

Dry as Chalk Dust

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Dry as chalk dust—that's the way most teachers I know view statistics. But statistics can come alive and bring life into your classroom if you learn how to use them!

One of the constants in the life of a teacher is the yearly achievement test—some years more than one set of tests. A week is usually set aside with sections of time blocked off to allow enough time for the spate of vocabulary, grammar and spelling, math and maps tests. Teachers issue careful instructions, stopwatch in hand, and students painstakingly begin filling in bubbles with HB 2 pencils in a race against the clock. At last the tests are complete, the extraneous marks on the answer sheets erased, and the tests are bundled up and shipped off to the conference. The teacher's work is done except for the filing of the reports when they are returned from the conference.

But wait a minute—the teacher's work should just be beginning! Why? The reports, when returned, have a wealth of information which a teacher can use to reach more students. When I first began teaching, I had no idea of the treasure trove that had been handed to me with these reports. Oh sure, I read them and nodded as I looked at the national percentile rank on the composite scores. Yes, I sagely noted, Joe was indeed at the 99th percentile in my grade books as well as on the report and well, yes, I wasn't surprised to see poor Bob showing at the 21st percentile. I dutifully filed the reports in each child's file and handed the reports to parents at parent-teacher meetings.

But then, one day, I discovered the treasure trove I really held in my hands with those reports. The detailed reports showed more than where my students would be placed in any group of 100 Grade 4's across Canada. It pinpointed where my students were weak and where they were strong. With a little time and effort I could see areas common to all of my students, both strengths and weaknesses. This meant I could now tailor my classroom instruction to better help my students. There were some areas that needed little reinforcement and others that needed a good deal of reinforcement. I no longer had to guess at what my students needed to learn in certain areas—I knew some specifics, thanks to the tests.

I also discovered that test results can be used even further than the immediate year they are released. They can also be analyzed over a period of several years. One way is to check the Grade 4 scores, for instance, to see if there are any patterns for several successive Grade 4 classes. Again, this can be useful feedback for a teacher working to eliminate problems for a new, incoming Grade 4 class. Another way is to follow a class for several years to see if they are advancing as expected from year to year, gaining approximately a year of learning in each tested area between each yearly testing period. So, for instance, a Grade 7 teacher could look back over her new incoming class's achievement test history and know what to expect and what to prepare for.

Since those days earlier in my career, I have had the opportunity as an administrator to help other teachers decipher the tests. I know figuring these out can be time-consuming so I have developed some spreadsheets so teachers can easily total their class's scores and see at a glance areas to concentrate on in their class instruction. I would be happy to email these spreadsheets to any teachers who would like a copy. Don't let statistics be dry as chalk dust—let statistics come alive and help you become a better teacher!

***SDACC NOTE:** The Cognitive Genesis testing provides a wealth of the kind of information that Janet refers to in this article. Contact your conference superintendent or the SDACC for more information about additional CTBS reports that can be ordered which provide individual student profiles and instructional strategies for each student based on their areas of strength and weakness.*

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