

ISA

International Schools' Assessment



A reliable evidence-based assessment designed to support international schools

The International Schools' Assessment (ISA) is used by international schools and schools with an international focus to monitor student progress over time, compare school performance internationally and inform improvements in teaching and learning.

The ISA is developed and delivered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). It assesses students in grades 3 to 10 in the following learning areas:

- Mathematical Literacy
- Scientific Literacy
- Reading
- Writing (narrative and expository tasks).

The assessment is based on the frameworks of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)¹ and is therefore not specific to a particular curriculum. Participating schools follow a diverse range of curricula, including International Baccalaureate (IB), English National, USA curriculum and others.

ISA tests assess complex, higher-order thinking skills using a range of question types, allowing students greater scope to respond in a variety of ways. These include:

- simple and complex multiple-choice questions
- interactive questions (where students place labels onto an image or chart, or select the correct position on a diagram)
- short answer questions
- extended writing tasks.

The ISA has been specifically developed to be culturally inclusive and suitable for students whose first language may not be English. However, it is intended for schools where English is the language of instruction.



¹ Note: the ISA is not endorsed by the OECD, nor is it part of PISA.

An overview of the ISA

Suitable for international schools

- Not specific to any one curriculum
- Based on international frameworks
- Wide-ranging test material draws on many cultural and national sources
- Designed with the knowledge that more than half of the participants have first languages other than English.

Valuable international comparisons

Compare students to:

- schools in the same region
- schools with a similar proportion of students with an English speaking background (ESB) and non-English-speaking background (NESB)
- an international cohort worldwide
- the latest PISA country results at Grades 8, 9 and 10.

Rigorous marking process

- Markers receive extensive training from experienced test developers
- Short answer questions and extended writing tasks marked by highly trained teams with backgrounds in the relevant learning area
- Accuracy of marking is constantly assessed and reviewed.

Informs school improvement with in-depth data

- Tests core skills in Mathematical Literacy, Scientific Literacy, Reading and Writing
- Reports scale scores, so student performance can be compared reliably across grade levels and over time
- Provides diagnostic information at the school, class and individual student level to identify strengths and areas for improvement
- Generates multiple report types designed for all levels of school staff, from teachers through to school leadership
- Allows schools to identify gaps, measure growth and evaluate instructional programs against objective evidence of student performance.

World-class online testing system and customer support

- Different test packages offer flexibility
- Access to comprehensive administration handbooks, support guides, instructional videos and webinars
- Dedicated customer support team ready to assist schools with all aspects of test administration and reporting.

Is the ISA right for my school?

A typical ISA school uses an international curriculum, such as the IB programme, or a national curriculum that is different to the host country. Schools may be accredited, members of an international school association or be aspiring to become an international school.

The ISA is especially appropriate for schools offering an IB programme. Around two-thirds of participating schools use one or more of the IB programmes. ISA tests can be broadly aligned with the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP).

Schools using the assessment are situated in many countries around the world, as shown on the map below. Refer to our [Participating Schools List](#) to learn more.



The proportion of schools participating from different regions can be seen below.

Region	Percentage of schools
Africa	5%
Americas	10%
Asia Pacific	51%
Europe	27%
Middle East	7%

The profile of participating schools is described further in terms of students’ first language. The table below shows the proportion of students with an English-speaking background (ESB) at the participating schools.

Students with an English-speaking background	Percentage of schools
15% or less	36%
16–35%	19%
36–55%	14%
More than 55%	31%

How do schools take part in the ISA?

How are tests delivered?

The tests are delivered online via ACER's web-based Online Assessment and Reporting System (OARS) and can be completed on various devices, including Macs, PCs, Chromebooks and iPads or tablets.

When can schools test?

Schools test once in the school year and choose from the following three test administration times offered. Each testing window runs for three weeks:

- October
- February
- May.

Schools can select the testing time that best suits their school calendar. If taken earlier in the school year, the ISA can inform the instructional program for that year. If taken later in the school year, the results can inform teachers of the student progress during that year. However, as the ISA is used to track student progress over time, it is important to sit the test at the same time each year, so students have had a full 12 months of learning between each assessment.

How much time needs to be scheduled?

Schools can choose the test days that suit them best during the three-week testing period. Test sessions will need to be scheduled over three mornings if students are sitting tests for all five learning areas.

Tests take approximately 45 to 60 minutes each and are administered by classroom teachers. Detailed handbooks, guides and test administration scripts are provided to support school staff in preparing and supervising the assessment.

How are ISA results provided to schools?

A set of customised reports is prepared for each school. These include results at the individual student, class and whole-school level. All reports include comparisons to all the schools participating in the program.

Multiple report formats are provided to enable schools to easily distribute results to school leaders, classroom teachers and parents. Data is also provided in spreadsheet format so that it can be imported into school management systems.

Reports are designed to support schools to:

- evaluate school programs and set targets
- identify strengths, gaps and areas for improvement.

A summary of the reports and results data provided is shown in the table below.

Report	Broad description
School report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aggregated data on school performance by grade level and subgroup• Includes comparisons to all ISA schools, schools in the region and 'like' schools (schools with a similar percentage of ESB and NESB students)
Class report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual student scores, including the student's overall score as well as scores for each test question.• Includes comparisons with all ISA schools.
Individual student report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reports the student's score against the described levels of proficiency for each learning area• Includes comparisons with all ISA schools
Interactive diagnostic report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A complete set of the results at the whole-school, class and student level• Includes multiple charts and tables to identify trends and patterns and to gather diagnostic information
Interactive tracking report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tracks progress for grade-level cohorts and individual students from one year to the next
National comparison report	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compares school performance against the latest PISA country results at Grades 8, 9 and 10

What are the key features of the ISA reports

A Progressive Achievement approach

Assessments offered by ACER are underpinned by the Progressive Achievement approach, which is central to the data provided in the ISA reports. This approach aims to help all students show progress in their learning by using evidence to identify students' needs, support the next steps in their learning and to track learning growth over time.

Scale scores reliably measure progress over time

A fundamental aspect of ACER's approach is the use of scale scores rather than raw scores. The advantage of using scale scores rather than raw scores or percentage reporting is that the scale makes it possible to compare the results of all students within the same learning area over time and between grade levels.

Described proficiency levels show where students are in their learning

The ISA scales for each learning area are divided into described proficiency levels which provide qualitative information about what progress typically looks like for students. The described levels indicate where the student has reached in their learning and what the next steps are likely to be. This provides context to the scale score.

ISA Reference Norm provides a comparison set of data

Comparisons provided in ISA reporting are made against the ISA Reference Norm. This is a large data set based on the result of all schools participating in the program. The ISA Reference Norm is updated each year at the end of the testing cycle to ensure it accurately represents the most recent cohort of participating schools.

ISA schools are also divided into four 'like school' groups based on the proportion of students with an English-speaking background. This enables schools to compare results with similar schools.

How are schools supported?

Preparing and administering the tests

We provide step-by-step guidance as schools progress through preparing and administering the tests. Detailed support is provided through administration guides, webinars and instructional videos. The ISA team maintains regular contact, providing information and instructions throughout each step of the process.

Interpreting results

A range of guides, videos and on-demand webinars are available to support schools in interpreting their results. These include the ISA Guide to Reports and the ISA School Leaders and Administrators Guide as well as specific guides for the ISA Interactive Diagnostic Report and the ISA Interactive Tracking Report. We also run live webinars and can meet with schools to ensure they are getting the most out of their reports.



Feedback from our schools

'[We like] that it's international and not linked to any one curriculum. The information that you receive at the end is comprehensive and gives good data to inform teaching and learning.'

'ISA exams are skill-based exams, and they are a benchmark for our school to reflect on our practices and allow us to have a plan for the coming years.'

'It tracks students over time. It gives the school, staff, parents and students a snapshot that correlates with our in-house assessments.'

'Questions are well crafted and challenge the critical thinking of students.'

'Our primary motivation for choosing the ISA over other tests was that the questions assess skill application more than content acquisition. We also really like the digital format. Our students found it easy to use.'

'The organisation is very good. The testing platform works smoothly and is well thought out. The support team were very responsive.'

'The school coordinator handbook was fantastic – particularly the step-by-step videos. They really helped me to understand how to set up ISA testing for the first time. The administrator handbook was thorough and the scripts very helpful.'

'Absolutely fantastic, timely support to resolve any queries or concerns I had ... I am very appreciative of this service and cannot communicate how invaluable the ISA team support was leading up to the testing days and during the testing sessions.'



Q&A interviews with ISA schools can be found on the website at acer.ac/isaschools

Background of the ISA

The ISA has been offered to schools since 2002. The program evolved from two main sources, discussions with international schools and ACER's work on PISA.

Schools wanted an assessment that would provide them with quantitative and qualitative feedback, as well as comparisons with other international schools. Although many schools were using existing external assessment for monitoring and self-evaluation, there was a general sense that, because these were primarily designed for national use, they did not cater for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

From 2000 to 2012, ACER had a major role in the development of PISA (www.oecd.org/pisa). This provided extensive experience developing international assessments that are culturally and educationally appropriate for students from many language and educational backgrounds.

More information about ACER

ACER is an independent, not-for-profit research organisation with a global reputation as a provider of reliable support and expertise to education policymakers and professional practitioners. ACER's mission is to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning across the lifespan.

ACER is highly regarded internationally for its assessment and educational measurement expertise and has been involved in a range of large-scale national and international assessments. ACER led the consortium responsible for the design and conduct of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2025. Building on this global leadership, ACER is now preparing for the PISA 2029 assessment.

For more information go to acer.org

What additional information is available?

The following additional information about the assessment is available from the ISA team:

- *ISA Information Handbook* (dates, prices, registration process)
- Sample test material
- Report samples
- ISA Test Construct and Validity document
- ISA-IB Alignment document
- 'International Schools' Assessment (ISA) – Introduction' webinar
- 'How to implement the ISA at your school' webinar.

Please email the ISA team at isa@acer.org to request any of these documents. Further information is also available on the ISA website at acer.org/isa





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