TEST PREP DONE RIGHT

Finding a healthy and productive way through the tensions presented by large-scale standardized tests is challenging for adults to navigate. For students, it can be overwhelming and stressful. Test prep done right is about focusing on supporting students by lowering their anxiety and increasing their metacognitive skills.

10 to 14 Days

From September to Mid-March, "test prep" is high-quality, culturally-competent instruction aligned to the CCLS and meaningful, diverse assessment practices. 10-14 days before the tests, the focus should switch to applying knowledge and skills to the testing format.

Use Test Prep Books Sparingly

NYS tests are designed to NYS' specifications. Resources to understand the tests can be found at www.engageny.org/3-8. The 2016 tests were field tested in 2014 and 2015, so those annotated items and passage give a sense of what to expected.

Help Students Create a Plan

Student anxiety can be dramatically reduced through the creation and use of a test plan. Consider engaging students in action research to try out different test-taking strategies. Give them time to debrief and discuss after practice tests.

Focus on Metacognition

Introduce students to concepts such as priming and stereotype threat. When sharing strategies, stress what works for you and invite students to consider what works for them. There is no right way to take a test. Tools like Behavior Over Time graphs can help these conversations take shape.

Anxiety is Contagious

Cizek & Burg (2013) found a strong correlation between teacher anxiety and student anxiety. One way to attend to this is to invite students to ask questions about the role, purpose, and consequences for the test and develop a common language among adults for talking test.

Note Collector on the Key Attributes of Learner-Centered Test Prep

	What this means	What this means to me
Key Findings from Research		
Action Research		
Stereotype Threat		
Priming		

Recommendations and Resources
Twitter Account: @AceThatTest
Podcast Episode: http://www.radiolab.org/story/stereothreat/
Article: Resilience for Anxious Students www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/11/resilience-anxious-students
Book: Sapp, Marty (2014). *Text Anxiety: Applied Research, Assessment, and Treatment Interventions*. University Press.
Literature Review: *Empirically Validated Strategies to Reduce Stereotype Threat:* tinyurl.com/LCTPLong

Key Findings from Research on Test Preparation
Suggested Guidelines for Quality Test Prep (Miyasaka, 2000)

1. Provide quality instruction, practice, and assessment from the entire domain of content objectives including the test objectives during regular instruction

2. Assess students using a variety of assessment approaches during regular instruction

3. Provide students instruction in and practice of test-taking strategies – the act of transferring knowledge to a particular setting

4. Test preparation immediately before the test should focus on reducing student anxiety, not on improving their scores.

Givens for Framing Test Prep in the Bigger Picture of Student Thinking

1. Test taking skills are independent of content abilities. (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1992) Actions like **priming** and reducing **stereotype threat** can supplement students' skills.

2. High stakes, summative tests are not typical performance. (Cronbach, 1990) Part of **test-wiseness** is understanding how different situations require different strategies.

3. It's not enough to just practice taking a test. Students need to **reflect** on the test taking experience, **develop** a plan, **practice** their plan, and **reflect** on how the new plan worked. (Hattie, 2009)

4. **Test prep** (explicit preparation in how to take a particular test) is most effective right before (no farther away than 10-14 days before the test). This is not cramming. It's a strategic shift for the learner from learning to applying what they learned in a particular way. Events like dress rehearsals can help reduce students' anxiety during this period.

Strategies for Integrating State Tests into A Learner-Centered System

1. Engage students in learning about themselves as test takers

2. Introduce students to the concept and benefits of self-priming

3. Help students understand and regulate Stereotype Threat

Understanding Learner-Centered Test Prep

1. **What is the difference between learner-centered test prep (what we refer to as test prep done right) and test prep we typically see and often occurs by rote?**

   At its best, test prep reduces student anxiety and increases their metacognition skills. This means that students are thinking about their thinking, their stress level, and how they manage their anxiety - skills students need beyond the day of the test. Test prep that focuses on rote is more likely to focus the students' attention on the test questions, using one right procedure to answer a question, and seeks to raise students' scores. These are typically the test prep strategies teachers themselves were taught or use. The table below highlights more differences:

Learner-Centered Approach Test Prep Done Right	Traditional or Inherited Approach Test Prep Done by Rote
Focus is on: • skills that extend beyond day of the test • decreasing student anxiety • increasing sense of control and metacognition	Focus is on: • increasing students' scores • decreasing reliance on individual thinking • increasing "right" answer thinking
Goal is transferring already taught and learned skills and understandings to test medium.	Goal is finishing workbook activities, "polishing" mastery of an ELA/Math skill.
When teachers ask the students to share their thinking, the goal is to highlight individual student approaches and strategies.	When teachers ask the students to share their thinking, the goal is to ensure all students are doing it the "*right*" way.
Teacher models the skill transfer concept with phrases like "*this is what I'm thinking as I take this test*" and "*this is what the skill looks like but this is what the skill looks like for the test.*"	Teacher models thinking around answering a given question with phrases like "*This is how you should answer this question*" and "*here's the right way to solve this problem.*"
Large school gatherings around the test focus on a sense of community and togetherness - *We're in this together. We know how amazing you are.*	Large school gatherings around the test focus on communicating a sense of personal responsibility - *I know I can count on you to do your best.* A particular score (i.e. Level 3) is treated as a target for everyone.
Administration takes the temperature of the school, classrooms, and individual students and answers any and all questions to respond to rumors and speculation.	Administration takes a hands off approach, leaving test prep up to individual teachers. Most frequent response to the students' concern is, "don't worry about the test."
Needs of students from stereotyped groups (i.e. children of color, children who experience poverty, anxious students with high expectations for themselves) are addressed in ways that support reducing stereotype threat, not increasing it.	The needs of students from stereotyped groups are ignored or addressed in front of all students. Teachers of color may be tasked with addressing the needs of children of color.
Leaders walk the walk by making concerted efforts to diminish pressure or stress around the tests. They work to develop a culture in which the State assessments are only one of the many data sources used to determine students' areas of strengths and needs.	Leaders talk the talk by reporting they are diminishing pressure but there is disconnect between their actions and words. The NYS State assessments scores drive many conversations, including local data-driven conversations.

2. **What does it look like to "practice" for the state tests? I want students to feel prepared.**

    A great deal goes into doing well on a test, including how we define what it means it "do well." When you help students practice, it's helpful to be explicit about what you're practicing. Seth Godin wrote "*better is better than more*" when it comes to practicing to master or transfer a skill. Are you helping students practice how to answer a particular item? Then model your think aloud for answering that item and ask for at least two other ways to answer that question or solve the problem. The goal should be to help students identify strategies that work for them on the test so that they are thinking about their test taking process, not just mimicking or copying how an adult answers a particular question.

    If you are modeling how to "take a test", build in time to debrief the act of taking a test. Consider asking questions like:
    - *Which question in this practice test were harder than others? What made them hard?*
    - *Which questions were easier to you? What made them easier to you?*
    - *What's your process for deciding how long to stay with a problem?*
    - *When did you decided to move on?*
    - *What's your process for making sure all of the answers on your answer key were correct?*

    If you are modeling how to manage the stress and frustration that comes with testing, it's important to empower students through self-management strategies. Platitudes and "you can do this" will only get students so far. More importantly, words are easy for us to say but hard for students to hear, especially when they are aware of the controversies around test-taking. After giving a practice test, ask students to assess their frustration level. Encourage discussion around how they managed and re-directed their frustration. If they can't re-direct, discuss ways they can learn to do so such as deep breathing, centering, or using a mantra. Discuss how these strategies work in situations outside of testing. The graphic organizer on page 4 can help students self-assess their frustration level. Systems Thinking tools like *Behavior Over Time Graphs* (http://watersfoundation.org/our-resources/) can also help students see the connection between moments of stress and how can they resolve the stress.

3. *How much is too much?*

    Test prep done right is very much like training to be an Olympic weightlifter. You are asking students to lift a heavy cognitive load in order to train for a particular event. Being good at lifting a particular weight, at a particular time, in a particular way seems like a useless skill. However, by virtue of doing the training, athletes get stronger and healthier. The "weightlifting" of preparing for a state assessment seems like a meaningless task that is only applicable in a certain situation at a certain time, but the benefits of metacognition remain long after the test is over. At the same time, it is possible to over-train. Even Olympic athletes cross train. They work on flexibility and endurance as well. Test prep should not become the center of a student's learning experience. Our first goal is move students closer to mastery of the NYS Learning Standards. In the weeks leading up to the state tests, our goal becomes helping them shift that mastery to a particular medium. Engaging students in a short action research project before the test can get at variety of skills including data collection, self-reflection, and understanding cause and effect. See page 5 and 6 for a walk-through of an approach to action research.

Managing Your Frustration

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Apathy	Boredom	Easy Engagement	Productive Provocation	Disciplined Difficulty	Overwhelmed	Panic	Anger	Rage	Disconnect

What on the test caused you to feel frustration?	What level (#) from the scale was your stress?	Why do you think it happened?	What will you need in order for your frustration to stay between a 3-5?

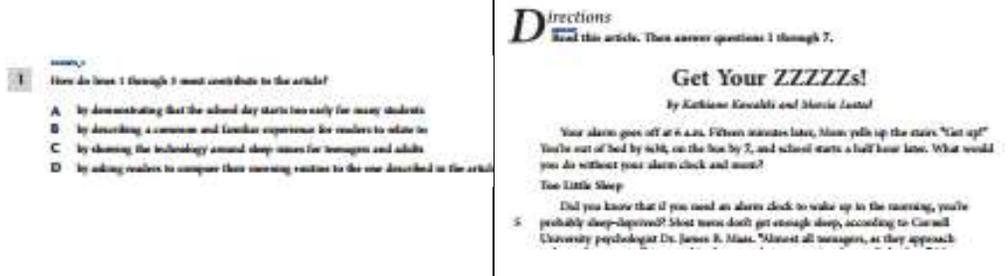Original scale developed by Angela Stockman, used with permission

Background Information for Test Taking Strategies Action Research

Source for "Practice" Items: Consider using old state assessments from advanced grades (e.g. 3rd takes an old 5th grade test) to model these strategies. The goal of instruction is to reduce student anxiety and help them develop a plan for taking the test that works for them. When presenting students with the practice items, consider letting them know the actual source and why it was chosen. However, for younger students, or those with a high degree of anxiety, this may be too much information. Instead the practice items and passages can be presented as having been picked because they are as challenging as the ones they will experience on the test. Stress that the purpose of the activity is to learn about themselves, not getting a right answer.

What the action research looks like: The goal is to invite students to better understand who they are as a thinker and a test taker. In order to give them time to reflect on what they learned, students should be provided with a way to document their results such as a bar graph or graphic organizer.

Possible structure: One way to consider this action research is to look at the testing window and plan backwards. If a school has committed to strategic test prep in the week before the test, it might look like:

- *Thursday*: Two practice passages from ELA test or two pages from math test using student strategy of choice; percent correct charted on graph; student generate list of possible strategies
- *Friday*: Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 1; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Monday*: Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 2; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Tuesday*: Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 3; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Wednesday*: Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using Strategy 4; percent correct charted on graph; debrief
- *Thursday*: Two practice passages from ELA or two pages from math test using strategy of choice based on action research
- *Friday*: Dress Rehearsal, debrief, and action planning

The strategies on the following page describing presenting different parts of an item from a sample test to students at different items.			
On a Math test:		**On an ELA test:**	
question refers to the question stem and the answers	**text** refers to the information needed to answer the question such as a grid, graphic, or information table In some cases, this may be included in the question problem and should be covered or removed when presenting the text to students.	**question** refers to the question stem and the answers	**text** refers to the information needed to answer the question. This is typically a reading passage or poem.
Arnold's entire workout consisted of 10 minutes of warm-up exercises, 25 minutes of lifting weights, and 15 minutes on the treadmill What was the ratio of the number of minutes he lifted weights to the total number of minutes of his entire workout?			

Sample Multiple Choice Test Taking Strategies

	Question → Text → Question	Text → Question	Text → Tag → Questions	Text → Tag → Question → True/False	Text → Question → Answer without Looking at Choices
	Preview the answer choices, tag the text or solve the problem, return to answers	Read the text or problem, then respond to each question	Read the text, text tag, respond to each question, confirm answer	Read the text, treat each question as a true/false statement	Read the text, read the question stem and write an answer without looking at choices
What are the key points of teaching this strategy?	*Do a think aloud of how you would preview the question to inform how you read the text.* Hand out the question(s) without the corresponding text. Give students time to preview the questions and tell them to identify what each one is asking or what math skills will be required. Hand out the corresponding passage or problem. Give students time to read the passage and complete the questions. Prompt them to use their question analysis to inform their reading. When students are finished, model for students how to text tag to match question to section of the passage. Be sure to debrief the drawbacks of this approach.	*Do a think aloud of how you would read the text to prepare yourself for the questions.* Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s). Give students time to read the text as they normally would. Hand out the questions. Given students time to re-read the text and respond to the question(s). When students are finished, discuss the contrast between strategy 1 and 2. *(It's common for students to suggest strategy 3 as a solution)*	*Note: this strategy presumes students are familiar with tagging strategies. If not, model first.* Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s). Give students time to read the text as they normally would. Be sure to remind them of text tagging strategies you've taught them. Hand out the questions and allow students to re-read the text and respond to the question(s). They should be sure to refer to their tagging to confirm that their answers are correct. When students are finished, model a test text tagging strategy. Be sure to discuss the difference between "real" text tagging and test text tagging.	*Prior to making copies, rephrase one item as a series of four statements. Model thinking of the question with each choice as a true/false statement.* Hand out the text without the corresponding question(s). Give students time to read the text as they normally would. Be sure to remind them of test text tagging strategies. Hand out the questions and give students time to read the stem with each answer as a true/false statement. When students are finished, discuss the time challenges posed by the strategy.	*Prior to copying the test, white out or cover up the choices beneath each item stem.* Hand out the text with or without the questions. Give students time to read the passage the respond to the question. Students should write their answer in the empty space. After they've completed the questions, hand out the questions with the four choices. Students select their answers. When students are finished, discuss the challenges (time, cognitive load) posed by the strategy.
	After each strategy, students should score and document their performance. While debriefing any strategy, consider questions such as: *What does a test-taker need to be aware of when using this strategy? When might this strategy be ineffective? What are some options if the strategy works well but takes a really long time?*				
Additional Debriefing Questions	What are some advantages to reading the questions first? What are some disadvantages to reading the questions first?	What are some advantages to reading the text first, and then reading and answering the questions? What are some disadvantages to reading the text first, and then reading and answering the questions?	What are some advantages to text tagging? What are some disadvantages to text tagging? What are some important things to tag?	What are some advantages to treating each choice as a true or false statement? What are some disadvantages to treating each choice as a true or false statement? What is a solution if none of the answers are completely true?	What difference did you notice when you didn't have any choices? How can you cover up the 4 choices during the test? What if your answer doesn't match any of the uncovered choices?

4. ***What does "priming" mean?***
Priming is the act of preparing ourselves to take on a challenging task or event. From Daniel Pink: *Confidence can lead to better performance. There is also a lot of interesting research on interrogative self-talk. If you go into an encounter and try to pump yourself up, saying, "I am awesome!" "I got this!" — it is more effective than doing nothing,* **but it is less effective than asking yourself, "Can I do this?"** *Because questions elicit an active response. You prepare yourself. You go over your game plan. You say, "Yeah, I can do this. Last time, I was a little nervous and [rushed through the hard items]." You are preparing. You are like an athlete at batting practice before the game.* Students can and should be taught how to prime themselves before challenging tasks. The state assessments provide an opportunity to practice the skill. Teachers can model this by asking yourself, "Can I do this?" and talking students through their test taking approach. For example: *Can I do this? Yes. I have a plan. My plan is to start with the hard items and then do the easy ones. I'm going to take 3 minutes to look through the test and find 3 hard items (or one hard passage for ELA). I'm going to do those three items (Or one hard passage) and bubble in my answers. Then, I'm going to find an easy one in the beginning of the test and bubble in the answer. Then I'm going to do the rest of the items. I'm going to double-check my bubble sheet when I have 5 minutes left.* Consider using old state assessments (from pre-2012) from upper grades as practice tests. While the complexity will be different, the stressors will be similar. Share old Regents with 8th graders to get them thinking about dealing with test frustration.

5. ***What is Stereotype Threat?***
Stereotype Threat is best understood as the "baggage" that we carry into tests and situations that has less to do with our abilities than how we perceive our abilities. For example, there is a stereotype in America that girls are worse at math than boys are. If girls take a science test moments after being reminded of their gender, they are more likely to perform worse than if they were not reminded of their gender. We need to help students understand and counteract those stereotypes as a way to control their own story and manage their own stress. Watching short clips of women, especially women of color, such as Mae Jamison in her TED talk, talk about being smart and her accomplishments can help counteract these stereotypes.

6. ***What type of questions should be I asking while doing test prep with students?***
<u>**The goal is to focus on metacognition, *thinking about thinking***</u>. There is no one right way to take a test. Questions that focus on the process students used to find the right answer are more effective than ones that focus on an item. For example:
- How do you know answer C is incorrect?
- What makes answer A "more right" or "more defensible" than answer C?
- If I say D is the right answer, where's the mistake in my thinking? How do I avoid repeating that mistake on other questions?

Whenever possible, teachers should model this kind of thinking in situations unrelated to state testing. That is, students should be expressing their thinking processes on a regular basis, not just in anticipation of the tests.

7. What about the whole "untimed" issue?

ELA Grade	Estimated Testing Time
Grades 3-4	Approx. 60-70 mins. of working time each day per session
Grades 5-8	Approx. 80-90 mins. of working time each day per session

Math Grade	Estimated Testing Time
Grade 3	Approx. 50-60 mins. of working time each day to complete sessions 1 and 2 Approx. 60-70 mins. of working time to complete session 3
Grade 4	Approx. 50-60 mins. of working time each day to complete sessions 1 and 2 Approx. 80-90 mins. of working time to complete session 3
Grades 5-8	Approx. 70-90 mins. of working time each day to complete sessions 1 and 2 Approx. 80-90 mins. of working time to complete session 3

NYSED has provided explicit documentation on how time they estimate students will need to work through each part of the test. These timeframes can serve as a starting point for dress rehearsals or when discussing time lengths with students.

When having conversations around time limits, teachers may offer clarity that the test designers wanted to help reduce students worry about being able to finish in time. The test isn't harder this year. Some students may want or need more time and if they do, it's available to them. When a district determines their approach to handling the time issue (i.e. removing students who finish early, setting aside quiet space for students who need a lunch break during the testing window), it might be helpful to share the plan with older students to get their feedback and request their thoughts around unintended consequences. Asking students questions such as, "we're thinking about moving students who finish from their classroom the gym for free play. Can you help us think through that solution?" can go a long way towards gaining insight on the issue. Once the plan is set, teachers and students will likely benefit from having a way to ask questions and receiving a consistent, clear response.

8. What is a dress rehearsal?

Lauren Ormsby, a principal in Western NY describes it as: *Once our testing schedule is created, we organize a "dress rehearsal" of the testing day for both Math and ELA. On dress rehearsal day students run through the testing schedule as if it is the day of the test. Sample tests are created and students take these tests in the testing environment. After the students take the sample test each teacher or accommodation provider discusses the experience with the students. During this discussion, children identify what went well, what was difficult for them and students identify strategies they used during while taking the real test. This is followed by a whole class discussion where the students share strategies with each other. Finally, each student creates a testing plan in which they choose strategies they will employ during the test and write them out. When planning the dress rehearsal, we ensure the practice test is rigorous and longer than the students can finish in the time allotted. This allows us to have important discussions with our students about what strategies they used when they did not understand a question and how they felt if and when they ran out of time. Additionally, students receiving accommodations learn who they will be testing with and have the opportunity to meet with that person ahead of time. The dress rehearsal is an important part of setting the stage for the test, demystifying it for the students and working out any bugs in a low stress situation.*

The dress rehearsal can also serve as a way to help districts do a trial run of their plan for dealing with students who additional time.

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9. Is it worth it?

The phrase "test prep" is loaded, political, discouraging, and on one hand, seems antithetical to learner-centered practices. On the other, we can leverage the mandate that is annual testing in grades 3-8 to get students thinking about themselves as learners. We can use the interruption that is state testing to introduce students to concepts around metacognition and provide a structure for them to learn about priming and self-regulation. While spending time talking about how to take a test may not feel worthy, the concepts, skills, and strategies it allows us to talk about are.

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