

Chalkboard

By

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During this week, fresh back from Spring Break, Gentry K-2 students at different grade levels will be taking the state mandated Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) exams. This is a norm-referenced test and norm-references exams will be the subject of a future *Chalkboard*.

But, let's do first things first. Previously, in March, our students in grades 3-8 completed the, also mandated, Benchmark exams, which as I have discussed many times in past articles, are used to measure our students' performance against certain defined standards or criteria, hence the designation of being a criterion referenced test (CRT). These standards, in Literacy and Math, and being field tested for Science for grades 5 & 7, are defined in Curriculum Frameworks prepared at the state level. The Curriculum Frameworks are basically a series of skills of which students are expected to demonstrate mastery.

In theory, these exams do not measure the performance of students against each other but rather only the student's performance against the standard or benchmark. If you are the parent of a school-age child, you know the performance levels are designated Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. The ultimate goal in the State of Arkansas is for every child to score at the Proficient or Advanced level.

Such a goal sounds easy enough to reach. Because it is a criterion referenced test, teachers know exactly what will be measured because they know in what skills the students are expected to be able to show mastery. This is not to say that the teachers know what questions will be asked nor what specific skills will be picked to be tested, only that the skills being tested will come from the skills found in the Curriculum Frameworks. In actual practice, the goal of having every student score at the Proficient or Advanced level is not an easy one.

I think it is important to understand that that the Benchmark exams measure "knowing" by "doing". Better stated, the student demonstrates what he or she knows by what he or she can demonstrate. Students are required to "put together" different "pieces of knowledge", to correctly answer a specific question. This is a much more difficult process than just knowing that a comma is used to separate a series or that the chemical formula for salt is NaCl. CRT's do not measure what the child knows but rather what the child can do.

Let me share a practical example of what I am talking about; this "doing what you know". Maybe I have told you this before, if so, sorry.

Jason, my oldest son, has been trying to teach me on a sporadic basis how to drive his dump truck. He has become slightly frustrated to say the least. Please understand that I know the shift pattern. It's basically the standard H pattern with a slight variation; second to third doesn't go to the top right of the H but rather the bottom right, then third to fourth goes to the top right. Then the transmission is "split" with a lever on the gearshift lever and the process repeats for fifth, sixth, seventh, and maybe eighth but I have never had the need for this gear if it exists. Oh, yeah. He says that I am only to use the clutch in starting out. After that he says it's just a matter of being in rhythm with the truck and timing the shift with the right RPM.

You can plainly see that I have the "knowledge". I know in my "head" exactly what I am supposed to do. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to proficiently put what I know into practice. Last Saturday, during my last practice session, I may have made some slight move toward "Basic" while up shifting if you discount the time I stalled out crossing Highway 59 and left us sitting in the middle of the road with traffic coming from the north. Sadly, my down shifting skills are at the low end of "below basic". I have given a whole new meaning to "If you can't find 'em, grind 'em"!

A key point needs to be made here. It's not Jason's fault. He is doing a good job as my teacher. He doesn't holler at me a lot except when it looks like I am about to hit something or if I am pumping his air brakes or if I am trying to use the clutch while I'm shifting. As far as modeling goes, when I am riding with him driving I could close my eyes and think it was an automatic transmission shifting.

He encourages me also; he says that my becoming proficient is a matter of continuing to practice, practice, and practice. He reminds me that his skills in this area are better than mine because he has shifted this truck or others a countless number of times.

In a similar fashion our teachers have prepared our students for the Benchmarks, the ITBS, and others in much the same way. They have taught what the "shift pattern" is and they have required the student to "practice shifting".