

High School Assessments 2006-07

Editorial Projects in Education Research Center

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One idea driving reform in American education is the notion that schools should be held accountable for performing to meaningful standards for learning, a force set in motion in the 1980s with several states adopting standards and assessments to measure student learning. Standards-based reform intensified in 1994 with the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Improving America's Schools Act (a reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act) mandating improvements in schools nationwide. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which became law in 2002, raised the bar for improvement and accountability yet again, elevating the importance of assessments as never before.

Each state now has its own system of testing and reporting student-performance results. Some aspects of state accountability systems are federally mandated under NCLB, while other features are unique to the state. This brief discusses the various types of testing required for high school students in 2006-07 as part of statewide assessment programs. This includes federally-required assessments, end-of-course testing, high school exit exams, and college admissions tests (e.g., SAT or ACT). The state-by-state table presented at the end of this brief shows the grades and subjects in which general education students take required assessments.

Information on assessments was collected from the EPE Research Center's annual survey of state education officials and confirmed with information found on the state's education department web site. Some examples of sources used for verification were: testing calendars, memos on testing policy, test administration guides, preparation materials for teachers, and brochures for students and parents.

NCLB-Required Assessments

Under NCLB, every state, school district, and school is accountable for achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the minimum level of improvement required to ensure that all students are on track to become academically proficient by 2013-14, the central goal of the federal law. To assess proficiency, students in grades 3 through 8 must be tested every year on the skills and knowledge embodied in state standards in reading and mathematics. Students must also be tested at least once during high school in both subject areas. In 2007-08,

states are required to implement science assessments at least once during grades 3-5, grades 6-9, and in high school. The EPE Research Center found that 35 states already require science assessments in high school.

Nearly all states now have assessment systems in place that meet NCLB's general testing requirements. Only two states, Maine and Nebraska, currently have testing systems pending approval by the U.S. Department of Education. Maine is requesting that the SAT, taken by all juniors, be allowed to fulfill its high school testing requirements. Nebraska is seeking approval for its locally-based assessment system.

Testing in the High School Grades

During high school, students are most commonly assessed during their sophomore year, with 39 states requiring at least one assessment in the 10th grade. Thirty-three states have grade 11 assessments, while freshman take at least one assessment in 25 states. States appear to ease up on testing significantly for seniors, who are assessed in only one state, Kentucky, which has a grade 12 writing assessment.

The number of states testing at a particular grade level is difficult to determine with certainty because some states employ end-of-course assessments. Since students may take (or schools may offer) a given course at different points during the high school years, students may not all take an end-of-course examination in the same grade. The EPE Research Center analysis employed such sources as state-recommended course sequences for general education students or references to the particular grade in the description of the end-of-course test in order to determine the grade during which an assessed course is most commonly taken.

The following table summarizes the number of states testing in each subject for each grade.

Subject	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
English/Lang. Arts	18	31	23	0
Mathematics	23	34	22	0
Science	13	19	20	0
History	3	12	14	0
Writing	6	16	12	1
Total (any subject)	25	39	33	1

The bulk of the assessment that occurs during the high school years involves tests of English/language arts and math and, to a lesser extent, science. However, states also test high school students in other subject areas. Twenty-two states require assessments in history or social studies at some point during the high school years. In most of those states (14), assessments occur during the 11th grade.

Strong writing skills are widely regarded as an essential component of college and work readiness. More than half of states (29) have separate writing assessments that require students to respond to a prompt in the form of an essay. Most of those writing tests (16) are administered to high school sophomores.

Only one state, North Carolina, requires students to pass a separate statewide technology test to graduate.

End-of-course Exams

Many state assessments are comprehensive, measuring a breadth of knowledge across an academic discipline like English or math. However, increasing numbers of states are using end-of-course exams, which are taken after completing a specific course (e.g., Algebra II or U.S. History).

In 2006-07, 13 states administered end-of-course exams in at least one subject. Seven of those states – Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Virginia – had end-of-course exams in the four core subjects of English, math, science, and history. Again, the grade in which students take those exams may vary to some extent, according to the individual student's sequence of coursetaking. In some cases, particularly in English, end-of-course exams may be grade-specific. For example, Maryland's end-of-course English exam is given to all grade 10 students.

Nine states recently formed a partnership to purchase common Algebra II exams. Four of those states – Arkansas, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts – currently include end-of-course exams in their state assessment system. The other five states – Kentucky, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island – presently do not have any end-of-course exams.

High School Exit Exams

Some states require that students pass an exit examination in order to receive a high school diploma. The rationale behind these policies is that an exit exam, by verifying a student's competency, adds value to the high school diploma. However, the decision to make exit exams a prerequisite for graduation has caused controversy in some states. This is particularly true when states are faced with reporting that large numbers of students fail the exams and when considering the uncertain futures of students who fail to earn a diploma.

Currently, 22 states require students to pass exit exams to receive a diploma. NCLB does not mandate that states require students to pass an exit exam in order to earn a diploma. However, the same assessments are sometimes used to satisfy both the NCLB high school-level testing mandate and a state-specific graduation requirement. According to the Center on Education Policy (2006), 17 of the 22 states that have exit exams use those assessments as part of their NCLB accountability system. Five states – Alaska, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Texas – use separate assessments for the purposes of NCLB compliance and state graduation requirements.

A comprehensive exam, testing students on the state's high school-level content standards, is most the common form of exit exam today, employed by 15 states. Four states – Mississippi, New York, Tennessee, and Virginia – use end-of-course exit exams. Alaska, Minnesota, and New Mexico employ minimum-competency exit exams (Center on Education Policy, 2006).

Using exit exams as a high school accountability strategy began to take off in the early 1980s. By and large, those early exit exams were considered minimum-competency tests, assessing knowledge and skills below the high school grade level (Warren, 2007). However, a review of assessment patterns over time shows a trend toward replacing lower-level exams with more challenging ones.

Minnesota, for example, is implementing a new exit exam for the class of 2010 with a reading test aligned to grade 10 standards and a math test aligned to grade 11 standards. The state's current exit exams are first administered in grade 8 (English and math) and grade 10 (writing). North Carolina currently requires students to pass a high school competency test if they do not pass an end-of-grade test in grade 8. The state intends to use its

high school end-of-course exams as a graduation requirement, also effective with the class of 2010.

Texas is another state changing its exit exam type. Texas currently requires that students pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam, which is a comprehensive assessment. However, a bill passed by the state legislature will require end-of-course exams to replace the TAKS by 2011-12. To receive a diploma, a student will need to average no less than 70 percent on the end-of-course exams taken in each subject area: English, math, science, and social studies.

Three states – Washington, Maryland, and Oklahoma – are expected to enact new exit exam requirements in the coming years. Starting with the class of 2008, students in Washington will be expected to pass the reading and writing sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in order to earn a diploma. Maryland will require students in the class of 2009 to pass end-of-course exams in English, algebra/data analysis, biology, and government to graduate. Similarly, Oklahoma administers a series of end-of-course exams in English II, Algebra I, biology, and U.S. history. Effective with the class of 2012, passing those tests will become a graduation requirement.

College Admissions Tests

Another trend in state high school assessment policy is requiring the ACT or SAT, the norm-referenced tests that are typically part of the college admissions process. Those in support of such a requirement argue that it is efficient – many students will likely take one of those tests anyway – and that it promotes college readiness, both in practice and in principle. Requiring the ACT or SAT, however, has its critics.

The Center on Education Policy (2006) noted that the ACT and SAT are not based on alignment to state content standards and are not as comprehensive as many standards-based state assessments. In addition, college

admissions tests set a very high bar for college readiness, which, while admirable, but may not be fair.

The nonprofit organization Achieve (2007) conducted a study of college admissions tests to examine their value within state accountability systems, as a means of assessing high school standards and college readiness. Achieve cautioned policymakers against limiting state testing systems to only one type of assessment. Their recommendations include: augmenting college admissions tests with state-developed components aligned to state standards (as some states have already put into practice – see below); using end-of-course exams to gauge readiness for college-level courses; and finally, revising current standards-based tests to include college-readiness measures.

In 2006-07, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan required the ACT, while Wyoming required the ACT or WorkKeys (a job skills assessment). Maine required the PSAT and SAT. Next year, Kentucky will add the ACT to its high school assessment system. In Illinois and Michigan, ACT results are employed for NCLB accountability, which means the scores are factored into AYP. To gain approval to use the ACT, Illinois and Michigan augmented the ACT with state-developed assessments. Maine, seeking approval from the U.S. Department of Education for the SAT, is still undergoing this process. Colorado, Kentucky, and Wyoming have criterion-referenced assessments, separate from the ACT, that comply with NCLB and measure high school standards. ■

References

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Statewide High School Assessments for General Education Students in 2006-2007

State	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Alabama		W	E M S H	
Alaska	E M W	E M W		
Arizona	E M	E M W		
Arkansas	E M S H	M		
California	E M S	E M S H W	E M S H	
Colorado	E M	E M S	E M S	
Connecticut		E M S		
Delaware	E M	E M	S H	
District of Columbia		E M		
Florida	E M	E M W	S	
Georgia	<i>E M S</i>	<i>E M S H</i>	E M S H W H	
Hawaii		E M		
Idaho	E M W	E M		
Illinois			E M S W S	
Indiana	E M <i>M S</i>	E M W	<i>E</i>	
Iowa			E M S	
Kansas		M	E	
Kentucky	E M	E M S	M S H	W
Louisiana	E M	E M W	S H	
Maine		E M W	E M W	
Maryland	<i>M S</i>	<i>E H</i>		
Massachusetts		E M S H W		
Michigan	H		E M S W M S H	
Minnesota	E M W	W		
Mississippi	M S	<i>E W</i>	<i>H</i>	
Missouri		M	E	
Montana		E M	E M H S	
Nebraska			W	
Nevada		E M	W	
New Hampshire				
New Jersey			E M S W	
New Mexico	E M S W	E M S H W	E M	
New York	M S	M S H	E M S H W	
North Carolina	E M T <i>E S</i>	<i>M S H W</i>	<i>M S H</i>	
North Dakota			E M S	
Ohio		E M S H W		
Oklahoma		<i>E M S H</i>		
Oregon		E M S		
Pennsylvania			E M W	
Rhode Island			E M	
South Carolina	<i>E M S</i>	E M	<i>H</i>	
South Dakota	W		E M S	
Tennessee	M S	E S	W	
Texas	E M	E M S H	E M S H W	
Utah	<i>E M S W</i>	<i>E M S</i>	E M S H <i>E M S</i>	
Vermont				
Virginia	M S H	M S H	E M S W	
Washington		E M S W		
West Virginia		E M S W		
Wisconsin		E M S H		
Wyoming			E M E M	

Source: EPE Research Center, 2007

E=English Language Arts, M=Mathematics, S=Science, H=History/Social Studies, W=Writing/Composition, T=Technology

Exit Exam (passing exam is required for a diploma for the class of 2007)*End-of-Course Exam* (grades may vary)**College admissions test** (subject is tested in the state-required ACT, PSAT, or SAT)

State Notes

Colorado: The Colorado ACT tests English, mathematics, reading, and science.

Illinois: Illinois' Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) includes: (1) the ACT Plus Writing (English, mathematics, reading, science, and writing); (2) a state-developed science assessment; and (3) two WorkKeys assessments (Applied Mathematics and Reading for Information).

Kentucky: Statewide ACT testing for all high school seniors will begin in the 2007-08 school year.

Maine: All Maine high school juniors are required to take SAT tests in critical reading, writing, and mathematics. Grade 10 students are required to take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) in critical reading, writing, and mathematics.

Maryland: Passing the High School Assessments (HSA) will be required in order to receive a Maryland high school diploma beginning with the graduating class of 2009. Maryland's High School Assessments are end-of-course exams for the following courses: English, algebra/data analysis, biology, and government.

Massachusetts: Students in grades 9 or 10 taking a high school science course (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, or technology/engineering) will take MCAS-Science. Students in grades 10 or 11 taking U.S. History I & II will take MCAS-U.S. History.

Michigan: Michigan Merit Exam (MME) consists of ACT Plus Writing (English, mathematics, reading, science, writing), WorkKeys (reading, mathematics), state-developed components (mathematics, science, social studies).

Minnesota: Students in the class of 2009 or earlier must pass the Basic Skills Test (BST) to receive a diploma. The BST is first taken in grade 8 (English and mathematics) and grade 10 (writing). Students in the class of 2010 will take the MCA-II/GRAD, a standards-based exit exam, in grade 9 (writing), grade 10 (reading), and grade 11 (mathematics).

Nebraska: Nebraska uses local assessments in its accountability system.

New Hampshire: In 2006-2007, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island pilot tested the New England Comprehensive Assessment Program (NECAP), which includes reading, writing, math, and science.

New Jersey: Science portion first administered in spring 2007, but it does not count toward graduation requirements this year.

North Carolina: The North Carolina High School Competency Tests are required for all grade 9 students who did not pass English and mathematics competency tests at the end of grade 8. North Carolina also requires that grade 8 students pass the North Carolina Test of Computer Skills to graduate. High school students who failed the test may retake it. North Carolina students in the class of 2010 will be required to pass end-of-course exams in Algebra I, biology, English I, civics & economics, and U.S. history to receive a diploma.

Oklahoma: Oklahoma will require students in the class of 2012 to pass end-of-course exams in U.S. History, English II, Algebra I, and Biology I in order to receive a diploma.

Rhode Island: In 2006-2007, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island pilot tested the New England Comprehensive Assessment Program (NECAP), which includes reading, writing, math, and science. Rhode Island also tested students in English and mathematics with the New Standards Reference Exam (NSRE).

Tennessee: Students in Tennessee must pass three Gateway Tests (Mathematics-Algebra I or Math for Technology II, Science- Biology I or Biology for Technology II, and Language Arts-English II), which are end-of-course exit exams. Local school boards determine how the other end-of-course tests (Math Foundations II, English I, Physical Science, and U.S. History) are to be used.

Vermont: In 2006-2007, Vermont, along with New Hampshire and Rhode Island, pilot tested the New England Comprehensive Assessment Program (NECAP), which includes reading, writing, math, and science.

Virginia: Students must earn a total of six verified credits to graduate: English (2); Mathematics (1); Science (1); History (1); and one credit in a subject of the student's choice. To earn a verified credit, a student must pass the End-of-Course test.

Washington: Students in the class of 2008 will be required to pass the reading and writing sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Lawmakers in Washington approved an amendment in April 2007 that would allow students in the classes of 2008-2012 who failed the mathematics section of the WASL to graduate as long as they take additional math courses. Passing the science section as a graduation requirement will now start with the class of 2013 instead of the class of 2010.

Wyoming: This year Wyoming requires all high school juniors to take either the ACT (English, mathematics, reading, and science) or WorkKeys (reading, mathematics, and locating information). Beginning in spring 2008, the state will monitor this requirement.

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