

Test scores should inform, not punish

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Next spring, thousands of Rhode Island high-school students may be denied a diploma, not because of poor grades, but because of low scores on New England Common Assessment Program tests. The current state Board of Education's plan to use the standardized test to help grant or deny high school diplomas will certainly fail, not educate, our bright and capable students.

It is not right or wise to use high-stakes testing to keep college- and career-ready students from graduating from high school. Research also does not support using NECAP, or other high-stakes tests for that matter, as a high-school graduation requirement.

There are many flaws in the current board policy and the state Department of Education's five-year strategic plan, now ending its third year. We'll raise two here.

The foremost issue is the Rhode Island public school funding formula, which currently denies students access to an equitable public education. As our neighbors in Massachusetts did 10 years ago, we should have frontloaded the resolution of this serious problem.

Another issue not being adequately addressed is professional development and curriculum development. Rhode Island does not have a curriculum aligned to the NECAP. There are currently at least 36 flavors of mathematics and English language arts curriculum in Rhode Island.

Instead of using a high-stakes test score to determine college and career-readiness,

we should employ a research and evidence-based assessment system that fairly and adequately uses multiple measures. Such a system should be similar to college- and university admissions, in which we examine grades, class rank, results of standardized exams like the SAT, work ethic, multidisciplinary achievements, evaluations by teachers, and what students have done in life. No student's potential should be limited by one test. After all, we are all more than a test score.

In addition, we should not only assess the quality of public schools by quantifiable information, such as student achievement scores and graduation rates, but also send education and community professionals into the schools to see firsthand the successes and challenges of the school system. This process, called School Accountability for Learning and Teaching, was once part of DOE's efforts, under Commissioner Peter McWalters.

Studies show the use of high-stakes testing actually does more harm than good. For example, Ronald Solórzano, an education professor at Occidental College, argues that students are not solely responsible for their test scores and concludes that "policymakers must discontinue the use of these tests for high-stakes decisions."

Providence native Henry Giroux, named one of the top 50 educational thinkers of the modern period, states, "Put bluntly, . . . classroom practices that can't be measured or defined as a work-related skill are viewed as irrelevant, and teachers who refuse to implement a standardized curriculum that evaluates young people through objective measures of assessment are judged incom-

petent."

Here in the School of Education at the University of Rhode Island, researchers concerned with the high number of high-school juniors at risk of not graduating conducted a study of the NECAP and National Assessment of Education Progress scores in Rhode Island and several neighboring states — New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts and Connecticut — to try to better understand the issue.

Results from this multiple-regression analysis suggest there are substantial gaps in proficiency rates between NECAP mathematics assessments conducted in high school and those conducted in the earlier grade levels across the New England states.

In other words, it's statistically unusual that Rhode Island students would have such remarkably low mathematics scores compared with regional peers. Fair, valid and reliable standardized tests, by design, should not produce such an outlier result. We have suggestions based on our research and expertise, which we look forward to sharing, but to date, we have not had meaningful, deep and long-term engagement in the issues facing public education here in Rhode Island in the three years that Deborah Gist has been Rhode Island education commissioner.

Thankfully, Board of Education Chairwoman Eva-Marie Mancuso recently announced plans to revisit the use of the NECAP as a high-school graduation requirement and the Rhode Island House and Senate passed joint legislation encouraging the board to reconsider graduation requirements set to take effect for the class of 2014.

We are pleased with this turn of events and certainly hope the board will continue to listen to and collaborate with students, teachers and other stakeholders on this important decision.

Rhode Island should put a moratorium on the use of NECAP as a roadblock to a diploma and take the time to re-examine the state's high-school diploma system. The citizens of Rhode Island owe this to our children.

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