

From the Director's Chair

June 10, 2009

2009 Standardized Test Math Scores: Quality and Equity?

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The Minnesota 2009 standardized test scores in math – taken by this year's high school junior class – are in and the results are both disappointing and illuminating. The results suggest that the majority of Minnesota students are far from meeting the academic standards established by the state, while we continue to have severe disparities in outcomes based on race.

Only 42 percent of all students were *proficient* in the overall test. While this is an improvement over the 34 percent of last year, it still means that less than half of our test takers are measuring up to the state's math standards. Unless this number changes, and assuming that the results reflect an accurate assessment of student learning, these results can detract from our ability to pursue a state economy that can participate strongly in emerging markets based on high technology. Economists argue that such an economy is needed to maintain living-wage income wealth generation.

Only 57 percent passed the "high stakes" portion of the test, known as the "GRAD." This is the part of the test in which a student must show some level of proficiency in order to receive a high school diploma.

This means that the other 43 percent of all Minnesota juniors are not on track to graduate from high school next year. (More on that later)

How do these results break out for Students of Color and American Indian students?

Racial disparities in outcomes exist on these test results. While 63 percent of White students passed the GRAD portion that compares to 52 percent for Asian, 31 percent Latino, 30 percent American Indian, and 21 percent African American students.

This means that 79 percent of African American and over 70 percent of Latino and American Indian high school juniors would not graduate next year.

What does it mean to have such large percentages of students not being able to pass a test and not able to obtain their high school diploma? What does it mean that the negative outcome is borne disproportionately by students of color and American Indian students?

In a society where opportunity is largely determined by the level of one's education and where dominant economic trends require a strong base of academic competency in certain disciplines, such as math, these results spell



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tragedy for communities of color.

The tragedy is two-fold.

First, the apparent lack of proficiency in math translates into diminished opportunities for career development in high wage-earning professions. While true for all students, people of color are still underrepresented in these fields.

This raises strong accountability questions of students, systems and policies that produce such an outcome and, in the case of students of color, questions our collective commitment to create an equal society.

Second, the immediate consequence of denying a high school diploma translates into making it more difficult for young people to move ahead at precisely the point where we structured our institutions to open pathways for their ongoing development. Numerous studies have well documented the effects on students of color of not receiving a diploma.

This raises questions about the purpose of having high stakes tests. While they may serve one purpose well, they might be counter-productive in meeting other purposes, like increasing the graduation rates of certain groups and thereby opening avenues for ongoing educational development. Arguably, remedial course-taking in postsecondary may be

preferable to the disillusionment of repeating a senior year or worse, of being out on the streets without a diploma.

What about the Assessment Itself?

And finally, with failure rates this high an issue may lie with the assessment test itself. Is it possible that a student has indeed acquired the knowledge we desire but the assessment can't capture that for every student? Given the stark consequences for the student, not receiving a diploma, it is imperative that we use an assessment approach that maximizes the opportunity for the student to demonstrate his/her achievement.

Legislative Action

With that in mind the state legislature this year waived the diploma requirement for the next five years. This year's 11th graders were the first class to have been required to pass the GRAD in order to graduate from high school. Now students must still take the test and up to two re-takes in order to graduate but, if they fail, can still receive a diploma if they meet all the other graduation requirements, including passing their required math courses.

Had the Legislature not acted this year the state's high school graduation rate, near the top of national results at 84 percent, could have plummeted to 57 percent. Four out of five African American students would not have received their diploma

next year. This would have taken Minnesota in the opposite direction it should be moving; increasing the college participation rates of all students, especially students of color.

The Legislature has given itself less than a year to devise a different assessment approach, including questioning whether to continue to use a high stakes consequence for students not meeting that new assessment. Our state's policy makers are struggling with the best way to use tests to enhance our education systems. Should they be used to measure where students are at any given point in time? Should they be used to determine whether a student can move forward? Should they be used as diagnostic information to inform instruction so that it can be tailored to better drive a student's learning? Should they be used to measure the effectiveness of schools and ascribe consequences?

Right now, our assessment system is used to do all of these things. And given the dominance of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the temptation has been to develop one tool that can accomplish all of these.

As the Legislature determines an alternative approach it should keep in the forefront the impact its solutions will have on the lives of students and particularly in our students of color.

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Suggested Principles for Advancing Equity

No matter what measurement approaches we use, Minnesota continues to create unequal K-12 outcomes that follow racial and income lines. To build a strong Minnesota all students must acquire strong skills regardless of their race and income. Here are some principles to guide that desired outcome:

Equity

- **Equity matters.** The consequences that flow from an assessment tool should not exacerbate race disparities. While it is fair to expect our schools to properly equip all students for life it is difficult to see how lowering the graduation rates of students of color can advance the cause of providing education opportunities for this community.

Capacity Resources

- **Capacity and resources matters.** Simply increasing standards will not necessarily improve achievement. Something additional must be done and it must be big enough and adaptive enough, given our student diversity in skills, to give kids the resources and pedagogies needed to achieve.

Empowerment

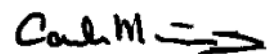
- **Empowerment matters.** As we move towards to ever higher standards, students and parents must have ownership of them. If they don't think they will ever need to use higher level math in their lives, then learning the subject may become a real challenge.

Relevancy

- **Relevancy matters.** Standards should be aligned, not in theory but in real practice, with what it takes to be successful in postsecondary and with what it takes to immediately succeed in the labor markets. These may not always overlap but neither should one cancel the other out so that students have more, not less, options as they move ahead in life.

Clarity

- **Clarity matters.** Any measurement tool should be clear about its purpose. If it is meant to either move or hold students back it should do so fairly with the best interest of the student and for creating opportunities for student growth. If it is meant to drive student achievement it need not be about conferring a diploma as much as it should be about guiding a student to achieving a diploma. If it is meant to measure the efficacy of schools the consequences should flow to the school. ■



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