

Standardized graduation tests improve student performance

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Since the push for standardized testing in the 1980s and the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of nearly two decades later, tests have become common staple of American education. End-of-grade and end-of-course tests have been established to measure a student's learning in specific content areas and to evaluate if he is ready to be promoted.

Recently, many states and systems have adopted this ideology to graduation itself. These states have now instilled graduation exams as a prerequisite for a high school diploma.

Despite massive opposition from several individual groups, these high school graduation tests are the best option for ensuring that high school graduates have met certain minimum requirements. These decisions have not come without a great deal of opposition. Since 2002, the year of NCLB, twenty-four states have phased in standardized test required for graduation from high school (Harac, 2003). Controversy has immediately arisen as students have been denied graduation as a result of not passing these tests. Some school systems have even been sued by the parents of these students and by the students themselves! However, the need for these tests is apparent from a variety of avenues. One of these avenues is the students themselves.

Students are very honest judges of their own efforts. Some opponents of the tests claim that it places undo pressures on students who are already under a mountain of academic stress. A survey of 600 middle and high school students attending school in systems where these tests are given produced some interesting responses. While 73% of students surveyed said they get nervous about these tests, those same students said they could certainly

handle the pressure; 23% said they didn't get nervous at all. In addition, 71% said they just did the bare minimum in school to get by.

Fifty-six percent admitted that they could try much harder in school, and 45% said that they knew that some students graduated even though they had not learned the required material (Johnson and Duffett, 2002). Another arena in which to judge these tests is to talk to the parents, teachers, and community members. In the above study, only 2 % of parents and employers and 1% of teachers felt that the push toward these standardized tests should be stopped. The vast majority of these respondents (86%, 79% and 75% respectively) say that these tests make student work harder. Employers also note the unacceptably low levels of basic skills in spelling, written expression and math in graduating students (Johnson and Duffett, 2002).

On a larger level, many educators at the collegiate level fear that US graduates are not competitive worldwide. " Worries about the United States' ability to compete in the global marketplace have given new urgency to the issue of students' readiness for college study and careers in such fields" (Klein, 2006). This fact is especially true in the area of math and written skills. One college official noted that before a program which used standardized English and math graduation tests results to place students in classes, " 62 percent of Western Connecticut State freshmen needed remedial math classes" compared to 41% after the use of the tests" (Klein, 2006). Clearly, students are getting the message and buckling down in order to be prepared for these tests both for mere graduation and for opportunities beyond. However, advocates for minority groups and poor students assert

that these scores are unfair and do not adequately test the subject area or that test only limited parts of the subject area.

Unfortunately, these problems will exist with or without the tests, and these problems exist independently of the tests. Therefore, requiring a test of this type does nothing discriminatory beyond what is already accepted practice in schools. It follows that standardized tests should be useful in weeding out these disparities. An article entitled "How to Use School Tests" (1999) notes that these "standardized tests are useful tools for identifying academic weaknesses - and, hopefully, spurring a reallocation of resources." The authors go on to assert that these tests should be used to improve schools identifying weak teachers and poor resources. However, recent studies dispute that these tests hurt minority children.

Clearly educational achievement is rising, especially in minority groups. Feldman (2000) asserts that achievement is rising in nearly every state that is raising its standards in this manner. She notes that the positive results are widespread and include students enrolling in more challenging courses to prepare for the tests. For example "the percentage of African-American youngsters taking Algebra II rose 20 percentage points between 1982 and 1994" when standardized testing first became an installation in education. In addition, "fewer students are dropping out than in the 1970s and 1980s-the improvement is especially striking for black students-and scores are up on both SAT and ACT exams, as are student test scores in many of our most troubled schools" (Feldman, 2000).

It seems that simply communicating expectations and providing students with pathways to achieve them is spurring on this rising achievement.

“ Tests are valuable. They provide a common measure of how well students are doing, and high-stakes tests give students a strong incentive to study hard” (Feldman, 2002). The key to making sure that higher education standards work for students is to coordinate efforts with teachers and administrators. These graduation tests must reflect current state standards and be aligned with the actual curriculum of each school.

Students who are struggling must be given extra attention as early as possible in order to help them pass. If these efforts are made, parents will support these tests and students and all of society will benefit.