NATIONAL LEARNING ASSESSMENTS 2017-18

Learning assessments in primary school (Grades 2 and 5), lower secondary school (Grade 8) and upper secondary school (Grade10)

The INVALSI 2018 tests at a glance

Learning Assessments
Acad. Year 2017-18

The INVALSI 2018 tests

Legislation Decree n. 62 of April 13, 2017 introduced important **changes** in student assessment, involving also the INVALSI tests and partially modifying their structure and their relation to the State examination at the end of the first cycle of education (primary school and lower secondary school). Starting from academic year 2018-19 these innovations will affect also the last year of upper secondary school.

For the first time, standardized English reading comprehension and listening comprehension tests were introduced – at the end of primary school (Grade 5), at the end of lower secondary school (Grade 8) and, starting from academic year 2018-19 also at the end of upper secondary school (Grade 13). The assessment of "receptive" (reading and listening) skills in English for all Italian students is of great importance. All schools in the country were given the opportunity to measure the level of English language skills of **all** students through tests that are scientifically anchored to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). This represents a great opportunity for the entire school system, because now both schools and families have precise information about learning levels in English attained by students, referring to the well-known and internationally acknowledged CEFR standards.

Starting from this academic year, the INVALSI tests at the last year of lower secondary school (Grade 8) are separated from the State examination. Though the two are still strongly connected, this separation has solved the problem of the incidence of the INVALSI tests on students' final marks. The testing happens in the month of April, and it is a requirement for admission to the State examination. The test results are expressed in the form of a qualitative indicator over an increasing 5-point achievement scale (from level 1 to level 5), which is reported in the student's certification of skills. This innovation is really important because test results are presented in terms of the skills attained by the single student, with an explicit description of what the student can do in relation to the goals prescribed by the National Guidelines. Thus, this solution translates into an operation of ***transparency*** enhancement for the entire system, because it allows schools, students and families to know in a direct and comparable way what skill level is attained by each student. This takes place, however, without creating interferences with the evaluation given by the student's school, which must consider elements that are not observable through a standardized test.

The INVALSI tests in 2018 involved more than **1,100,000** students in primary schools (Grades 2 and 5), about **570,000** students in lower secondary schools (Grade 8), and about **550,000** students of upper secondary schools (Grade 10).

Computer-based testing (CBT)

In 2018, the INVALSI tests 2018 for the third-year of lower secondary school (Grade 8) and for the second year of upper secondary school (Grade 10) were taken on the ***computer*** and ***online*** for all students of Italian schools. This was a great technological and organizational challenge for the country's school system.

The success of the operation was possible thanks mainly to the ***choral and generous effort of all schools in the country*** which, overcoming the doubts and fears at the onset, deployed the best energy leading to a successful final outcome (to the operation). Thanks to advanced and innovative technologies, which made the Italian experience one of the most significant in the sector at European level, more than 2,200,000 tests were administered to Grade 8 students in the space of three weeks, and more than 1,100,000 to Grade 10 students in two weeks.

This is a major success story for Italian schools, because the efforts made will have effects that last long after the tests have taken place: the schools have inherited equipment, technology and experience that are essential to develop students' IT skills.

The CBT tests constitute not only a technological innovation, but determine a ***general change of the test structure***. Starting from this year, the tests are assembled in different versions for each subject, maintaining the same level of complexity and the same criteria of composition (number and typology of questions, contents and topics, etc.). This solution allows for tests to be carried out on different days and according to flexible organizational modalities decided by the schools. As is appropriate and convenient, schools can subdivide classes into shifts, abandoning the logic of one student – one computer.

Main results

Small differences may grow into significant ones

The outcomes of the tests in **primary schools** are very similar for all regions of the country and they are rarely statistically significant. Nevertheless, some indications emerge already, pointing at problematic aspects that contribute to determine very different outcomes across regions and across schools at the secondary schooling level.

- The **mean levels** of test results at Grade 2 are almost the same in the entire country, but for some regions in the South (Campania, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia) a higher rate of students with very low results is observed.
- Already from Grade 2, schools in the South struggle more to grant **equal opportunities** to everybody. The difference of results *across* schools and *across* classes is much higher in the South than in the Centre and North. This indicates a higher tendency to form classes where there is a higher concentration of better and more advantaged students and classes with lower performing or more disadvantaged students.
- The differences that begin to be observed at the end of Grade 2 become **more evident at the end of primary school**, especially from the standpoint of equity, meaning the school system's ability to grant equal opportunities to each and every one.
- **92.4%** of Grade 5 students attain the prescribed A1 CEFR level in the reading comprehension test, versus **78.6%** in the listening comprehension test. For reading, a little more than 94% of the students reach the A1 level in the North and Centre, versus about 88% in the South. For listening, the corresponding percentages are about 83% in the North and Centre versus about 70% in the South.

... and what about secondary school?

More reliable data for clearer information

Computer-based testing (CBT) allows getting clearer and more reliable data on students' result levels in **the third year of lower secondary school** (Grade8). The small differences encountered in primary school and the heterogeneity of the school system seem to grow into highly divergent outcomes within the country at the end of Grade 8.

The results of the computer-based tests are provided in the form of ***increasing competence levels*** (from 1 to 5 for Italian and Mathematics and from pre-A1 to A2 for English). By design, level 3 in Italian and Mathematics can be considered adequate in terms of the goals prescribed by the National Guidelines. For English, the latter explicitly indicate that students should attain the A2 level at the end of lower secondary school.

At the national level, the students obtaining **adequate or higher results** are:

- Italian: 65,6%
- Mathematics: 59,9%
- English Reading (A2): 73,9%
- English Listening (A2): 56,1%

- **Regional differences** become very important. In some regions of the South (particularly Campania, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia) more than 50% of Grade 8 students – with peaks of up to 60-65% – perform below the goals prescribed by the National Guidelines.
- Computer-based testing allows achieving a highly desirable and hoped for result: the substantial ***elimination of cheating***. For the first time since the INVALSI tests linked to the State examination have been carried out (since 2008) no significant cheating phenomena have been reported. This is important not only because it provides better quality data and information, but also because it translates into an opportunity to foster transparency and respect for the rules. This is a very significant aspect, with great pedagogical value for each and every one.

More and more students taking the tests

The INVALSI tests for the second year of upper secondary school (Grade 10) are also now computer-based. The subjects tested are Italian and Mathematics. The CBT mode resulted in increased participation of students from all school types and in all the Italian regions, with no exceptions.

- ***Student participation*** to the INVALSI tests reached the highest level since their introduction in 2011. The average growth was +10%, equally distributed all over the national territory, but even higher for the field of professional education.
- The differences in results of students from ***different types of schools*** (high schools, technical colleges and vocational colleges) persist, but students of the technical colleges, especially in the North-East and in Mathematics, achieve excellent results that are comparable to those of High School students.
- ***Regional differences*** and differences across types of schools become more pronounced versus the situation observed at the end of lower secondary school (Grade 8). The problem is particularly acute in Mathematics. In Campania, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia more than 75% of students attain results below the national mean. In these regions the weakest students (those in the lowest percentile) do not manage to achieve the lowest results observed in the other regions.