxiety.
- Reducing Test Anxiety (Source: Educational Testing Services)
This guide provides practical guidance for people who suffer test anxiety. It is designed specifically for individuals entering the teaching profession, but is useful to anyone who has to take tests. This guide reviews the major causes of test anxiety and offers practical advice for how to counter each one. This guide may be particularly useful for older students and their parents as well as the professionals who work with them.
- Combating Test Anxiety: Relaxation Techniques (Source: Sinclair Community College)

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