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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

A Graduation Test: The Wrong Cure for Pennsylvania's Education Problems

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Thank you for inviting me to talk with you about high school graduation tests. I am pleased to see a diverse alliance of organizations coming together to oppose the proposed mandated state exit exams. These tests have caused a great deal of damage to students and schools across the nation. It will take a strong, united and effective effort to block this proposal, and FairTest looks forward to working with you to accomplish that goal. At the same time, we must promote positive approaches to improving education for students whose schooling opportunities remain far too limited.

FairTest has worked with educators, parents, civil rights groups, and community advocates in many states and at the national level to oppose the use of standardized tests as stand-alone graduation requirements. We are a small, non-profit advocacy group, located in Cambridge, Mass. Our website is www.fairtest.org.

History of graduation tests

Graduation tests were introduced in the south in the late 1970s into early 1980s. They were the product of compromise between governors who wanted to raise taxes for schools – the south clearly had the weakest education systems – and business leaders who agreed to support tax increases in return for assurances of improvements. The deal took the form of minimum competency tests (MCT). Florida was the first. Civil rights leaders went to federal court in a case that reached the fifth circuit. The appellate court approved the use of tests provided students were given an adequate opportunity to learn; in practice that adequate opportunity was very weakly defined. The tests spread across states, next appearing in northern industrial states with sizeable African American populations – New York, New Jersey and Ohio, for example.

By about 1989, 23 states had or planned to have MCTs. But many never implemented them, and some dropped them, so by 1995-96 there were 16 states with mandatory graduation tests (Neill, 1997). The number was stable until the late 1990's when there was a renewed push for these tests. States like Arizona and California have added them. There are now 26 that have or say they will have mandated graduation tests. These will affect 70% of all kids and close to 90% of racial minorities. The pattern of these tests being more prevalent in states with more minorities remains true. The question then is, does this benefit these students? FairTest's answer is no, and I will use a good part of this talk to explain why this is true.

A final note on the history: many of these states have some sort of appeal or alternative process. Most such appeal systems help very few students. New Jersey is the primary, maybe only, exception to that point, and its alternative assessment is under attack.

Some test consequences

Tracey Newhart, a young woman with Down syndrome from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, completed her required high school coursework and was accepted to study culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University. But because she could not pass the state high school exit exam, the MCAS, the college rescinded her admissions offer (Rothstein, 2003).

In Baltimore, 16-year-old Portia Dyson earns A's and B's in her coursework, works in a University of Maryland research laboratory, and dreams of studying science and nursing. Test anxiety – a well-documented phenomenon – caused her to fail three of the four state exams required for graduation. Now she is must retake high school courses she already passed, instead of the subjects she needs to succeed in college (Bowie, 2007).

Tracey and Portia are real people. They are just two of tens of thousands of students across the nation who are “collateral damage” from the graduation testing explosion. Pennsylvania should think twice before going down this road. Evidence shows “high-stakes” tests are the wrong prescription for what ails public education.

The ills of many public schools are undeniable. Like other states, Pennsylvania has vast disparities in educational access, quality and outcomes. The record demonstrates, however, that exit exams are a false solution for these very real problems. Graduation tests simply add another punishment – denial of a diploma – to the victims of inadequately funded education. The victims are disproportionately low-income and minority youth, students with disabilities and English language learners. But graduation tests are a harmful distraction from addressing real issues, a false and misleading solution that harms children without benefiting society.

Proponents of graduation tests ignore the real consequences. Avoiding the need to address deeply entrenched social and educational issues, they promise miracle cures. In reality, the harmful side effects of exit exams include narrowed curriculum, teaching reduced to little more than test prep, increased dropout rates, and profoundly demoralized students. These damaging consequences most powerfully affect low-income and minority-group students.

Exit exam promoters promise narrowed achievement gaps and overall score increases. That has not happened. The number of states with graduation tests has steadily risen over the past two decades. During the same period, however, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports no narrowing of the achievement gap among racial groups at the high school level (Neill, 2005). Nor have average scores increased -- there has been no rising tide to lift all the boats. I noted that southern states generally implemented these tests in the 1980s, but the south as a region continues to lag behind on educational indicators such as NAEP, graduation rates, and college attendance.

Other major independent studies have examined whether high-stakes testing improves learning outcomes by comparing states with such tests to states without them (Nichols, Berliner & Glass, 2006). If anything, the results favor those without high-stakes tests. The Texas Higher Education Authority reported that the need for remediation at Texas public colleges increased after that state imposed a graduation test (Haney, 2000). The biggest high-stakes testing operation these days is the federal No Child Left Behind law. The rate of improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress has actually slowed down since NCLB was put into effect (*FairTest Examiner*, 2007). In short, high-stakes testing does not produce improved learning.

A major reason for the lack of progress is that ***high-stakes testing narrows education***. Untested subjects are ignored, while tested topics turn into test coaching programs. Test prep is like holding a match to a thermostat and believing the room will get warmer: Scores may rise on that test, real learning does not.

Let's talk about this issue in more detail. The key justification for the imposition of the tests is a paper on the Pennsylvania State Board of Education (2007) website, "High School Graduation Requirements and the 21st Century Economy." I want to debunk a few of the claims made in that paper.

First, the general claim is that the kids must pass standardized tests so Pennsylvania and its students can compete better in the global economy. Some evidence on this issue:

- Economies of post-industrial nations scoring in the middle of pack on international comparison tests did better than those scoring highest, going back to first international comparison in 1964 (Baker, 2007). I will get to why in a minute.
- On a recent international study of children's overall well-being in economically advanced nations, the U.S. was at the bottom with England (UNICEF, 2007). Across six categories, it did best in education (slightly below the mid-point). That is, education relatively held its own, even bringing up other areas that are not doing well. It may well be that other areas – health care, housing, community stability and such – are *more* of a problem for children's learning and futures than our schools.

All this does not mean we should ignore education. Consideration of the major purposes of education - equality of opportunity, citizenship and lifelong learning – means that we must indeed markedly improve education, particularly for low-income and minority-group students.

The second claim in the Board of Education paper is that if students pass the PSSA, they are ready for college and less likely to need remediation. The implication is that if we prep kids for PSSA – or comparable graduation tests – then they will be college ready. This is a logical and statistical fallacy – it assumes causation when there is only correlation.

It is far more likely that students who do well in well-resourced schools, those students who get the famous well-rounded education and one that inculcates the ability to think in

and across subjects, will do well in college *and* on the PSSA. It does not follow that focusing on PSSA tests will produce high-quality learning outcomes, especially on important things no one- or two-hour standardized paper-and-pencil test can measure. Those outcomes are often essential to doing well in college. Examples include: extended writing in subjects; reading complex text in subjects with strong comprehension; ability to analyze and summarize what has been read; ability to synthesize and evaluate knowledge, information, data; ability to engage in research, produce research reports and successfully complete complex projects; any kind of extended work. Achieve (2005), which supports graduation tests, surveyed employers and college teachers of first-year students and found these are the kinds of skills actually needed. Let's not pretend the PSSA or other state exit exams measure them.

And what about the so-called soft skills? Oral communication, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, drive? They too are prized by employers and colleges but are driven out of schools by the emphasis on standardized tests.

All in all, the focus on graduation tests will undermine, not improve, the quality of education in terms of economic needs. I mentioned that the U.S. economy overall did better than economies with higher test scores (Baker, 2007). (This of course leaves aside the issue of how well the economy served people at the bottom, impacted the environment, etc.) The U.S. economic gains are very likely due to greater ability of U.S. students to problem solve, be creative, and so forth. That is not to denigrate content knowledge, but as Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge" (Baker, 2007). We should bolster content knowledge for those students who need more content knowledge, but not at the expense interest, curiosity, creativity and imagination, which tend to wither with an intense focus on standardized tests.

Let me turn now to the consequences for individual students.

High-stakes testing reduces the high school graduation rate. Texas introduced exit exams in 1992. Fifteen years later, a record 40,200 students in the Class of 2007 were denied diplomas based on the state tests (Radcliffe and Mellon, 2007). California has seen a dramatic decrease in graduates since it imposed a mandatory exit exam in 2006 (*FairTest Examiner*, 2007). National independent research confirms a link between graduation tests and higher dropout rates (Warren, et al., 2006). The more difficult the graduation test, the more the dropout rate goes up (Dee & Jacob, 2006).

In 2006, Boston's annual dropout rate rose sharply, from 7.7% to 9.9%. At the same time, the city has suffered a wave of youth violence. Boston City councilors, who solicited the views of local young people on why violence was rising, reported, "Students ... expressed massive frustration and boredom with the endless drilling and practice of the MCAS test and test preparation... Far too many students describe their school experience as an MCAS-centric environment... [as a result] the incentive for students to remain in school is tenuous" (Ross et al., 2006).

In every state, the impact is greatest for low-income and minority group students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Consider Massachusetts:

For the Class of 2006, statewide, the DOE reported MCAS pass rates of 97% for whites, 86% for Blacks, 87% for Hispanics, 79% for students with disabilities and 72% for LEPs (MA DOE, 2006) But when you take into consideration the dropout rates for each group, pass rates are probably closer to 88% for whites, 71% for blacks, 64% for Hispanics, 64% for students with disabilities and 54% for LEP students (MA DOE, 2007).

Unable to produce evidence of real success, exit exam boosters say, "We're not doing these students any favors if we just 'give them' a diploma." But what is gained if students have nothing to show after playing by the rules and passing required courses for 12 years of schooling? Students without diplomas earn much less, are far less likely to maintain stable families, and are far more likely to end up in prison. Denying a diploma based on a test score does neither student nor society any favors.

If exit exams really enhance equity and school quality, why are southern states -- the first to adopt graduation tests -- still mired at the bottom by any measure of educational performance? Why, in short, should Pennsylvania follow the failed practices of Mississippi and Alabama?

Massachusetts, my home state, would appear to be an exception. It introduced statewide exams and then a mandatory exit test. Exit exam supporters point out that NAEP scores are up in grades 4 and 8, and Massachusetts leads the nation. Massachusetts also fares well on SAT college admissions tests, and on more important measures, such as the percentage of students who go on to college. But achievement gaps remain and the dropout rate has increased. The fact is the state always did well on many measures, and the gains in test scores are most likely due to a massive infusion of state educational funding, directed mainly at low-income districts.

The truth is that race and class performance gaps reflect more on what happens outside the classroom than inside. A recent analysis of high school test scores published in *The Connecticut Economy* (Heffley, 2007) found socioeconomic factors alone account for about 85 percent of the variation in test scores in four subjects in that state. Virtually every study ever done finds that socio-economic status is the primary explanation for test scores. Pennsylvania can do better than putting accountability on the backs of its children while failing to address the underlying economic and social inequalities.

Some say exit exam unfairness can be addressed by offering the tests several times a year, with opportunities to pass extending beyond completion of grade 12 coursework.

In fact, this is inadequate. First, every test has an error range. On a well-developed norm-referenced test, the range is about 10 points – e.g., a 50 could really be a 45 or a 55 (Rogosa, 2001). PSSA will not be more accurate, and taking a test twice or even six times will only solve this problem some of the time. Second, test anxiety, a well-studied area, is a serious factor. Estimates show that sizeable percentages of test takers suffer measurable

anxiety; for many, it significantly impairs performance (Hembree, 1988). Retake opportunities won't solve that problem – indeed, having failed once, a student's anxiety may be more likely to increase.

There are also those who claim that schools will ignore kids unless there is the pressure of grad tests. However, the nation has the NCLB law, which demands a focus on lower-scoring students. Unfortunately, NCLB does not produce good results in terms of school improvement, just as graduation tests are not producing real increases in student learning. There are better ways to go about school improvement.

The choice is not between imposing graduation tests and doing nothing to improve education. Fixing the problem of unequal schools and inadequate outcomes requires many actions, from ensuring funding equity for low-income cities and towns to better K-12 programs -- including professional development and high-quality assessments -- to having expectations of a 'well rounded' education for all children.

Pennsylvania must reorder its priorities and pursue public policies that address the foundations of children's academic success: health care, nutrition, and living wages for working parents, along with high-quality teachers, access to a strong curriculum, and well-resourced schools.

All that said, there are things that can be done in the realm of assessment. First, the weight generally given to tests must be reduced to stop narrowing and dumbing down the curriculum. Rote learning to address the kinds of questions that can be answered by filling in bubbles will not benefit students or our society. Adding a few short written responses won't help much. Instead, assessment must be reconfigured in three ways.

First, develop and use real diagnostic or formative assessments. Research shows formative assessment has perhaps the most powerful positive effect on learning of anything that schools can directly control, and the results are more powerful for low-performing students (Black and William, 1998). But it is rarely used, and teachers are not well-skilled in this area. These days, we are seeing districts use so-called "benchmark" or "interim" tests that look like the big tests. These are to real formative assessment as multiple choice tests are to real assessment – a weak imitation. Implementing formative assessments will require time and money, professional development and time and space for teachers to work together.

Second, implement a statewide system that uses multiple forms of assessment, mostly under local control. Nebraska does this – it has a quality control system, but the assessments are local (Roschewski et al., 2006). They are not all excellent, but they are getting better, and in the process teachers become better teachers. In my handouts is a two-page summary of what we propose in Massachusetts, the CARE plan (1999). Ironically, the Massachusetts law called for a comprehensive system of assessments. That is what the state started to do, until politics intervened and we got a single state test. Our proposal would provide all the information needed for real evaluation and accountability.

Third, think anew about what students should be required to achieve before they earn a diploma. Ensure the resources are there to enable students to meet those goals. Then think about how students can demonstrate this learning, what are the various ways they can do it, and how the state can check up on the system. The CARE proposal provides one way to do that. In any event, there is absolutely no need to impose a one-size-fits-all graduation test to answer any of these questions. As I have explained today, the real fact is that graduation tests hurt, not help, students, schools and society.

These are recommendations for improving assessment and using assessment to improve schools and student learning. They are not more general recommendations for improving education. I think that starts with a combination of adequate resources and powerful, ongoing, educator-controlled professional development. Certainly a strong curriculum is essential, and viable options for different students and healthy relations between schools and parents are also vital. But we either get serious about systemic, long-term positive change in schools, or we succumb to fraudulent quick fixes that do more harm than good, such as graduation tests.

What is necessary then is a powerful movement among educators, civil rights groups, religious denominations, community organizations and businesspeople to stop the proposal for Pennsylvania to impose a high-stakes graduation test. I think you can do that. While you do that, you should work as well for real solutions to the actual deep problems facing education in Pennsylvania.

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