

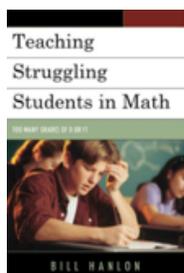
# Nevada Public Education News



## High School Exit Exams Must Go!

~ *Bill Hanlon*

Two sessions ago, the NV Legislature passed a bill replacing the High School Proficiency Exams (HSPE) with end-of-course exams to be developed by the NV State Board of Education. The State Board got a late start on this process which resulted in two classes of students who did not have to pass exams to graduate.



At their latest meeting in March, the board could not agree on a cut (passing) score for these exams. The result of that inaction is students enrolled in classes of algebra or geometry last year will be given an automatic pass on these exams no matter what their score. This could mean a third class of students exempted from passing these exams to graduate high school. Good!

The fact is only 12 or 13 states require students to pass exit exams to graduate high school. The Nevada requirement results in our students not playing on a level playing field with respect to graduation requirements and needlessly places their graduation in jeopardy.

Now, I can hear the “accountability” folks, the folks who demand “high standards” bellyaching about such a decision. That’s okay with me as long as they are willing to sit down and take these exams and have their scores published. It’s tiresome to listen to people support testing when they have no idea what and how the material is to be tested.

I think one of the reasons behind the state board’s inaction was the discrepancy of scores between middle school students taking algebra and their counterparts in high school. Another reason was so few students would have passed the tests if the cut score was a percentage of problems answered correctly. How does the board justify 70 to 80% of students failing (not graduating) at the high school because of these tests?

For a brief moment I will put aside the facts that students are not guaranteed experienced, qualified teachers, class sizes are way too large, and the lack of investment in professional development by the governor and state board and stick with the realities in the classroom. While I don’t have the results, I would guess that approximately 80% of the students taking the end-of-

year algebra test in middle school passed while 80% of the high school algebra students failed. Why the discrepancy?

The reason for this disparity has fallen on deaf ears since the common core standards were rolled out. Students taking algebra in middle school are typically more academically inclined, have a better background in math and are motivated by the fact they have already decided to go to college. Also, students taking algebra in middle school have parental support and backing. In addition to those factors, middle schools are very selective about who gets to take algebra and their classes are typically much smaller than high school classes of algebra.

Now, contrast that to high school algebra. Since students in high school are forced to take algebra, the range of students in an algebra class spans from special needs, to students who would rather be involved in vocational programs to some students who might want to consider going to college. Too many do not come into the classes with the knowledge and skills required of students enrolled in a college prep program, they are not motivated to learn algebra and often question why they have to give up taking vocational classes so they can learn how to derive the formula of a parabola. And then we have special needs students who may not have the ability or aptitude to be successful in these classes. These factors all lead to classroom management issues.

As you compare those two sets of test scores, you can see why teachers are concerned about using exams as part of their evaluation.

Add to that the “nobody fails” policies enacted by school districts under the guise of a “Minimum F “ policies, we can see teachers are not even allowed to fail students without coming under a lot of scrutiny. So students can pass with minimum or no effort - actually failing. That helps explain why the grades students earn in classes do not match exam grades.

Exams should have a purpose. An exit exam should be designed to measure something beyond how many correct over the total number of problems. That’s what the old HSPE did, it sure wasn’t a college entrance exam or a minimum competency exam - it was a bad joke. These new end-of-course exams seem to fall under the same category: just what are they measuring?

And who is on the hook to pay for all the remediation needed to pass these exams?

Its time to get rid of these as graduation exams. Our students would be much better served if we didn’t adopt one-size-fits-all models; allowing more opportunities for vocational type students and placing other students in classes that are appropriate to their academic level or need while trying to provide for students who would like to go on to college.

