Why Use the ISA?  

What is the ISA?

The International Schools’ Assessment (ISA) is a high-quality assessment for Grades 3 to 10 used by international schools to monitor student performance over time and to confirm that their internal assessments are aligned with international expectations of performance. The ISA is not based on any one curriculum but tests core skills in mathematical literacy, reading and writing that it is reasonable to assume most students at a particular grade level have been taught. The ISA test material is as culturally inclusive as possible. The ISA is designed and developed by ACER and the ISA reading and mathematical literacy assessments are based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Like PISA, the ISA is not just a multiple choice test. Half the questions in the reading and mathematical literacy tests are open questions that require students to generate meaning, explain their reasoning, find evidence and justify their opinions. The ISA also includes two writing tasks: a narrative task and an argument. This allows the ISA to assess a broad range of English literacy and mathematical literacy skills. Testing a broader range of skills takes more time and is also more expensive than an on-line multiple-choice test.

What is ACER?

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is one of the world's leading educational research centres, committed to creating and distributing research-based knowledge, products and services to improve learning. ACER has led a consortium of research and educational institutions and eminent individuals, having held the major contract to deliver the PISA project on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) from 2000 to 2012.

What is PISA?

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a test of education systems, and achieves this by assessing the skills and knowledge of nationally representative samples of 15-year-old students in three core areas: reading, mathematical literacy and science. PISA was born in 2000 after the OECD found that they had a number of economic measures of member countries but no measures of educational achievement. Since then it has been conducted every three years to report on the academic competency of 15-year-olds from all OECD and a growing number of non-OECD countries. To date, more than a million students in over 60 countries have participated in PISA assessments. In 2009, a total of around 470,000 students from 65 countries participated in the PISA data collection. The participating countries make up close to 90% of the world economy.

Why use the ISA?

The ISA allows schools to benchmark themselves against other schools worldwide. Through managing PISA ACER has gained invaluable experience in developing assessments that are culturally and educationally appropriate for students from many language and educational backgrounds.

The ISA provides:

- an external evaluation of core skills in mathematical literacy, reading and writing that allows schools to check the reliability of their internal assessments;
- comparisons of the school’s Grade 8, 9 and 10 students’ results for mathematical literacy and reading with the PISA results for each country that participated in the latest PISA administration;
- a detailed set of reports summarising the school’s results and comparative data that allow schools to easily identify areas of strength or weakness and trends over time;
- comparisons of students’ results with all other participating students in the same grade level providing a benchmark for schools to monitor individual student and grade level performance against international expectations; and
- scaled ISA scores that allow schools to directly compare students’ results from any ISA tests so schools can track changes in student performance across grade levels and over time.
The ISA Individual Reports tell parents what they want to know.

The ISA Individual Reports shows parents the level at which their child is performing overall in mathematical literacy and reading and writing, compared with other students at the same grade level in other international schools. The report also helps parents to identify the skills their child has mastered and those that they need to develop. Parents can track their child’s progress over time because the ISA scores can be compared from year to year.

The ISA Class Reports provide detailed diagnostic information to teachers.

The ISA Class Report gives teachers detailed information about the kinds of skills their students have mastered and those they need to learn. It shows teachers how their students performed in each question on the test compared to all the other students in that grade level in international schools across the world. ISA scale scores allow teachers to directly compare students’ results at different grade levels and to track the performance of students over time.

The ISA School Reports allow schools to benchmark themselves against other schools.

The ISA School Report gives school administrators summary statistics that allow them to monitor their schools’ performance over time and to compare their performance at each grade level with all the other schools that participated in the ISA and with other “like schools”: those with a similar percentage of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The ISA National Comparisons Report allows schools to compare themselves against PISA country performance.

The National Comparisons Reports compare the performance of ISA Grade 8, 9 or 10 students in Mathematical Literacy and Reading with the performance in PISA 2009 of samples of 15-year-old students from 65 countries.

The ISA Interactive Diagnostic Report helps schools to interpret and use the ISA data to inform improvements in teaching and learning.

The Interactive Diagnostic Report shows ISA results in a range of graphic displays which makes it easier got schools to identify trends and patterns in comparison with all other ISA schools and to interpret diagnostic information.

The optional Interactive Tracking Report allows schools to monitor the performance over time of individual students and of different groups of students within a school.

Data from all schools participating in the ISA programme have been used to establish reliable benchmarks for student performance. With this report schools can monitor, over a number of calendar years, whether student performance has changed in relation these benchmarks. This report is recommended for schools that have participated in ISA programmes for at least three administrations.

What are scale scores?

The “ISA Scale” score is different to the “raw score” results that you would get by adding up the number of score points for correct answers on each part of the assessment. Each learning area or domain (for example, reading) has a scale and raw scores calibrated onto the scale are converted to scale scores. The ISA scales for mathematical literacy and reading are based on those developed for the OECD PISA.

The advantage of using scale scores rather than raw scores or percentage reporting is that the scale makes it possible to compare all students’ results within the same domain. For example, using scale scores in reading, we can directly compare the performance of students from Grade 3 to Grade 10 for any year. It does not matter which reading test students completed their scale scores can be compared with the scale scores of any other students who have completed an ISA reading test in any year. Tracking the ISA scale scores over time can provide quantitative evidence of variations in the abilities of cohorts of students and individuals from one year to the next, as well as evidence of the impact of changes in curriculum or pedagogy on student performance.

How can schools use the ISA data?

Extensive support material is available to help schools to use their ISA data to inform and improve their teaching programs. These include the Guide to Reports, Diagnostic Interpretations of the ISA Data for Classroom Teachers, Benchmark Interpretations of the ISA Data for Classroom Teachers and A Guide to Interpreting the ISA Data for School Leaders and Administrators. Annotated writing samples help teachers to understand what is expected at each of the levels of the writing marking guides and can also be used by teachers to moderate their own scoring of writing. If you are still unsure about what your data means you can email us. We pride ourselves on our fast and detailed responses to school queries about their ISA data.
How valid is the comparison with other schools?

The ISA Series K test was administered to over 64,000 students in 312 international schools in 2012–13, providing a sound basis for comparison of results at each grade level. ISA schools are also divided into four “like school” groups at each grade level on the basis of the percentage of students with a non-English speaking background. Comparative data for “like schools” is only provided where the numbers of students are big enough to yield meaningful comparison. The ISA reports include a t-test calculation of the significance of the comparisons. Some caution should always be exercised in the interpretation of these kinds of comparative data: for example, apparent differences might arise because of the sample of students in the particular year.

The ISA provides a service to international schools that allows them to compare themselves with other schools. This also relies on the co-operation of the schools. We rely on schools to administer the ISA according to the detailed instructions provided so all students complete the test under the same conditions and the data is comparable. We rely on schools to keep the ISA secure by ensuring that test booklets are never copied and that all test booklets are returned every year so we can provide scaled scores that link the tests over time. We also rely on schools to only exclude students in a participating grade level from the ISA when they are genuinely unable to attempt the test so the data accurately reflects student achievement in the school. Our contact with ISA schools through email and person-to-person at conferences assures us that the schools currently using the ISA respect and follow these rules. However, the ISA cannot enforce them. It is up to the community of international schools to collectively support the rules and ensure they are followed so the ISA comparative data is of use to everyone.

Our website has more information about the ISA: www.acer.edu.au/isa including the following for download:

- ISA Background Report
- Matching the ISA to the PYP and MYP Curricula
- ISA Interactive Report Manuals
- Diagnostic Interpretations of the ISA Data for Classroom Teachers
- Benchmark Interpretations of the ISA Data for Classroom Teachers
- A Guide to Interpreting the ISA Data for School Leaders and Administrators

Further information

Email isa@acer.edu.au
Phone +613 9277 5555 or
Website www.acer.edu.au/isa