

Nevada Public Education News



Nevada High School Proficiency Exam

~ Eliminated? ~

Bill Hanlon

There are a number of good reasons to eliminate the Nevada High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE). The reason that is being used is the only one that is just not true. The Washoe superintendent has insinuated on a number of different occasions that there are questions on the exam that students are not taught. That's just hoey!

Currently all the items on the HSPE math test are based on the state math content standards adopted in 2006. The alignment study conducted in 2010, found that all items on the high school test aligned to content contained in those standards. If schools in Nevada are teaching to the state content standards, there should be no items on the test that are not covered by 11th grade. In fact, if the school districts were teaching to the new, more rigorous common core standards in math, that HSPE would be seen as pretty easy.

And while a couple of people have blamed the HSPE for the state's low graduation rate, the facts just don't support that either. Based on the data from the NV Department of Education for the class of 2011 (the last year the state has complete data for), only about 6% of students did not graduate because they had not passed one or more of the proficiency tests. In the same class, there were about 22% of students who were considered credit deficient. In other words, it's students failing classes that is the underlying cause of students not graduating – not the HSPE.

Those are the facts. Having said all that, I don't want to defend the test. An exit exam has been given to Nevada students since the late 70's. I have questioned on numerous occasions the purpose of the test. It's clearly not a minimum proficiency exam and, just as clearly, it's not a college readiness exam. Nobody has ever been able to give me a satisfactory answer to its actual purpose – besides being used for graduation.

Students get seven tries to pass it. Students used to have to wait till their junior year to take it. But it was determined that if sophomores saw the test, they would take their studies more seriously and better prepare so they could pass the exam in their junior year. That resulted in raising the opportunities from five times to pass to the current seven opportunities.

Sophomores didn't seem to take the test very seriously since they knew they could retake it six more times – a good example of unintended consequences. Also many sophomores were still in the process of taking geometry in March of their sophomore year, that results in some questions

those students might not be expected to know until they completed that class. The intention was always to have juniors take the exam. However, I'll note it again, that after all the opportunities students have to retake the different versions of the exam, over 90% of all Nevada students end up passing the HSPE.

Another reason why I don't defend the exam is that less than half the states have an exit exam. Our neighbors, Arizona and California have exit exams. Utah does not. That translates to students in Nevada who have 22 credits and have not passed a section of the HSPE being denied a diploma, while their counterparts in Utah earn theirs.

It's been suggested that the HSPE be replaced with the end of course exams - that students should only be tested on what they have been taught. That's certainly the best idea I have heard. But...in Clark County, the district has semester exams in place now. Student performance on those semester exams is far worse than the student performance on the current HSPE. So, if the goal is to increase graduation rates, the students in this state will be running into a buzz saw.

In order to accomplish end of year testing, I'm guessing that different versions of the semester exams would have to be created, tests would have to be scheduled, people hired to proctor the exams, people hired to grade and report the results. So there is also a fiscal note.

Another alternative under discussion is to use the college entrance exams, ACT or SAT, as exit exams. While they do have different versions of their exams, and they have the logistics of scheduling, grading and reporting addressed, there is still a dollar cost. And their scheduling may not fit the needs of our students. And, they are in the process of changing their tests to be more aligned with the common core standards

There are other issues as well, the National Governors' Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, Education Trust, Achieve all seem to talk about all students being college and career ready by graduation. The problem with that is they have not defined what college and career ready really means - just like our HSPE. The big push is that all students be college ready. Having been introduced to the Standard Normal Curve, Bell Curve, I see that as a fantasy of policymakers who spell "clue" K L U - as in having no clue. Some students just don't have the aptitude, interest or desire to go to college. A one size fits all model is not in students' best interest.

I have never understood why we can't value other people's knowledge bases. If a person wants to be a plumber, electrician, mechanic, book-keeper, hair dresser, etc, is that something to look down upon? Whenever I have had trouble with my air conditioner, I never gave the person a quiz in algebra to determine if they could fix it. I was just glad they had that knowledge base.

In fact, the new common core tests are going to be a great deal more difficult than parents of students have ever thought of experiencing. Because of expected extremely high fail rates, New York has begun airing public service announcements getting their community ready for the results of the new tests. They are not expecting their students to do well - they are not the only ones. States are now beginning to push back against these tests and standards.

So, should Nevada keep the HSPE? I would say no unless someone can define what the exam is supposed to measure – not just used as a graduation tool. I would say no out of fairness because less than half the states have such an exam, I would say no because it places an additional burden on NV students and the state budget. I would say no because of all the time, energy and money that goes into having one, the loss of instructional time preparing for it, then all the additional funding that pays for the remediation of students who are not passing it. That money would be better spent up front preventing issues rather than trying to clean up the mess after the fact.

Hopefully, we won't make educational statistics worse in Nevada by making decisions on the faulty information that the HSPE is responsible for low graduation rates.

There is a need for educational accountability; that means we need testing. Until we decide what a graduate should be responsible for knowing, then we should not be testing them.