

Should students have to pass a basic skills test to graduate from hs? essay examp...

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This essay examines the merits of tests taken by many of our High School students in order to qualify for entry to college or university. There has been much criticism of the tests that have been operated in almost half of the States of the U. S. Are they effective? Are they necessary? Do the students in States that impose such tests do better than those in States that don't have such tests? Are the tests focusing on the right skills? Or should the focus be instead on raising the standards of education – especially in English and Math – throughout High School. Would that be a better way to raise the quality of High School graduates? Jason Koebler, in an article entitled “ U. S. Can Learn From Other Countries' Education Systems” (May 2011), on the U. S. News website, claims that our education standards have declined, quoting a 2009 report that ranked 15-year old students from 70 countries. According to Koebler, the U. S. “ ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in mathematics.” Although many argue that these so-called “ high stakes” tests (tests that determine an important future outcome) are not effective, or even counterproductive, I think that in principle the testing is a good thing, even if it serves only to dissuade those of the lowest abilities from wasting those years at college, when they really are not intellectually equipped to benefit from the studies. However, I think raising basic education standards including literacy throughout the High School years is equally important.

But should the testing system be changed? Should the tests be standardized across different States? At present there are around 25 U. S. States that operate these tests, but they are not collectively organized and/or standardized. An article entitled “ High school graduation tests have little tie

to college, report finds” (2004) on the USA Today website, claims that only Georgia “ says its test ensures students are prepared for higher education or work”. In the same article, it states that “ colleges and employers continue to warn that schools are graduating students who cannot communicate, analyze or reason well enough to succeed without remediation”. I believe this view underlines my belief that although testing may be useful (as I suggested earlier) even if only to weed out those unsuited for college, it is an improvement to basic skills that is also sorely needed in our High Schools. When I read some documents written by college students, I cannot believe the spelling and other errors that litter the pages. How do so many get through the years of High School and are still unable to spell even everyday words?

However, if there are to be tests, how can they be made equitable across all States, and how could/should they be revised to ensure they are testing for the skills that colleges and/or employers want and need? Achieve Inc., a non-profit organization, produced a report entitled: “ Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams” (2004). That report included a map (below) showing which States had (or planned to have) such tests:

The report was based on detailed analysis of English language and Math exams in six States: Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio and Texas. Following that analysis, the report’s authors reached three main conclusions:

The tests do need to be improved to be better measures of the various skills the graduates will need to be successful in the real world,

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States should not rely on such tests alone; they will need to develop a more comprehensive system that includes graduation tests.

So, despite opposition to testing per se from some quarters, it does appear that Achieve, Inc., an organization dedicated to improving educational standards, is in favour of the testing in principle, though wanting to see improvement and expansion of the methods of assessment of the High School graduates.

Much of the opposition to these “ high stakes” tests as a matter of principle, appears to come from the teaching establishment and/or parent groups. (Could the latter be mainly parents of low-achievers?). An article in New York City Eye (June 2012) entitled: “ Not Just Field Tests: Across U. S., Parents Mobilizing Against Test Mania” reported on recent rallies and marches campaigning against the tests in various States. However, reading the reports of those events it is clear the numbers of protestors were small – in all cases but one the total was between 75 and 600, one in Albany being the exception with 1500 attendees – still a fairly modest gathering.

It is understandable that at least some teachers will be opposed to these tests. Firstly, because they can be seen as a measure of the teaching ability of the staff at that school. Secondly, some teachers claim they need to focus the curriculum more tightly on the test content, so narrowing the curriculum, forcing them to omit other, equally important topics. But if – as Achieve, Inc. suggests – the tests are not overly difficult, does that reaction from teachers confirm that something is lacking in the teaching standards, if special efforts are necessary to ensure success in straightforward tests? However, failing the test need not be the end of the college dream. Various States allow

students who fail the test to re-take it. In California for example, as stated in details about the “ California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)” on the California Department of Education website, a student failing the exit test in grade ten can make two further attempts in grade eleven and (if needed) up to five more in grade twelve! In my opinion, if a student is unable to pass the test after eight attempts, that person really should realize that maybe college is not the best way forward for them.

And what of the States that still don't have High School graduation tests. Do their students fare any better or worse in college? An article entitled “ High Stakes Tests Do Not Improve Student Learning” (July 2008) on the FairTest website suggests that students from States NOT having these tests actually do better on average. However, as the article says: “ this correlation by itself does not " prove" that high-stakes testing damages student learning”, although it does suggest that testing does not specifically give students an advantage.

In conclusion, I would say that on balance testing is a good idea, though as various studies have shown, the present testing system needs to be standardized, but more importantly expanded to include other skills that are not yet assessed by the tests, but are needed by students in “ the real world”. However – and I believe this to be equally important – our High School education system needs to look at how to improve our overall standards of High School education, particularly as research has shown the U. S. has fallen behind other developed countries in this regard. The time should be past when we have college students who cannot spell words in everyday use or manage basic arithmetic without a calculator.

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