

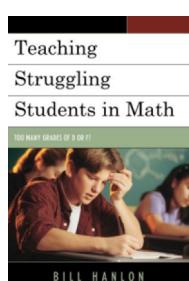
Nevada Public Education News



End-of-Course Exams --- Higher Failure Rates??

Bill Hanlon

The soon to be adopted end-of-course exams might very well result in higher fail rates than the proficiency exam it is replacing.



The Nevada State Board of Education just lowered the cut score to pass the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE) in math because the high failure rate would result in fewer students graduating high school.

One of the major issues with the HSPE is it was never defined to measure anything except questions on the test. It certainly did not measure proficiency, nor did it measure if students would be career or college ready. It only really measured how many questions students got correct on the test. Good to know because most people in the community have absolutely no idea what is on the test, but they talk about the results with great authority. *Ignorance is bliss.*

Because the HSPE was seen as a barrier for graduation, especially for minority students, a bill was passed last session to do away with the test. The HSPE will be replaced by end-of-course exams determined by the NV State Board of Education. On the surface, that sounds great. But here is the rub. Decisions are only as good as the information used to make them

The failure rate on the semester exams (end-of-course) given by the state's two largest school districts is higher than the fail rate of the HSPE. When legislators were informed of that, they were not interested in having data that would cause them pause. Some just wanted to get a high profile bill passed. They succeeded – will the students?

Why are so many students failing the semester exams? The first reason is we don't use common sense. We keep using a **one-size-fits-all** model and wonder why specific student populations are not being well served. That policy makes public education look terrible. Private schools target specific student populations so they can better serve them.

American students are more than capable of performing at higher levels, but some face more obstacles than others. Student placement is a huge issue. When students are placed in classes without the ability or prerequisite knowledge and skills for a class, they are set up to fail. Those

students become frustrated which often results in class distractions, which then takes the rest of the class and teachers off task. Some teachers end up not teaching their assigned curriculum. Then add to that the class sizes, especially in Clark County, you've got a real problem. If you visited a comprehensive high school algebra class, you should not be surprised to see 38-42 students in the class. In Clark's CTE high schools, their class sizes are 25. The CTE schools serve specific student populations with lower class sizes being subsidized by regular students. Based on that, you should not be surprised to know that CTE schools perform better than their counterparts in comprehensive high schools on exams.

Another reason to look forward to a higher fail rate on semester exams vs. the HSPE is the HSPE typically tests major concepts and skills without going into much depth because it measures standards over 3-4 years. The semester exams should have a lot more depth because they will be able to measure students' deeper knowledge, understanding, and application of algebra and geometry. For example, there are no algebra derivations or geometry proofs on the HSPE, I would think there would be on more rigorous semester exams.

*Jumped
from the
frying pan
into the
fire*

So, we are back to the idiom, *ignorance is bliss*. As some in the community are more than happy to complain about the current fail rate without knowing what's on the test; legislators, by replacing the HSPE in math with end-of-course-exams, have jumped from the frying pan into the fire. More students will fail those end-of-course exams unless the exams are watered down or the cut score for passing is very low. If the exams are watered down, then our college bound students get shortchanged because teachers ultimately have to prepare their students for tests. In either scenario, when the end-of-course exams are compared to the new common core exams, there will be a discrepancy in the results.

When we place all students in the college prep classes, including students without the ability to learn these abstract concepts, the failure rate is exaggerated. Public education should respect the knowledge bases of students who would like to become electricians, plumbers, beauticians, etc – not ridicule them or have them end up majoring in math because they have to take remediation courses at the expense of vocational type classes.

The solution is to truly understand these *one size fits all* models are a sham – like the much the heralded zero tolerance policies. We need to our best to address the needs of the students without taking away from the needs of other students. Universities typically offer math classes for students in the natural sciences and another version of those same classes for students who do not need that level of depth. Public schools should be able to do that as well.

One bad decision often leads to a series of other bad decisions. When students are misplaced in secondary schools, elementary intervention models are often placed in secondary schools. That only sounds great. It looks like we are doing something. A closer examination might suggest a worse problem. Algebra teachers, who have a case load that approximates 200 students per day in five 50 minute classes, have been told to take up to 15 minutes out of their fifty minute classes for intervention. What that tells me is approximately one third of instructional time is lost for students who *should* be there. Less instruction surely wouldn't lead to higher fail rates, would it?

A side note, elementary teachers have 20-30 students per day and can adjust their day accordingly. That flexibility does not exist in secondary schools.

To meet the needs of students, classes have to be designed (many already exist) for students who need additional assistance/remediation. They should be placed in those classes with a plan and a timetable to get out of the remediation program and placed in environments that best fit their needs.

If student placement is not addressed and we keep supporting these **one-size-fits-all** models, then there will be headlines in the next few years about the exaggerated fail rates, the need for more funding, public schools failing, with the end result having students get shortchanged in these adult political battles.