Students in schools are assessed continually, and whilst such assessment is typically diverse in how it offers students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do, pen and paper tests are used to measure student performance under certain circumstances. This is the case with the likes of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN, which will be undertaken for students in Years 3,5,7 and 9 from May 11 – 13, 2010). The reality is that the consequences can be dangerous and the stakes high, for students and teachers alike. Therefore, the timely focus of this edition of St Columba’s Curriculum Matters is...

Testing

At St Columba’s we care about our students a great deal. We therefore will not ignore the tests, yet we will not let them control our lives, the lives of our students or good quality teaching and learning. Consequently, we are committed to developing ways to help our students cope with the demands of the testing environment, yet still support them in enjoying happy, productive and satisfying learning experiences. Our commitment is about supporting learners so that, by the end of primary school, they have a sound grasp of skills, processes and content, and a breadth of enjoyable learning experiences which will place them in a sound position to take full advantage of future learning opportunities. We will therefore take a balanced approach to the idea of testing and will not ‘teach to the test’ (as in NAPLAN). There is good evidence to suggest that such a ‘teaching to the test’ approach can, in fact, turn children off and reduce their learning. So...

What will we do? We will focus on quality teaching and learning across all year levels (P – Year 7) to support learners so that they understand what they are learning about, with one aim of getting the results they deserve in the likes of national tests. For us, at St Columba’s, it makes sense to prepare students for quality test performance by teaching them the useful strategies needed in test taking through the daily curriculum, therefore not disrupting quality teaching and learning, nor the balance of our curriculum.
How will teachers support learners (across the whole school)? We will...
1. Analyse the skills students need to perform well and discuss the implications of these for our teaching and learning, across all year levels;
2. Further develop and implement rich writing, reading and numeracy activities;
3. Integrate valuable teaching pedagogies aligned with well placed experiences at testing practices, e.g. Focused quality numeracy and literacy activities with embedded testing language.
4. Empower students with ‘Testing Genre’ knowledge to instil confidence and representative results of ‘who they are’.

What may this look like?
As a staff, teachers from all year levels have engaged in conversations about teaching students to read and respond to the genre of tests. For Prep learners this may be as simple as verbally being given two possible answers to a question and asking them to choose which is the best answer. As students progress through their years of learning, the kinds of specific skills they need to be successful test takers will develop. Some of the testing techniques our teachers will develop include:
• Multiple choice questions – selecting the best answer from alternatives by interpreting the text, comparing information and paying careful attention to the wording. We are mindful of teaching the language demands of multiple choice questions and what it means for the test taker, as well as providing tips for students to do their best. These tips include:
  1. Reading the question and all answers carefully (paying attention to the specific words in the question and the details in each possible answer).
  2. Selecting the answer carefully (crossing out the ones you are sure are incorrect and focusing on the ones that are left to make your choice).
  3. Using what you do know in the answers (drawing from your knowledge on the topic).
  4. Not always choosing your first answer (test writers include wrong answers that are frequently made, so be sure to check).
  5. Making good use of a pencil and highlighter.
  6. Being careful of answers containing words like always or never.
  7. When a question requires the best answer, realizing it may not fit exactly.
  8. When asked to respond to the main idea, read the passage and determine the main idea for yourself.
  9. If you don’t feel comfortable with any of the responses, try having a guess.
 10. Spending a limited amount of time on each question and going back if you have time.

• Short-answer questions – understanding what the question is asking and organizing a more complex and elaborate response. Tips include:
  1. **Circle** the part of the text that tells what they are being asked to find.
  2. **Underlining** or **highlighting** the information provided in the question.
  3. Organising information in your head so it is complete, logical and detailed.
  4. Writing and rereading your response, checking it makes sense and is complete. This check needs to also focus on sentence structure, usage, punctuation, capitalization and spelling.
• Extended-response questions – giving necessary time and thought before writing the final text. Tips include:
  1. Reading and being clear about the question.
  2. Noting important ideas, phrases and words.
  3. Rereading to highlight and add to notes.
  4. Organising notes by numbering or by using a graphic organizer visual plan.
  5. Writing, then rereading response, checking it makes sense and is complete. This check needs to also focus on sentence structure, usage, punctuation, capitalization and spelling.

• Noting the similarities and differences between general classroom reading and writing and the reading and writing required in tests. At St Columba’s, beyond our regular literacy and numeracy activities and the strategies identified above, we will engage our students in activities which require them to:
  ~ read a designated amount of text within a set time frame
  ~ write ‘on demand’ to an assigned topic and audience, within a designated time frame
  ~ work alone, without help
  ~ monitor pace and productivity without teacher support
  ~ evaluate and revise without assistance.

(Summary from Fountas & Pinnell, p461-82)

• Taking examples of ‘closed questions’ (such as those in the Numeracy section of NAPLAN, where there is only one possible answer) and turning them into open-ended questions. This strategy assists students in examining all the different ways these questions / problems may be solved, as well as identifying common errors that students make in their answer. One way of achieving this is by providing students with a question such as...

  Jim is 91 years old. Sam is 8 years old.
  What is the difference in their age?

   

   11 years  83 years  97 years  99 years
   o   o   o   o

Students could be asked how they could solve the problem. Then, after sharing this with the group, they could think about and share other possibilities. The correct answer is 83 years, however some students will select 99 years as the correct answer. Students may be asked why they think some students would have chosen this response. Answers like the 99 years example are often included as a possible response and are called ‘distracters’. Students are helped to understand that the writers of the NAPLAN (and similar tests) didn’t just pick out 11, 97 and 99 without having good reason. The writers picked these answers because they anticipated what incorrect answers students might give.

• Looking at the language of numeracy - this includes identifying a key word/s in the problem which tells what to do to get the correct answer (eg difference), and what that word means in this question. It could also mean considering other ways the same question could be asked and how the question could be written as a number sentence,
  e.g. 91 – 8 = □  8 + □ = 91

(Kate McKay, 2008)
What can parents do?
There are a number of simple things parents and carers can do to support their child/ren...
✓ During the immediate lead up to any test, encourage your child/ren to revise the focus of the content, if they know what it will be. By and large it is not possible to do this for the NAPLAN Tests. What you can do is get them to share with you some of the test taking strategies that they have talked about at school. Showing you what they have learned is a great way to reinforce their learning.
✓ Ensure that they have a good sleep the night before, and a hearty breakfast.
✓ Check that they have all the tools that they will need for the test. This may include the likes of sharp lead pencils, a rubber, pens and a ruler. And, they should always have a spare!
✓ Let them know that you understand how they may be feeling. Nervousness and butterflies in the tummy are common.
✓ Assure them that any test is just a ‘point in time’ way of showing what they are capable of. Their teachers use a variety of types of assessment to determine their strengths and areas which need further support.
✓ Encourage them to stay focused and to do the best they can.
✓ When you receive the test results, remind yourself that they are ‘a point in time’ assessment. Be sure to examine how results sit with other information you have received about your child’s learning progress (e.g. through parent / teacher interviews, their learning portfolio and their written report). Collectively, these will provide you with a balanced view.
✓ Recognise and celebrate areas of strength, and discuss any areas that may need future support. If needed, set a goal together to work for improvement, with ideas about how to achieve it. Be realistic.

One final thought in relation to the concept of testing...
Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.
(Albert Einstein)

References:

Thank you to those who contributed to this edition of St Columba’s Curriculum Matters...
Prepared by Margo Carwardine,
Assistant Principal, St Columba’s

Don’t forget to check out other editions of St Columba’s Curriculum Matters, plus additional curriculum information on our school web site...
www.stcolumbaswilston.qld.edu.au