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Minnesota Educators' and Students' Insights on Assessment and Accountability

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Educational accountability systems, like No Child Left Behind and Minnesota's graduation standards, are predicated on the notion that they create expectations and incentives for educational achievement. At the same time, they have been used as "gatekeepers", identifying students deserving of promotion and/or diplomas and honors. In high school, some of the same assessment tools that are used to determine whether schools are helping students make progress are also used to determine whether students are eligible for a diploma. Widespread failure on these assessments, such as occurred with the 2009 Minnesota GRAD test for math, can lead to a number of different explanations. Perhaps the standards for what a student should know are inappropriately high. Perhaps the test was flawed. Perhaps the teachers and schools failed in their responsibility to prepare students. Perhaps the students failed in their responsibility to learn the subject matter.

Or, perhaps none of the above.

After interviewing 59 high school students and 20 educators from six schools about the proposed ACCESS accountability system for Minnesota, the Citizens League found that Minnesota's existing accountability system is not yet producing its intended consequences, despite concerted efforts by many, due to: 1) a lack of clarity about the standards; 2) unfair and unrealistic expectations for the students who struggle the most; and 3) a failure to align incentives so that the efforts of schools, teachers, and students are all moving in the same direction. It was clear, although not unanimous, that the proposed ACCESS system would be an effective and welcome step in the right direction of rectifying these problems.

However, if it is Minnesota's intention that all students meet state educational standards for learning, greater support and/or more alternatives are needed for students who enter high school well behind their grade level in academic achievement. It is possible to go a step further and suggest that if Minnesota's intention is to give students an educational background that provides them with the knowledge, skills and confidence they'll need to reach their unique potential in life, then ACCESS is a necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, change. We found that the current system imposes high opportunity costs for learning among certain students.

To summarize, the Citizens League found the following:

1. Accountability systems are seen as a legitimate state function by administrators, teachers and students.
2. There was general agreement that the state's current course requirements are appropriate, including Algebra II. However, the adequacy of opportunities for meeting those standards for students who lag far behind was routinely questioned.
3. Most educators and students were not opposed to using standardized tests as a criterion for a diploma, although the general sentiment was that the standardized tests are not particularly relevant in this regard. ACCESS is widely regarded as a significant improvement.
4. The current accountability system is bringing about intensive efforts to improve instructional practices in all schools. There were mixed reviews about whether ACCESS's proposed "on track/off track" rating would be helpful and some concern about combining the reading and writing exam, whereas the 72 hour turnaround time was universally applauded.
5. Standardized tests are generally regarded as a reasonable means of holding schools accountable. However, testing can only produce the desired results if the interests of students, educators and schools are aligned. They currently are not well-aligned, and ACCESS is seen as a big step toward improving alignment.
6. There is general resistance to the notion that standardized tests are the best way to measure students' knowledge and skills.
7. Standardized tests are a poor source of motivation for students. ACCESS (through end of course exams) represents an improvement by increasing the relevance of the tests.
8. Standardized testing currently imposes considerable educational "opportunity costs" for certain students as they prepare for the tests.
9. Educators expressed a great deal of uncertainty and confusion about what the state standards actually mean for instructional purposes, and agreed that ACCESS would be a great improvement in helping teachers and students understand exactly what is expected of them.

ABOUT THE CITIZENS LEAGUE RESEARCH

In 2009, after 57% of the state's 11th graders passed the GRAD test in mathematics, the Minnesota legislature passed and the governor signed a five-year reprieve that enables students to earn a high school diploma even if they fail. At the same time they created a task force charged with developing a recommendation for a new high school assessment and accountability system for Minnesota. The task force has since developed a proposed what it deems a "bold and very different" alternative to the GRAD test.

In February of 2010, the task force asked the Citizens League to "test" the proposal with educators and students. The objective of the Citizens League was not to determine whether educators and/or students would support the proposal, but whether it would improve student learning. If accountability systems are intended to improve

student learning, they must bring about new behaviors amongst some combination of schools, teachers or students. The Citizens League was charged with discovering whether ACCESS would compel effective change.

The Citizens League spoke with twenty educators and 59 students from a broad range of schools. Together they represented a diverse set of responsibilities, educational interests, organizational structures, and academic challenges. A sense of this range can be found in the table below, which provides enrollment information.

		grades	08-09 enrollment	free lunch	red. lunch	English language learners	special ed.	minority enrollment
PLYMOUTH YOUTH CENTER	alternative	9-12	135	87%	4%	5%	13%	95%
EDINA SENIOR HIGH	district	10-12	1,814	6%	1%	2%	9%	15%
STEWARTVILLE SENIOR HIGH	district	9-12	484	9%	6%	0%	6%	4%
HARDING SENIOR HIGH	district	9-12	2,049	71%	12%	60%	12%	88%
HIGH SCHOOL FOR RECORDING ARTS	charter	9-12	225	80%	4%	0%	24%	93%
AVALON SCHOOL	project-based charter	7-12	181	2%	0%	1%	23%	29%

Educators included six principals, assistant principals or directors; eleven math, science and language arts teachers (spanning course levels from credit recovery to AP courses); two persons responsible for test administration; and one counselor. Six of the twenty filled more than one role.

Students who participated were selected by school principals and/or math department leaders. Working with the school leaders, the College Readiness Consortium and Citizens League requested to speak with 5-7 students from all academic levels in mathematics. At Harding High School and Stewartville High School we spoke with three groups broken down by academic “tracks” --one group of students struggling to meet the state standards in mathematics, one group of intermediate students, and one group of advanced students. In these schools, struggling students who were in 9th grade were taking algebra or pre-algebra. Intermediate students were also taking algebra, but at a faster pace. Advanced students were taking geometry. As the students’ grade levels increased, so did the courses they were taking (e.g. advanced 10th grade students were taking Algebra II). At Edina High School, we spoke with two groups. One group was intermediate [all in 12th grade taking college algebra prep (post Algebra II; not quite pre-calculus)] and the other group was advanced/very advanced [10th and 12th grade taking calculus as PSEO, 12th grade in AP Calculus BC (will graduate having three college-level semesters of math), and 12th grade in AP Calculus AB]. At Avalon School, High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA), and PYC Alternative High School, we spoke with just one group of students each. At Avalon the group included two intermediate level students and two advanced students. At HSRA we spoke with two intermediate students and three students who were behind. At PYC all students were behind in math.

The Citizens League interviewed educators in a one-on-one process, while students were interviewed in groups. The interviewers initiated both sets of interviews by asking about perceptions of the current system. This was done to set a baseline for comparison with ACCESS, as well as to allow the interviewers to test the assumptions behind ACCESS as they apply to actual experiences, as opposed to the projected, hypothetical experiences that might occur under ACCESS.

What follows is a description of the broad themes heard throughout the interviews. These themes are best read as a “package”—that is, any one finding is best understood in the context of the other eight. Having promised anonymity to the participants, and given the relatively small number of participants from each school, we opted not to attribute the quotes.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Accountability systems are seen as a legitimate state function by administrators, teachers and students.

No educator questioned the state’s right to hold schools, educators or students accountable for their work. There was complete acceptance that accountability is a legitimate function of the state. Their concerns centered on how accountability is practiced, as discussed below.

Likewise, students viewed accountability systems as necessary to ensure quality schools with quality teachers. Regardless of their opinions about Minnesota’s current system and the ACCESS proposal, students are sure the state’s *intent* is “improvement”.

Students viewed accountability systems as a way for their families to hold schools accountable for making good decisions regarding teachers and teaching. In fact, some students indicated that the proposed “on/off track for readiness” rating of their performance on the tests would provide a means to see if their school is helping them achieve their goals. A handful of students indicated they believe the system puts gradual pressure on the state to restructure teachers’ jobs. In particular, they want to move away from teachers having tenured positions. If students aren’t making progress with a certain teacher, they want it exposed.

“Tests hold teachers accountable. It’s wrong for teachers to be paid if they are not helping you.”

Students didn’t see themselves as accountable to the system, pointing out that they “achieve” for themselves and not for the school, not for the state, not for America’s competitiveness against China, and not for “girl power in math and science”. Many viewed Minnesota’s current system as failing to recognize their *daily* accountability, which they demonstrate by attendance, completing course assignments and tests, and even achieving outside of school via internships, jobs, and other activities. As standards are raised or changed,

students who are on track or advanced said they will meet them and students who are already behind said they will keep trying with the hope that they will meet them or be given some sort of other opportunity to graduate. But no group of students saw this as having much to do with their accountability.

“I am so sick of ‘We need girls to learn math and science because we need to beat the Chinese and because we are America!’ Not everyone is a mathematician. I understand encouraging it, and technology is awesome. I’m have a job in environmental interpretation, so I’m contributing. But still, [the message from the state is] like, ‘forget about you!’”

“At Avalon, we get credit for learning we’re doing at our internships. I taught 7th grade science and got credit for that. We’re doing more to prepare for our future, and I appreciate not having to smooch that in around all the traditional coursework.”

Some students took issue with the idea of being accountable for learning under a system which they do not control. In particular, several mentioned that they don’t really have the power to select their teachers (they’re placed) and the teachers’ abilities and chosen methods can have a lot of influence on their learning. Students at one school had actually sensed themselves regressing in 10th grade compared to 9th grade, and they all respectfully said it was due to the teacher. A handful of students at another school explained that the ACCESS proposal might cause them to expose these teachers, a behavior which they associated with being accountable for their learning. Others said that success depends so much on elementary schools, and holding them accountable for *that* is not acceptable.

“It’s the way [math is] taught that concerns me. A lot of students are struggling with the teaching strategies. He doesn’t explain things enough. Last year I did great.” (10th grade student responding to the ACCESS proposal’s potential impact on students with “average” grades)

Finding 2: There was general agreement, that the state’s course requirements are appropriate, including Algebra II. However, the adequacy of opportunities for meeting those standards for students who lag far behind was routinely questioned.

There was widespread agreement that students should leave high school prepared in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Also, there was general support for higher standards, although a few preferred the basic standards system. Educators believed the vast majority of students are capable of learning Algebra II (with exceptions for students with serious learning disabilities). Yet educators from a number of the schools felt that meeting the Algebra II (and in some cases the reading) standard is simply unrealistic under current conditions. As one educator said, “I’m all for accountability, but it needs to be layered. One step at a time.” The following are examples of the reality for some schools and students:

- Educators in one school described an entering class of fifteen students, of whom none were on track to pass the Algebra II exam in 11th grade. The average math proficiency among these students was a 5th grade level; the top student was at grade level 8.5. For these students and their teachers, the Algebra II standard only made them feel defeated about math. Algebra II was too quick a jump to a higher standard for these students.
- Another school also described a set of students with 5th grade math skills. These students have very low confidence in and high anxiety about their math skills because of repeated failure. While this educator is introducing these students to Algebra II concepts, he begins with them by going all the way back to third grade math skills, so they can focus on what they do know and try to build confidence as they progress.
- Some educators stressed that for many ELL students, the Algebra II exam amounts to a reading test. They agreed that the ELL students are among the hardest working of all students, but they did not feel it was realistic to expect a student who has been learning English—even for 4+ years—to acquire the language skills to succeed on an Algebra II exam. One educator, faced with sixty new students, nearly all well behind grade level and many who barely know English, said ‘You almost get a little cynical’ (about the standards, not the students). Yet that same educator said about standards in general, “We’re finally moving in a standards direction!”

One teacher described how defeating it feels to be held accountable for something that cannot be accomplished (i.e, bringing students up multiple grade levels in a matter of months):

“How do I help? I’ve hit every tool in the toolbox. I don’t know what to do. They [the students] don’t know what to do. It’s very sad. They work so hard.”

Students almost unanimously believed a college degree is necessary to succeed in the world, and that earning a high school diploma is a gateway to college admission. Students said that their teachers have told them that Algebra II (and sometimes a higher level of math) is needed for students to get into college, and therefore that is the right standard. They expect to leave high school ready for college.

There was also support for science standards, but many students and teachers wondered why the emphasis on biology. The ACCESS proposal to add an end-of-course exam, with graduation stakes, for biology was almost universally rejected by students because they did not see the skills from biology as fundamental. Some students (and teachers) proposed an idea to test students on science skills (such as scientific method/problem-solving) or a science of their choice. Their peers liked this idea, although they were not sure how the latter would work out under ACCESS. Could students opt of the state biology final for a separate final that would come later? And taking a test for a course that comes later would mean less opportunity to retake.

Finding 3: Most educators and students were not opposed to using standardized tests as a criterion for a diploma, although the general sentiment was that the standardized tests are not particularly relevant in this regard. ACCESS is widely regarded as a significant improvement.

The ACCESS proposal goes right to the heart of this question, by proposing that the “high stakes test” be incorporated into a course grade, rather than standing as a criterion for a diploma in its own right. Students as well as educators had sophisticated and nuanced views on the subject. In short, they see a diploma as a right of passage into the adult world, signifying that a student has the skills to successfully navigate adulthood. In their words, a high school diploma reflects:

“...a broad educational background and the basic skills to function in society.”

“...a training ground for navigating life—it has less to do with paper, and more to do with the kind of person you want to become along the way.”

“...productive citizens who are engaged.”

“...independent life-long learners who care about the communities they live in.”

In this context, whether a student passes an Algebra II exam is not a relevant indicator of most students’ ability to succeed as adults. Also, as one educator described, “There are 170 days of school. A diploma should depend on what happens on one test on one day?” Another suggested that the transcript might be a superior way to summarize a student’s knowledge and skills rather than expecting a diploma to convey standardized skills. “Testing only matters if everyone gets the same exposure.” The ACCESS system was viewed by most as a superior method for meeting the requirements for a diploma.

Students were generally comfortable with exam requirements for a diploma as long as the skills tested are fundamental to the rest of their learning (reading, writing, math at Algebra II level). Advanced- and intermediate-level students said that having the diploma at stake makes them take the test seriously, but that they aren’t concerned they won’t pass. They often don’t know their scores, and see the GRAD tests as something they have to “check off” on their journey towards graduation. They are far more focused on their GPAs and ACT scores.

“I’m never afraid of failing. I know I’m taking the test on test day and that I’ll pass. It’s just how well. And then by the time the scores come, my mom just tells me I passed. I don’t care how I did.”

“Right now a diploma means that you’ve committed to 12-13 years of doing the same thing every day.”

That said, students who are very far behind believed they should be able to demonstrate that they are making significant progress and have the ability to learn Algebra II eventually. They had every desire to learn Algebra II

and be college ready, and are working hard toward meeting the standards associated with graduation, but were visibly stressed about the idea of not graduating despite all their progress. They wondered what will all their progress will have been worth if they can't earn a diploma.

“Tests are important to see if you learned; seeing the levels you at (sic). But passing to graduate is crazy. Comprehension levels are different, so things need to be more individualized. A diploma should say the level you [completed] and your progress. A diploma doesn't need to mean that I'm advanced and at a '7 out of 8' performance level.”

“Raising the stakes is only screwing over the kids who try the hardest. These tests are easy for me. But I see my peers pushing themselves to the limit to get the minimum. And they are good students in other areas; just not in math.”

There was unanimous, often enthusiastic support from educators as well as students for an end-of-course exam rather than a separate high stakes test (note: for students, this support was separate from it counting toward their grade). Educators felt that the end-of-course exam solves a few practical, yet important deficiencies in the current system. A number of them pointed out that the current exam is given at a pre-established time, which is unrelated to when, or whether, a student has taken the course. Some students have had a year to forget all of the material. Others haven't even learned it yet. They also remarked that students take the current exam when there is still roughly a quarter of the school year remaining, forcing them to cram a year's worth of material into three-quarters time.

Many students agreed. Intermediate-level students were most comfortable with the overall ACCESS proposal, most saying we should “lean toward” it rather than keeping things as is. Advanced-level students were split. The majority preferred to keep their grades and the tests separate, rejecting ACCESS on this basis. For the most part, this group of students does not currently need to think about the tests much and they are also earning high grades. ACCESS would disrupt what is currently working well for them, and possibly put their good grades in jeopardy. These students held fast to this idea even when presented with their earlier statements that the exams were “easy”. The rest of the advanced-level students preferred ACCESS because it represents the idea of holding students accountable for really learning the material and they weren't threatened by the idea of a state test as a final exam in their course.

“25% of the grade would definitely motivate students. It would tell teachers more what to teach. And you could rock the course if the test throws you off.”

“What we have now is way better. Keep things separate.”

Students who are far behind were also split. They liked the idea because they didn't see the sense in taking an exam where they had never seen the material simply because they're in 11th grade, especially since they feel the test scores don't tell them if they did well on the parts they *know*.

"The math test covers what we learned. *And* the test covers a whole lot of stuff we've never seen before."

However, some believed ACCESS would jeopardize their opportunity to pass *both* the course and the state test when currently they can pass one but not the other. For example, they believed that an average/C-student who does poorly on the test would not pass the course *or* the test whereas under the current system they would pass the course and could keep working on the test.

"[ACCESS] would be way better for me. 25% of my grade would really help me out because I do great in my course, but I'm a bad test taker."

"I'm an average student. Right now I can pass the course; so maybe I'd just need to focus on the test. I prefer that. I like the intention of the proposal, but if it came down to my grades in math and biology, this would kill me."

Asked to consider the idea of having two types of diplomas, honors and regular, advanced-level students again were split, with a large majority being against the idea.

"The concept of an honors diploma would add more stress and take focus away from grades; and that's what's really causing me to learn right now. I don't pay attention to the tests, and they take time away from my learning as it is."

Intermediate-level students were neither here nor there. Yet students who are struggling or far behind thought the idea was quite motivating.

"A regular diploma would be some people's honor."

"This would be more motivating. I would set higher ambitions and still have a chance to pass if I couldn't reach the honors level."

"This would keep people trying hard."

Some practical considerations:

- Advanced-level students currently taking Algebra II and biology pointed out that all three tests proposed under ACCESS would fall in the same year. In that case, they said they would rather leave math at the end of 11th grade to avoid stress of three high-stakes exams at once, despite having reported that the current GRAD exams are “easy”. Advanced-level students also felt that the ACT and AP options under access came too late to be of use to them.¹
- Students at chartered and alternative schools also worried about ACCESS’s proposed time frames for tests, which are at the end of the traditional semester periods. Even if ACCESS is improved from the GRAD system, to them an improved system would allow *them* to take the test after *they’ve* learned the material, which often doesn’t have much to do with traditional semester timing.
- Many schools only award grades for quarters or semesters—there is not a “final grade” for all course work. How then would the state test account for 25% of a student’s grade?
- Educators and students were mixed on whether a 25% weight of the final exam in the course grade is appropriate. Answers seem to depend on what they were accustomed to. Students whose finals already account for 20% or more of the grade were more willing to accept the 25% than students in schools or courses where the current weight is more around 10%. Students in schools and courses with 10% weight were more willing to accept ACCESS if the state tests counted toward 10-15% of their grade.

Finding 4: The current accountability system is bringing about intensive efforts to improve instructional practices in all schools. There were mixed reviews about whether ACCESS’s proposed “on track/off track” rating would be helpful and some concern about combining the reading and writing exam, whereas the 72 hour turnaround time was universally applauded.

It was clear from every educator interviewed that they feel a great deal of pressure to improve student performance. Several educators expressed it as “a sense of urgency.” The pressure points varied—some felt pressured by being placed on the AYP list, others by a sense of injustice that their students might not graduate despite really hard work, others by school boards who were dissatisfied with test results. No one mentioned parents as a source of pressure.

As a result, the educators have been experimenting and implementing a wide variety of changes in the course offered and instructional practices, especially regarding credit recovery. Many are making more use of formative assessments to better understand students’ skill levels. Some are using online tools with the standards and assessments built in to the lessons. Some have started new, slower-paced courses and/or longer blocks of time in class so that students who are behind grade level will not feel frustrated when they cannot keep up with faster paced materials. Some are creating courses with more intense instruction, with two teachers for every fifteen to twenty students. Educators are coordinating more with middle schools. One school has changed grading practices to “group grading” to create greater consistency in grading. The overall theme of these varied

¹ A parent of a homeschooled student did indicate that ACCESS’s option to use the ACT score would have helped her son, who had to pass the GRAD tests despite having already been deemed “college-level” on the ACT exam.

practices is a move toward more individualized instruction. One educator described it as “a laser sharp focus on the learning needs of the kids.”

Most educators liked the proposed “on track/off track” assessment of students for this reason, while a few felt it would be demeaning to students. Many are focusing their efforts on identifying just what level a student is at with any particular skills, and feel that until recently, such information was not available to them. One teacher described having the data to assess each student’s learning levels as the greatest advantage of testing as well as the biggest drawback of the current system. But many also thought the “on track/off track” assessment would benefit individual students, because many students arrive in high school believing that their skills are superior to what they actually are; then they are shocked and disheartened to find that are not on track for meeting the standards.

Students agreed that the “on track/off track” assessment would be helpful for students to assess their own progress. They see it as potentially either validating them and how well their school is serving them or giving them a much needed a wake-up call. They expressed concern about the ranking eventually being a part of their transcript, however.

There was universal praise for the 72-hour turnaround time between testing and results. Many complained of the inordinate lag time between when students test and when the results are made available. Moreover, they do not receive the type of feedback they need from the test results to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practices. One teacher remarked, “If a test was really thoughtful, its feedback would be really exciting.” A few teachers commented that simply passing a test (especially one given as early as ninth or tenth grade) doesn’t help a student—the student needs feedback so he/she can continually progress.

Students too wanted schools to be able to assess their progress (preferably as individuals in addition to on average), and to use the findings to improve teaching and learning methods for students attending their particular school. They’re not sure this is happening, particularly given the slow turnaround of exam scores and lack of ability to learn from the tests (see what they missed and improve). Students unanimously favored ACCESS’s 72-hour turnaround, often citing this reason.

Students in large district schools said that they had a significant amount of practice for the writing test in 9th grade, which they now understand to be an important foundation for the coursework that came after. At one school, students in the advanced-level discussion group discovered that the 12th grade students had significantly less practice for the writing test than the current 9th graders, indicating that practices have changed over time. These students see the practice as an asset to their learning. Students attending a chartered school felt the repeated practice for the writing test was not helpful, however, and this contributed to their changing to a project-based learning environment.

Most students considered the 9th grade focus writing skills to be so fundamental to their later learning that the idea of moving the test to 10th grade concerns them. While a handful of students liked the idea of getting both

the reading and writing tests done at once, in general students thought that their schools are currently well set-up to support their passing of the writing and reading tests—and they weren't interested in fixing what isn't broken. Even if they viewed the current GRAD tests as easy to pass, they worried that combining the tests would make the test either too long or too stressful. Especially since they viewed the design of the reading test to be poor (see below), they worried that their minds won't be clear enough to write well if the writing portion of the test came second. They'd rather keep things as they are than risk having to deal with poor test design.

Students attending chartered and alternative schools questioned if ACCESS could take away from the instructional practices that make their schools work for them. Students at Avalon wondered how ACCESS would be implemented in their project-based school. One student asked her peers, "Do we even have final exams?"

A practical consideration:

- Some educators noted that a computerized system is not only beyond the school's technical capacity, but is unfair to those students who are not computer literate.

Finding 5: Standardized tests are generally regarded as a reasonable means of holding schools accountable. However, testing can only produce the desired results if the interests of students, educators and schools are aligned. They currently are not well-aligned, and ACCESS is seen as a big step toward improving alignment.

The hot button issue for many educators was the reprieve on the Algebra II GRAD exam. Those who talked about the reprieve saw it as an enormous blunder by the state. Some felt they had been personally discredited in the eyes of their students, as they had repeatedly warned and encouraged students about the importance of doing well on the exam. But educators also expressed concern that they have been set up to fail. The school will be held accountable if students don't score well, but what motivation do the students have? They know the test does not matter. Some educators described it as using the students as "pawns" to meet the schools', not the students', needs.

The alignment of interests was expressed in other ways as well. One educator said that he wished tests would be added in other courses to put teachers in those subjects under the same pressure as teachers in reading, writing and math. Also, students who really cared about their schools were motivated to do well so that the school would perform well, while students who did not like their schools admitted to purposely sabotaging tests in which they had no personal stakes.

The end-of-course exams proposed in ACCESS significantly improve the alignment of interests, by dovetailing standards, course content, high stakes testing, grades and graduation requirements. Students will want to pass the test to ensure a good grade, teachers will care about the test standards as it aligns with course content, and the schools will care about good overall test results as well as student learning.

There was not a strong reaction, either for or against, to the proposed alignment index. Most educators believed it to be reasonable, and as mentioned above, some are moving toward group grading practices as a means of creating consistency and standards in grading. These particular teachers were not troubled by the prospect of holding students back; they already do so routinely. Students said they would not go out of their way to change schools in order to get a higher GPA. They were more interested in getting a good education.

Students in chartered schools perceived that the expectation is that their schools' students must perform better than traditional schools to be considered legitimate. They resented the idea of their schools being accountable for higher overall performance, as they think the design of their schools is positively influencing their learning and ability to succeed in the "real world". In other words, if the goal is accountability for learning then the students in these two chartered schools consider themselves to be making more academic progress and taking more personal responsibility for their learning, whether or not their schools' overall test scores are high compared to others.

"Compared to a school like Roosevelt, we're more college prep. We're accountable for ourselves like we will be in the real world. We learn from projects. We teach ourselves. We're responsible for our learning. That's why I am here every day. And it's paying off. I have a job lined up at Dain Rauscher that will pay my college tuition." (This quote is from a junior currently taking Geometry.)

Finding 6: There is general resistance to the notion that standardized tests are the best measure of students' knowledge and skills.

Virtually every educator viewed standardized testing as an imperfect way of evaluating a student's knowledge and skills. Stories abounded—the high degree of test anxiety, even among students who know the material and perform excellently in class; the diligent, super hard-working student who "almost" passes, time after time; the immigrant whose rudimentary English (but fluent second language!) temporarily impedes his ability to demonstrate his skills.

But perhaps more important, educators agreed that what can be measured on standardized test (even a good test, and many were not willing to concede that the current tests are good) is but a small portion of the knowledge and skills learned in high school.

"[Tests include] no problem-solving skills, no (measures for) diplomacy and tact. They test two of the eight intelligences. Where are the other six?"

"Our students are 90% free and reduced lunch, 40% homeless, 60% adjudicated, and 100% gifted."

Compared to the current system, educators preferred ACCESS, but many felt that other measures were more important, like student portfolios, senior projects, demonstration of problem-solving skills (such as in basket tests) and mentorships.”

Educators strongly emphasized that the tests should be developmental in nature, helping educators and students track a student’s progress, build confidence from achievements and diagnose weaknesses. They felt the current system is grossly deficient in this regard. For these reasons educators preferred the ACCESS system which moves to a more blended system of assessment.

A few, however, felt that it depended on the content of the end-of course exam and who will be developing that content (i.e., preferably teachers). If ACCESS is approved, the state might consider asking “regular” teachers to help decide the test content, both as a means of building ownership in the system and validating the content, but also because it is likely to be highly instructive for test preparers as well as teachers to sort through the different practical realities of deciding test content.

Students generally resisted the idea that the tests measure what they know. Their foremost concern was that their performance on *a* test, given on *a* day, is dependent on how they’re doing physically and emotionally on *that* day. State tests also do not allow for faster or slower paces, which students said has little to do with their overall comprehension of the material. These are things students feel they can negotiate with their teachers (organize a retake or another demonstration of knowledge). They don’t feel like the state testing system offers them these “real life” options.

Students also strongly believed that the tests, particularly the reading test, could be better designed, especially if course grades are going to depend on them (and they were skeptical about whether state leaders will be able to do that, given the current acceptable design). Very advanced students thought the math test measured their knowledge of specific concepts that they had since internalized and could no longer separate from the much more advanced math they are doing. Thus, they appreciated the ACCESS proposal to take the test right after learning the Algebra II level content. However, they strongly believed state tests could not measure their capacity as well as their current final exams.

Students at all academic levels reported that the reading test is too long, boring, and has “terrible” narrative content (some of the educators concurred that it is a mediocre test). While some students finished in plenty of time, most agreed there was not enough time to take it, especially given the questions asking students to refer to specific lines in the narratives. Again, students sense their reading comprehension skills extend far beyond what this test can measure.

“A poorly written poem [on the reading test] is not anywhere near the quality stuff we’re reading in English class. We have good questions and discussions there. Why not acknowledge that?”

“The tests are so simple that I over thought the answers. The way they’re written, it seems like they are trick questions.”

Students were not afraid of a tough final exam, but they *were* concerned about the state’s judgment of their capabilities using GRAD or ACCESS superseding the judgment of people who know them.

With their diplomas at stake, and having seen peers repeatedly fail despite hard work, most students very strongly supported ACCESS’s proposed option to allow students who do not pass the tests to demonstrate knowledge in other alternative ways.

Finding 7: Standardized tests are a poor source of motivation for students. ACCESS (through end of course exams) represents an improvement by increasing the relevance of the tests.

Because the GRAD tests are currently divorced from coursework and grading, educators described student attitudes toward exams as mostly “a thing to check off.” The tests and high stakes may motivate some students to pass, but not necessarily to learn the material. For students who struggle, the standardized tests have a negative effect—students become discouraged and anxious. They may keep trying because they have to pass the test to graduate, but their confidence wanes, and they begin to feel bad about themselves. Once again, there were many stories about the students who tried really, really hard, but in the end only had tears to show for it.

For most students, the idea of failing the GRAD tests and not graduating causes them to want to learn the material.

“I want to graduate with my class.”

“I don’t want to end up like my uncles and aunties. I want to be the first in my family to graduate.”

But for the same students, the idea of using tests to motivate student learning was, as one student put it, “simple minded”. Some are discouraged by the high stakes, and by the negative messages associated with not passing. But moreover, they say, motivation comes from people, relationships, and their dreams for their future. A few mentioned that it’s hard to tap into that motivation when “schools are like prisons”.

“The test is actually doing the opposite of motivating me. It’s discouraging me. It’s blocking me despite all my hard work.”

“No, the tests aren’t pushing us. They’re laying on top of us!”

“The tests are a joke. They’re so easy. They’re something I have to do. That’s it.”

“The test is like a voice that will either say I am nothing but rubbish or that I have basic knowledge.”

“If you really want to motivate students, do not focus on tests. Get gangs, violence, drugs, and anything else requiring cops at the front entrance out of schools.”

“Give students an opportunity to think for themselves!”

“You can’t force learning. I’m more likely to want to learn when I’m not sick of the whole idea [referring to too much test-prep].”

“The tests are irrelevant to what so many students are trying to do. Like my friends who are really talented in fine arts, and are wasting their time trying to pass the math test. We should be valuing these talents. Instead we’re making it impossible for them to get a job.”

Finding 8: Standardized testing currently imposes considerable educational “opportunity costs” for certain students as they prepare for the tests.

Teaching to the test is common, with considerable time spent not on content, but on test taking techniques. Intensive test preparation is common. A biology teacher described how her students were pulled out of class for three weeks so they could prepare for their standardized exam instead. In other schools, students must forego electives such as art and music in order to prepare, giving up the opportunity to develop other talents and pursue other interests. When asked how the focus on standardized testing was affecting students’ creativity (a 21st century skill), one educator replied, “[Tests] are based on 20th century educational practices...teaching to the test is detrimental to 21st century skills.” Some teachers also stated that the standards force a narrowing of course content, such that one teacher felt he had to “leave out a lot of the good stuff.” The opportunity costs are seen as especially high for students who struggle with test-taking. “If a student struggles to pass a test, [the test] more and more prescribes their day.”

A number of students questioned if it’s a good idea for the state to extend the standards beyond fundamentals because the practice would cause schools to focus too much on students learning the named subjects.

“Standardized tests lead to standardized learning. Teaching everyone the same things is not good. That won’t help us reach the goals.”

Finding 9: Educators expressed a great deal of uncertainty and confusion about what the state standards actually mean for instructional purposes, and agreed that ACCESS would be a great improvement in helping teachers and students understand exactly what is expected of them.

One teacher after another expressed frustration about the need to interpret state standards. The standards are so lengthy that teachers do not feel that they had sufficient guidance to know what would be covered on state exams...especially important because there is not time to cover everything equally well. One teacher described the current system as “without focus”. Some teachers felt that the standards are encouraging shallow coverage of many topics rather than a deeper understanding of critical topics. In contrast to all of the other teachers interviewed, one teacher stated that he understood the state standards perfectly well. When asked to elaborate, he stated, “Well, it took me a couple of years of research to do it.”

The upshot is that teachers don’t know what they or students are being held accountable for. As one educator said, “There should be no secret about what you’re expected to learn.” Teachers and administrators felt that the end-of course exams would make a significant improvement in aligning course curricula with state standards; moreover they welcome it. Most felt that the instructional supports would be helpful, and would certainly be reviewed, if not used. Usage would depend on quality.

The Citizens League would like to thank the participating schools, educators and students for contributing their time and insights to this important subject matter. The Citizens League operates with the principle that people whose lives are affected by a policy should be involved in framing the policy problem as well as solutions, because we believe the result is more effective policy. The educators and students helped us understand how education policy plays out in the schools, and we hope that others reading this report will find their insights equally valuable.