



August 18, 2003

Sally Kilgore: Use high school exams to reward, not punish

By SALLY KILGORE

Faced with abysmally low passing rates on high school exit exams, states across the nation are backing away from plans to deny high school diplomas to failing students.

This summer, California's State Board of Education voted unanimously to postpone the penalties for poor results on its statewide assessment — a move that spared 92,000 students from failing — and New York recently voided the results of its math exam.

Now a report by the Center on Education Policy has revealed huge racial and ethnic disparities in pass rates on Tennessee's Gateway examinations. Whereas 87% of all white students passed the exam's math component on their first try in 2001-02, only 55% of English language learners and 49% of African-American students advanced.

These results may tempt Tennessee lawmakers to postpone plans to withhold diplomas from students who fail the Gateway exams in 2005. But there are better options available than simply sidestepping accountability, especially in light of new evidence that shows exit exams encourage schools and teachers to align their teaching with more rigorous academic standards.

Tests are blunt instruments, not finely calibrated measures of performance.

The same student can produce different results on the same test depending on the day. And students with different levels of subject-area proficiency, like English language learners, can score well above or below their true abilities on a particular exam.

Howls of indignation are inevitable if we allow exit exams alone to make or break a student's chances of acquiring a high school diploma, and we should work to design a fairer system that serves the needs of all students.

First, Tennessee can lead the way nationally by providing students with performance incentives rather than just penalties. Imagine the possibilities if the exams offered high-

scoring students opportunities for college scholarships or guaranteed admission to state universities.

Current state plans to award scholarships to students with high grade point averages invite students and parents to "game the system" by seeking enrollment in schools where grading norms are relatively lax. But if scholarship eligibility required both high grades and strong performance on the Gateway exams, every student would have a reason to excel, and the extra motivation would likely make the test results a more accurate indicator of what our high schoolers really know.

Second, Tennessee could address concerns that students who fail the exam one or more times may become discouraged and drop out of high school. Schools and teachers should not only be held accountable for the proportion of students passing the exams by age 17 but also rewarded for the proportion of students who pass the exams on their first attempt.

Current state policies provide considerable flexibility in regard to when students can take the exams, allowing students three chances to take the tests during each academic year. Allowing students to take the exams when they feel best prepared not only reduces the number of students who become discouraged but also reduces the need for extensive remedial work.

When combined with a system of rewards — scholarships or guaranteed admission to college — this strategy provides students with strong incentives to take the time, if needed, to score above the proficient level. Such a system would encourage teachers to address student knowledge gaps earlier rather than later and give students more time to excel.

Finally, Tennessee can chart a new course for exit exams by using alternative measures of achievement for students with a unique range of talents. We all know someone who has strong abilities in one area but dramatic limitations in others, and many European countries have acknowledged this fact by creating exams that cover a broader range of academic disciplines as well as the commercial arts. A broader range of assessment measures would give students more options to demonstrate excellence and offer colleges more tools for selecting entering classes with a truly diverse array of talents.

Most American states are setting up high school exams that are destined to be dumbed down to just another minimum competency test once the demonstrations of angry parents and students begin echoing in state capitols. We don't need "déjà vu all over again" in testing. We need to think outside the box and find ways to make exit exams valuable tools for measuring individual skills and identifying, encouraging and rewarding talent.

Sally Kilgore is president of the Nashville-based Modern Red School House, a school improvement design now working with 80 districts in 23 states.

