

Score Higher! With Better Test-Taking Tips from Teaching That Makes Sense

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (March 21, 2006)-- Recently, Kaplans' SCORE! Educational Centers, Inc., released a list of strategies parents could use at home to help their children get ready for high-stakes state testing. Steve Peha, president of Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc., and a national expert in standardized test preparation, offers his own set of tips that go beyond the obvious to help kids score even higher. Kaplan's tips are in black, TTMS tips are in red.

SCORE! Tip #1: Read all directions carefully! Oftentimes in test-taking environments, the adrenaline gets pumping and students read through instructions too quickly. Taking the extra time to slow down and make sure they understand the question not only saves them from making wrong answers, but also saves time in the long run. A good guideline is to read each written directive at least twice.

Score Higher! with TTMS Tip #1: By all means, read the directions. But read them in a way that will improve your understanding. Test directions are usually written so that almost every part of every sentence contains vital information. So don't just read the directions, read them sentence-by-sentence and part-by-part. That is, make sure you break longer sentences carefully into meaningful phrases. How do you do that? Slow your normal reading rate by about 15%-20%, pause a little longer than usual at the ends of sentences and paragraphs, and read with a hint of expression to encourage accurate phrasing.

SCORE! Tip #2: Underline key words in the directions. This is a good strategy for kids in 5th grade or higher. At the younger grade levels, kids might get too bogged down in actually identifying the words and miss the greater question. Good key words to remember are: "Compare," "Contrast," "Define," and "Explain."

Score Higher! with TTMS Tip #2: Instead of underlining key words, box the entire phrase of the instructions in which they are contained. Sure, you can remember "Compare", "Contrast", and "Define" but problems on the test will be asking you to compare, contrast, and define certain things. Underlining just the key word, and not the other important information associated with it, could hamper your understanding and cause you to miss something. Why use a box rather than underline? Because in complex instructions, your underlines can run together. With boxes, you can keep things separated. What do you do in really complex instructions where your boxing makes the problem look like a diagram of a football play? List the instructions, part by part, on a separate sheet of scratch paper. It's a drag, I know, but it will help your understanding and give you a nifty checklist of things you need to do.

SCORE! Tip #3: Listen attentively to the teacher or proctor. It's very easy for your child to let anxiety and adrenaline take over when they are sitting in the room with the test in front of them, waiting for the teacher to start the exam. Talk to your child about taking a deep breath and not getting distracted from the directions the teacher might be giving. Otherwise, your child might miss some very important information!

Score Higher! with TTMS Tip #3: In many situations, verbal instructions from the teacher will already be written in the test booklet. So don't just listen, follow along with your pencil. Put a question mark by anything you don't initially understand. Or use the boxing technique described in Tip #2 to mark off important details. It's not listening that makes the difference; it's how you listen that really matters. Brain research shows us that if we support our listening with another kind of closely related mental activity, we will understand and retain more of what we listen to.

SCORE! Tip #4: If the directions are confusing, ask! Your child's teacher is there to help explain unclear directions, and he will tell your child if a question is asking for too much information. It is always better for your child to ask and be told by the teacher that they can't answer the question than to not ask at all.

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #4: Yes, by all means, ask for help any time you need it. But don't just throw your hand up and say, "I don't get it." or "Can you help me?" or "What's the capitol of West Virginia?" Be specific. Using any marks you may have made on the instructions, come up with questions that are as relevant as they can be. And don't stop asking until you're sure you've got the information you need. Even better, consider this: many states allow kids to ask their teachers for help understanding instructions at any time during the test, on any problem they encounter, and not just before the test starts. If you get stuck on a problem you don't understand, chances are your teacher can at least help clarify the instructions for you.

SCORE! Tip #5: Learn how to skim. This is most relevant for students in older grades as they will be reading longer passages. Teach your kids how to skim through a passage quickly to get the basic idea and then read the questions that correspond with that passage. Then, when they go back into the paragraph, they'll know what information they need to be looking for.

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #5: Skimming is great when you're looking through a newspaper for an article that interests you or when you're browsing an Internet search looking for your favorite legal music download. But it's not always a good idea on reading comprehension tests -- especially if you do it the first time through. Instead, try the following. Read the passage at a comfortable rate. As you move from paragraph to paragraph (or section to section if the passage has headings), underline important ideas and make brief notes in the margins. Your markings could be as simple as putting a check by something you understand or a question mark by something you don't. Then -- and only then -- will skimming (on a subsequent reading) be valuable. Better yet, skip the skimming altogether. Most tests you'll take at school won't have tight time requirements. Take advantage of this fact and try this approach: (1) Read the passage once through very carefully. (2) Read the questions you're supposed to answer about it. (3) Go back to the passage and read it through again -- read carefully; don't skim! -- but this time underline or make a mark in the margin where you know you'll find information that will help you answer the questions. Then, answer the questions one by one, always going back to the text to double-check your information.

SCORE! Tip #6: Process of elimination. A portion of the test is multiple choice, so knowing how to eliminate wrong answers will help your child make an educated guess, if necessary. Getting four options down to two means they have doubled the likelihood of choosing a right answer!

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #6: Using a process of elimination strategy is great but unless you know how standardized tests are put together, you won't always know how to eliminate the wrong answers. Here's the deal: in a 4-choice question, one choice is the right answer, one choice is typically a very wrong answer, and the other two are called "distractors." These choices are similar to the right answer and they're put in specifically to fake you out. The way test makers choose distractors is interesting. Long before you take the test, they give the problems to other kids like you and discover the most often selected wrong answers. Then they put those on the test as wrong choices. If you're a lot like the kids who got the answers wrong, you'll be distracted by the distractors. To beat the system, you have to be honest with yourself about your ability to solve the problem. If the problem

seems very easy to you, select the first answer you come up with. If the problem seems very hard, eliminate the first answer you come up with -- it's probably one of the distractors that fooled other kids like you. Using a little reverse psychology on yourself, you can sometimes get the right answer even if you have no idea how to solve the problem at all.

SCORE! Tip #7: Manage time well. Good time management is critical to good test taking. It doesn't matter if your child is in 3rd grade or graduate school, no one wants to run out of time on a test. Every question gets equal weight, so it is in your child's best interest to skip questions that are particularly difficult, and save them for the end. And if your child finishes early, answers should be double checked!

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #7: While time management may be critical on the SAT or ACT, it's usually not critical on the high stakes state tests we take at school. So before you go rushing off to consult your copy of the "One Minute Manager for Test-Taking Teens", find out how much time you really have on this test. Many schools will say, "You have 3 hours to complete the test." But the truth is that kids who need extra time can often get it, right up to a full school day. So be sure to ask about "extra" time. Now, about this idea that "every question gets equal weight". This is often not true. In general, on high stakes state tests, individual multiple choice questions have one weighting whereas questions that involve complex problem solving and written out answers are weighted much more heavily (It's also important to note that many of these problems offer partial credit so even if you don't know the right answer, it can pay off to just keep working on it and writing down more information). When it comes to double-checking your answers, there's an interesting psychological element you should be aware of: more often than not, your first answer is your best answer (assuming, of course, that you felt at least somewhat confident about it to begin with; if you were just guessing, see TTMS Tip #6 about eliminating answers in multiple choice questions.) Whatever you do, don't go back and spend an hour second-guessing yourself, especially on multiple choice problems. Instead, try this: for problems that are really easy, get the right answer and write "easy" in the margin; for problems that are really hard, make your best guess and write "hard" in the margin; now, if you have time, only go back over the problems you didn't mark as easy or hard. Why? Because the easy ones were easy and your first guess is most likely to be right and the hard ones were way over your head so spending time doing them over probably isn't going to help much. It's the in-between problems that might benefit from a little more attention. But again, unless you know for sure that you've improved on your original answer, don't change it.

SCORE! Tip #8: Answer some easy questions first. By attacking a few easy questions right off the bat, your child will build confidence and manage their time well. Starting off an important test with the right attitude can make all the difference!

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #8: While it's great to buoy your spirits by knocking a few easy ones out of the park, skipping hither and thither through your test booklet in search of low-hanging fruit often causes problems that more than negate the small bump in confidence you may achieve. First of all, it's very easy to skip a problem on the test and not skip a blank on your answer sheet (if you're taking this kind of test). And if that doesn't scare you, some kids skip over problems they think will be hard and then completely forget to go back and answer them. Skipping problems also makes time management a little harder if you're working on a tightly timed test. Finally, many tests have many problems that are actually multi-part exercises spread across more than one page. Just try doing these out of order and see what happens! Looking for a smarter approach? Suck it up and answer the questions the way they're presented. Using TTMS Tip #7, you'll know how to mark the problems appropriately so you can return to them at the end if you have time. Will

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struggling over the first few problems tank your spirits? I doubt it. And, in any case, test makers often put easier problems up first in test sections anyway. The hard problems almost always come later.

SCORE! Tip #9: It's OK to take a break. Time management is important, but not if it means that your child is going to burn himself out before the end of the test. If your child says that tests feel overwhelming and exhausting, tell him that it's OK to put his pencil down and close his eyes, stare out the window for a moment or just take a few deep breaths. Just don't lose track of time!

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #9: Here's a simpler to pacing and time management that will probably more effective for you. Start out by doing problems at a pace that is comfortable for you. After you've done a few, check the clock. Think about how many problems you've done and how many you have left to do. Then make a rough estimate of how you're doing on time ("I've just done about a third of the problems and I've only used about a fourth of the time! I can go a little slower later on if I have to."). Truth is, with regard to most high stakes state tests, you'll get plenty of time. The tests are designed to give all kids a fair chance. That means the timings are unusually generous to account for even the slowest test-takers. Long before the test begins, just ask yourself: "Compared to my friends in class, am I faster, about the same, or slower than they are at solving problems in this subject?" Unless you're one of the slowest kids in the class, you'll probably feel like you have plenty of time on the test. And if you are one of the slowest kids in the class, you'll probably end up having plenty of time anyway. So relax already on the time management thing!

SCORE! Tip #10: Try some practice questions! Kids always perform better when they are more comfortable with the content and format of a test. The Connecticut State Department of Education is a great resource and has a website with sample test questions available at: <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/assessment/cmt/resources.htm>.

Score Higher! With TTMS Tip #10: If you're like most kids in most schools, you've probably been bombarded by practice test questions for weeks in class. And many of these will likely have come from your state's official testing website. So, lighten up on yourself a bit as the big day approaches. Short of adding new brain cells, it's highly unlikely you will be able to raise your score a week before testing begins. At this point, you know what you know, you've worked as hard as you've worked. The best thing you can do is make sure you feel your best when the time comes. Above all, don't cram. No matter how poorly prepared you think you may be, cramming is unlikely to help you raise your score. So for a couple of nights right before the test, don't stay up late studying questions. Watch your favorite TV shows and go to bed early. These tests can be very long and getting tired is one of the main reasons kids do poorly on them.

About Steve Peha & Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc.

TTMS provides teacher training, model classroom instruction, curriculum development, enterprise technology and other products and services that make teachers and administrators more effective, help schools raise scores on high-stakes tests, and help students develop real-world skills that prepare them for the future. A nationally recognized education consultant, Founder Steve Peha is a passionate advocate for sensible school reform. His unique strategies, based on years of experience in classrooms and the world of business and high technology, make teaching easier for teachers and learning more meaningful for kids. His powerful, authentic approach to teaching earned him the *2001 Innovators in Education Award* from the Newspaper Association of America, and earned www.ttms.org an "A" from *EducationWorld.com* in 2004.

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