



Circular: 0084/2024

**To: Boards of Management, Principals and Teaching Staff of  
Post-Primary Schools and CEOs of ETBs**

**Advice on the use of assessment instruments/tests for Guidance  
or for additional and special educational needs (SEN)  
in post-primary schools**

(Revising Circulars [0001/2023](#), [0067/2020](#) and [0058/2019](#))

## **1. Introduction**

This circular provides advice to recognised post-primary schools as defined in [Circular 31/2011](#), on the appropriate use of assessment instruments/tests for guidance and for additional/Special Educational Needs Teams (SEN Teams).

While regular and formal standardised testing takes place on a national basis within primary schools, standardised testing in post-primary schools is administered at the discretion of each school; some post-primary schools may not administer any standardised tests.

The circular applies to all instances when a standardised test, either ability or achievement, is used in post-primary schools. It provides clarification on the administration of assessment instruments, the interpretation and provision of feedback on test scores, and the retention of assessment information. When considering the content contained in this circular, schools should be mindful of their responsibilities under General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

## **2. Purpose of this circular**

The purpose of this circular is to outline key information pertaining to standardised assessment in post-primary schools. Schools may consider this information and design their own assessment policy, one which meets the need of their own school communities. A school's own assessment policy will set out in detail the school's policy on the use of tests – to include: consent, administration, interpretation, retention, feedback and processing, in accordance with GDPR regulations. The school's assessment policy will also reflect on the timing, administration and interpretation of psychometric assessments in the context of student wellbeing.



Regarding the use and meaning of standardised-assessment data, results of any one standardised test should not be used in isolation, nor used as baseline data for predicting students' future achievements, nor for solely informing decisions regarding the provision of interventions or targets within learning plans for students. Information from ability tests, achievement tests, teacher observations, [the Education Passport](#), [the Student Support File](#), parental reports, as well as the views of the student are essential aspects of a thorough assessment. This encompassing and universal evidence-based approach facilitates the identification of individual students' strengths, interest, values, motivation and learning needs through multiple means and therefore helps to inform the actions and interventions that best address those needs.

### **3. Purpose of assessment instruments/tests**

This circular refers to standardised tests which may be utilised from time to time in post-primary schools:

- Ability tests are designed to establish what a student is capable of knowing, while achievement tests measure what is known and has been learned or achieved to date;
- Standardised ability tests are designed to be curriculum independent and measure more enduring and long-term traits than the attainment of learning. They aim to measure what a student is capable of knowing rather than what is known and;
- Standardised achievement tests measure what a student knows and can be used to assess, for example, students' knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy, and to determine progress in these areas.

On foot of information garnered from various assessment practices including ability and achievement tests, further information may be gathered through the administration of diagnostic tests to provide a more detailed view of a student's learning strengths and needs.

- A diagnostic test is designed to provide specific information about a student's strengths and needs in some aspect of learning, for example, word-identification skills or understanding of number concepts.

Guidance counsellors may use the outcomes of ability, interest, values and motivation tests to support students' decision-making regarding subject choices and Senior-Cycle options and to support career development, including planning for further and higher education, training, apprenticeships and the world of work.

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Assessment results should not be regarded as definitive nor interpreted in isolation. Students' needs and other contextual information should always be taken into consideration.

#### 4. Selection of assessment instruments/tests

Schools should only use assessment instruments which are appropriate and have a clear and defined purpose.

Engagement between primary and post-primary schools will inform decisions around the selection and timing of any assessments for students transitioning to post-primary education. Schools should make best use of the [Student Support File](#) and the [Education Passport](#) in supporting the sharing of relevant data, including assessment results, as students transfer from primary to post-primary school.

Care should be taken by users to accurately research the suitability, reliability and validity of all assessment instruments selected for use, and to ensure that the versions in use are the most up to date and appropriate for administering to the specific student cohort. In particular, care should be taken in relation to the suitability of the assessment instruments that are used with students with SEN, or with students who are studying English as an Additional Language (EAL). A consideration in the case of EAL students would be that their test scores may be adversely affected by their English proficiency, not only in English-language assessments, but also in other subject areas, meaning that their scores may not provide a true reflection of their ability or attainment level in the target area.

Test administrators are advised to closely examine the test manuals and any other supporting information before selecting a test. It should be noted that not all instruments available on the open market for schools have Irish norms, and some have not been revised for a number of years.

In selecting an assessment instrument, schools should be aware of the qualifications required to administer, score, interpret and provide feedback on that particular test. Where necessary, the publisher of the test may be contacted for more detailed information in this regard.

A sample list of assessments is available [here](#).

The use of assessment instruments in schools for the assessment of personality is **not** appropriate.

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The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) provides information and advice on the use and appropriateness of certain assessment instruments/tests.

## 5. Administration of assessment instruments

Prior to administering any standardised test, information should be provided to parents and students regarding the purpose of the assessment and with whom the assessment results may be shared and why. The consent of parents (for students under 18 years of age) and assent of students over 18 should be obtained in advance of the assessment instrument being administered, in line with the school's assessment and data-protection policies.

Some assessments, such as standardised group-achievement tests, can be administered by subject teachers, under the supervision of a suitably qualified person. Other tests should only be administered and interpreted by appropriately qualified personnel depending on the nature of the instrument used. Schools should check in advance with the test publisher on the specific qualifications required for each instrument used.

The administration of ability tests in schools should be restricted to appropriately qualified personnel who have been specifically trained in specialised psychometric testing, including the selection and administration of such assessment instruments, interpretation of assessment results, scoring and feedback. Typically, in the case of psychometric instruments of general ability (and individually administered achievement tests), such personnel will be qualified guidance counsellors or teachers of special education with appropriate qualifications to administer specific tests. Such personnel should engage in ongoing training and continuing professional development.

## 6. Exemption from the study of Irish

All students are expected to have the opportunity to participate in the learning of Irish to the greatest extent possible and to achieve a level of personal proficiency that is appropriate to their ability and needs. [Circular 0055/2022](#) 'Exemptions from the Study of Irish' (post-primary) outlines that there are certain exceptional circumstances where an exemption from the study of Irish may be granted to a student enrolled in a recognised English-medium post-primary school. Copies of the circular together with application forms, guidelines for schools and other relevant information are [here](#).

Applications for exemptions from the study of Irish for students who experience **significant literacy difficulties** can only be considered where the school holds evidence that these needs remain significant despite the student having had access to a differentiated approach to language and literacy learning over time

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(see section 2.2.2 of Circular 0055/2022). In practice this will mean that the student is receiving SEN support in the school and therefore that the school will have evidence on an individual's Student Support file to support the application. This documentary evidence includes the results of appropriate assessment instruments/tests which were administered as part of an evidence-informed, ongoing cycle of assessment and during regular reviews of the student's learning needs. **It is not envisaged that this testing would be undertaken specifically with the objective of granting an exemption from the study of Irish**, but only out as part of a student's ongoing SEN provision. The granting of an exemption from the study of Irish should not be a key factor in planning for the provision of special-education teaching or testing for a pupil/student.

At the time of an application under section 2.2.2 of Circular 0055/2022, a literacy achievement score at/below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile in at least one standardised test that specifically measures either word reading, reading comprehension or spelling (a 'discrete test'<sup>1</sup>) is required. The school may need to conduct such a test within the 21 school day period stipulated in the circular unless they have conducted an appropriate test within one calendar year of the date of application, as advised in the guidance accompanying the circulars on exemption from the study of Irish. This testing is **additional** to the tests conducted as part of SEN provision and should be carried out in accordance with the guidance for such testing provided on the exemptions from the study of Irish website linked above. Where the school holds no documentary evidence of the persistence of a significant literacy difficulty, they are not required to conduct a standardised test and should refuse the application as the terms of subsection 2.2.2(i) of Circular 0055/2022 are not met. Schools should ensure that the versions of tests in use are selected according to the guidance provided in section 4 (above) of this circular.

In considering applications for exemptions from the study of Irish for students who experience a **high level of multiple and persistent needs that are a significant barrier to the student's participation and engagement in their learning and school life** (Section 2.2.3 of Circular 0055/2022) the school should also consider the results of any assessment instruments which have been conducted as part of ongoing review of the student's SEN provision and have been carried out in accordance with this circular. The circular on exemption from the study of Irish does not require that the school carry out any testing that would not otherwise be merited as part of the SEN process for an individual student.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the Circulars on exemption from the study of Irish a 'discrete test' is a standalone test which assesses a single literacy skill.

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## 7. Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE)

The underlying principles of the examination-accommodations scheme put in place by the Department of Education and operated by the State Examination Commission (SEC) are similar to those that underpin arrangements in other jurisdictions with broadly similar disability-rights legislation to that of Ireland. All such schemes focus on the need to remove barriers to accessing the examinations, while retaining the need to assess the same underlying skills and competencies as are assessed for all other candidates, and to apply the same standards of achievement as apply to all other candidates.

The scheme provides accommodations for candidates with a variety of complex special-educational needs including learning difficulties as well as permanent or temporary physical, visual, hearing, medical, sensory, emotional, behavioural or other needs.

Details of tests that are acceptable for RACE will be set out in the [Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations – Instructions for Schools](#), which is published annually by the SEC. Schools should ensure that the versions of tests in use are the most up to date and appropriate for administering to the specific student cohort. For the purpose of RACE applications, schools are advised to await updates and information on closing dates from the SEC and adapt the timing of testing, if required.

RACE information can be accessed [here](#).

## 8. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

Standardised tests may be administered through digital means and/or through use of paper and pen. Where data from these tests are stored and retained online/through digital means, it is important that this data is retained and processed in line with EU GDPR regulations. While some test publishers are based in the UK, in most cases, their data storage remains within the EU. Where test publishers process and store data outside the EU, however, school authorities should ensure that the companies concerned apply GDPR to all EU personal data.

In using assessment instruments, school management and the appropriately qualified teachers should pay due attention to the requirements of current legislation, particularly in relation to GDPR.

When administering online/electronic assessment instruments, schools need to be cognisant of GDPR **data-processing and retention** requirements, for example, ensuring compliance in relation to who controls and has access to the

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data, the purposes for which this data will be used, the retention of the data and where the data is stored i.e. within or outside the EU.

### **9. Interpretation of assessment instruments**

As highlighted in National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) publication [A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Resource Pack for Teachers](#): “Results of any one test should not be considered in isolation and tests results should always be considered alongside other information: parental information, information from the primary school, information from teachers etc. Additionally, schools need to be aware of the risks associated with early labelling, which may place a ceiling on expectations or consign students to particular groups (p.40).”

In addition, as highlighted in the NEPS publication, schools and teachers should be aware of the particular difficulties associated with the assessment of children whose home culture is markedly different from the group on whom the test is standardised. This may be a factor and should be considered when considering, for example, results for Traveller children or children who have newly arrived from other countries.

The results of any one test should not be used as baseline data for predicting a student’s future achievements, or for solely informing decisions regarding the provision of interventions or targets within learning plans for students.

Decisions regarding the use of assessment instruments and the sharing and interpretation of assessment data should always be made in accordance with the individual schools’ policies on assessment, SEN and data protection, and in accordance with best practice on test administration and usage.

### **10. Constructive feedback on standardised test results**

In line with the school’s assessment policy, schools should ensure that appropriate, accurate and constructive feedback is provided in a timely fashion to students and parents by appropriately qualified personnel, for example, guidance counsellors or other suitably qualified teachers.

Students should be provided with the opportunity to explore their assessment results in the context of the educational options available to them in the school and to inform their future educational and vocational development, career choices and decision-making. Students and parents should be made aware of the limitations of the results of standardised tests during this discussion and the importance of other factors including the students’ interests, motivation, talents and experiences, and information available from other sources.

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## **11. Sharing standardised test results with members of school staff and with external parties**

In line with a whole-school approach and as part of the school's assessment policy regarding standardised testing and data protection, the results of standardised tests, in conjunction with other related information, should be shared with relevant members of school staff. This is in order to plan effectively to meet the educational, social, emotional, behavioural and well-being needs of the students. It may also be necessary at times to share relevant information with external parties, such as NEPS, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and (only if requested) the Irish Exemption Appeals Committee (IEAC). Schools need to be mindful of their data-protection/data-sharing responsibilities when sharing data with external bodies.

Schools should be mindful of the limitations of standardised tests when sharing results and the potential for students to acquire a label based on these results. It is important when sharing these results that they are presented accurately and sensitively and in a way that is clearly understood by the receiving party. However, schools should also be cognisant that students as data subjects (and their parents/guardians, as applicable) have a right to full knowledge of available test results as this constitutes their personal data. For example, students (and their parents/guardians) have a right to access subscale scores as well as overall test scores, where these are available. Care should also be taken to ensure that the difference between standardised-ability and achievement tests is understood and the limitations of such tests have been explained.

## **12. Retention and processing of assessment data**

Schools should be aware of obligations relating to access, retention and processing data under the [Freedom of Information Act 1997](#), the [Freedom of Information \(Amendment\) Act 2003](#), associated regulations, and the Data Protection Acts [1988 and 2003](#), and [GDPR \(2018\)](#).

## **13. List of assessments**

A list of sample assessments may be found [here](#).

It is vital that schools are aware of the various qualifications required in order for the assessments to be administered. The required qualifications may vary for each assessment. This information is also available at the same [link](#).

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#### 14. List of useful references

The following may also be consulted in conjunction with this circular:

- State Examinations Commission Guide Reasonable Accommodation at Certificate Examinations [RACE](#)
- ‘Exemptions from the Study of Irish; Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools’ and supporting documents [www.gov.ie/en/service/irish-exemption/](http://www.gov.ie/en/service/irish-exemption/)
- *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools* developed by the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), the Inspectorate and Special Education Section, DES (2017): <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56c43-supporting-pupils-and-students-with-special-educational-needs-guidelines-for-schools/>
- *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support*, NEPS (2007): <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/dca316-special-education-needs-a-continuum-of-support/>
- *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools: A Guide to Establishing a Team or Reviewing an Existing Team*, NEPS (2021): <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/97aa18-national-educational-psychological-service-neps-resources-and-public/>
- National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) [NEPS](#)

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