

Testing, Designators & Graduation

The below positions are the product of the following action items passed by the Delegate assembly of NEA-Alaska: NBI 91-70, NBI 01-30, NBI 01-35, NBI 01-37, NBI 01-38, NBI 01-39, NBI 01-44, NBI 01-45,

NEA-Alaska recognizes that testing is a part of life in education. The Alaska legislature has imposed two forms of testing, the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination (HSGQE) and the Benchmark Examinations. Initially the legislature proposed to impose one high stakes examination that would determine if a student would be allowed to graduate. The power of the test to deny diplomas to students who had otherwise distinguished public school careers seemed rather harsh and unbending. NEA-Alaska was instrumental in encouraging the Governor to propose legislation that would add benchmark testing. NEA-Alaska supported benchmark testing because these tests would assess a student's progress on the specific skills that composed the HSGQE. These tests would be administered at reasonable intervals throughout the school career. The theory of these exams is to provide diagnostic information to teachers and schools regarding student progress toward mastery of the reading, writing and computational skills required of students wishing to pass the HSGQE and receive a diploma. Benchmark exams would allow schools and individual teachers to fashion remediation programs specifically designed to meet the needs of their students.

NEA-Alaska members were enthusiastic about having relevant data that would assist them in meeting the defined skill needs of their students. The Delegate Assembly specifically requested that our members have ready access to test data and that that data be provided in a form that was relevant and practical. Alaska Summit 2000 provided information and strategies for analyzing test information so that it provides meaningful information. Tests simply report information. Tests do not provide analysis of cause that will assist educators in remedying the problems indicated in the test scores. To facilitate the analysis process the state collected data and reported scores in disaggregated categories. Dr. Jim Cox of JK Educational Associates, Inc., provided three days of hands on work using test scores from the participant districts and using a template he has developed over his 30 plus year career as an educator and director of educational testing and assessment. Participants were both pleased and frustrated by the process and template. To take raw test scores and draw meaningful conclusions from that data requires hours of handwork and additional hours of discussion with colleagues. Only then can meaningful analysis and conclusions be derived from the data. Since the Summit 2000 little statewide effort has been made to ensure that new teachers learn to use the Cox template and process. Unless the process and template are shared with every new teacher the benefits of testing will be lost. NEA-Alaska continues to support improved reporting and analysis of raw test scores so that teachers will have meaningful information and can draw valid conclusions from the data. As Jim Cox said, the temptation to draw unwarranted conclusions from raw data and then swing from one

program to another in hopes that an improvement will occur is almost unavoidable. When the response to raw test scores is to adopt yet another new program, schools and students are stressed and disrupted. Regular changes in program do not serve to address the specific problems that cause poor student outcomes on exams. Through careful and systematic analysis of data educators can diagnose and prescribe targeted remedies for specific problems. Rational use of test data requires a process of constant refinement rather than a series of jumps and starts. NEA-Alaska encourages the state of Alaska and the individual school districts to avoid the temptation of misusing raw test scores for political gain. A studied and methodical approach for analyzing and studying disaggregated test score data requires patience and restraint. If test scores are to be used for the purposes of refining and improving instruction raw data cannot be folded into quick sound bytes that serve to draw unwarranted conclusions. Teachers, parents, students and community members must be educated to appreciate the prescriptive value of test data. They must also be educated to reject quick and impulsive conclusions drawn from raw and unanalyzed data. To the extent possible the state should establish reporting procedures that predigest and analyze data so that reports to teachers and parents will have some inherent meaning. Value added studies should be included in the reporting process so that the public and parents can appreciate the growth reflected in test data.

NEA-Alaska's Delegate Assembly has supported the use of test scores to diagnose and prescribe remedial instruction for students. As part of this process the HSGQE is offered to students starting in the 10th grade. These repeated test opportunities allow students and the schools to target instructional support. The HSGQE is intended to determine that a student has attained skill levels in reading, writing and computation that would be expected of a high school graduate if the adopted standards had been met. These tests are not intended to measure the appropriate level of achievement for sophomores or juniors. For this reason NEA-Alaska objects to any attempt to utilize test scores from 10th and 11th grade students as part of the school designators process.

Considering the high stakes nature of the HSGQE and the important diagnostic value of both the Benchmark Examinations and the HSGQE it is essential that students take them under optimal conditions. Attempts have been made to create a warm and healthy environment for students taking the exams so that they perform to their capacity. NEA-Alaska encourages the DEED to consider as many factors as possible to determine dates that are least likely to find students under stress or duress. Students should not take tests with the importance that these examinations hold when they are predictably tired from other school related demands. As an example, the HSGQE should not be scheduled near the dates that schools are scheduling quarter or semester finals. To the extent possible the state should work with school districts to determine the most appropriate dates for testing based upon school calendars and scheduled events. It is understood that no one date will be perfect for every school district. On the other hand if dates are set based upon good information and careful consideration, then unnecessary or avoidable problems can be identified in advance.

Several problems can occur when testing programs are instituted. In particular, tests can determine the focus of the instructional program. School boards and school

administrations are charged with adoption of curriculum and materials for instruction. The old axiom, “What is tested is taught” applies to decisions that are made as school boards and districts consider what should be taught and what should not be taught in their schools. Regardless of what is taught and how well students learn certain skills they will not graduate from high school unless they pass the HSGQE. School districts justifiably ask that their schools focus more time and resources on the instruction of students in skills related to the examinations. There is only so much time available in schools for instruction. The question then becomes, “What courses and programs should be taught and which ones should be eliminated?” The exams, both the HSGQE and the Benchmarks, are focused on basic literacy and computational skills. Instruction in schools will naturally shift toward basic literacy and computation. NEA-Alaska believes that our society would not be as productive and colorful if our populace were to learn only literacy and computational skills. Most of what makes our world alive and creative is outside the realm of literacy and computation. The beauty of art affects us every day. The sounds of music and the inventiveness of our scientists rely upon skills that are outside the realm of basic literacy and computation. High school students have not received a well-rounded or complete education if their only instruction or their primary instruction is confined to literacy and computation. Granted, high school students need to be literate and need to be competent to deal with basic computation. Students need so much more than that to be constructive and productive members of society. Students need even more if they are to enjoy a quality of life that is aesthetically and spiritually complete. For this reason NEA-Alaska promotes the notion that high school should expose students to a well-rounded curriculum. Included in this well-rounded curriculum should be a requirement that students take at least one credit in the arts. This may mean that graduation requirements may need to require 21 credits for graduation. High school may be the only formal education some students receive. In that spirit high school curriculum and graduation requirements should ensure that student have a well-rounded and balanced educational experience.

NEA-Alaska also understands that not all students have the same capacity for achievement. Some students will take college preparatory work. They will excel at every challenge they encounter. Other students will work very hard to achieve the minimum requirements of their course work. These students will focus on studies that will prepare them for the rigors and demands of vocational studies to follow or the world of work. Another category of student will work very hard to achieve minimum skills required for hourly wages in unskilled work. Much of their public school career is focused on survival and independent living skills. That challenge of such skills is every bit as demanding for these students as the college preparatory studies are for the college bound students. A different yardstick is used to measure progress made by these students. None-the-less, these students should be recognized for their achievements. Future employers will need some assurances that these students have the discipline to survive in the workplace. These students will never be able to pass the HSGQE. Yet, the work these students have done and the progress they have made toward independent living is meritorious. NEA-Alaska strongly supports the concept of differentiated

diplomas that will recognize the achievements of all students who work through their high school program. The differentiated diploma could include notations for passage of one, two or all three strands of the HSGQE, completion of requirements for graduations from the defined high school program or completion of a program that has been defined as part of the IEP process. Each form of diploma recognizes an achievement that is relative to the abilities of the student named. Employers will have relevant information about the abilities and skills of the individual they are considering for employment. Most important, however, is that no student will be denied a diploma if they complete programs appropriately suited to their abilities. No student should be totally denied a diploma that recognizes the collective work and accomplishments of a high school career based upon one test. The inability of that student to pass the HSGQE will be duly noted on the diploma. The student will not be denied appropriate recognition for the classes they completed and the skills they have demonstrated through the course of their high school career.

NEA-Alaska believes that any single high stakes exam is incapable of fully assessing the accomplishment and achievements of a student. Not all students are capable of demonstrating what they know under the pressures and circumstances of a high stakes, paper and pencil exam. Some students reveal their skills and achievement through the course of daily activities. They consistently perform on projects that demonstrate the very skills that the exam purports to assess. Comparing the results of the exam with the level of skill that is reflected in the project would indicate a level of disconnect between the two measures. If the State of Alaska wishes to fairly and accurately assess the qualifications and skills of a student consideration must be given to a multiple measure assessment approach. Student portfolios and projects can reveal much about the student's readiness for the world of work. With a multiple measure approach the written test is only one small part of a comprehensive view of the child. Students often demonstrate their skills and abilities in different ways. Just as teachers learn to teach to the different modalities of student, so should the state learn to assess learning with full recognition of the different styles of learning and performance that exist. The range of options for a multiple measures assessment could include some or all of the following: benchmark examination scores, norm referenced test scores, HSGQE scores, attendance, value added measures and growth factors, socioeconomic factors, English proficiency, eligibility for special education, and if so, the IEP. If the school designators are implemented the impact of the school designation awarded to the students school ought to be factored into the assessment. Student assessment is complex. Single high stakes exams are inherently unfair and incomplete. Students who are denied diplomas based upon a single high stakes exam may have cause for action against the state. Issues of validity, reliability, bias and fairness will ultimately be tested in court.

NEA-Alaska strongly supports the notion that any testing mechanism should have relevance as a predictor of success in the job world. DEED should also assess the impact of the exam on such things as drop-out rates, post-secondary education achievements, job acquisition and any other factors relevant to determine the predictive validity of the exam

and the impact of a high-stakes testing program on student participation in and completion of high school programs.

Both the Benchmark and HSGQE have been based on the adopted student performance standard. The student performance standards were developed by Alaskans to meet the needs of Alaskan students in Alaska's economy. NEA-Alaska believes that Alaskan teachers should be trained and used to score the examinations. Alaskan teachers are better equipped to appreciate the appropriate application of Alaska's Student Performance Standards to the responses of Alaskan students on the Alaskan Examinations. In addition the state of Alaska does not need to export work to other states when it can be done and done better by Alaskans. The value of having Alaska's teachers work with the exams, score the exams and analyze the questions and responses in the context of the Student Performance Standards will help our teachers shape their instruction to better meet the needs of students taking the exams. This is not to say that NEA-Alaska supports teaching to the test per se. What does make good educational sense is that Alaskan teachers learn to think like the test makers. Teachers can then train students to better demonstrate what they have learned on tests administered in Alaska. There is a significant difference between teaching to the test and teaching students using methods and procedures that are consistent with the test. If the goal of the testing program is to help students learn defined skills then the test should assess student skills not their capacity to work with a test format that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

NEA-Alaska believes that assessment is a double-edged sword. On one hand testing can be used to cast blame and undermine the institution of public education. On the other hand, testing can be used to determine the status of student progress and fashion strategies for remedial action. If testing is to be of any value in Alaska it must seek to clarify and explain what students are learning. Testing programs must be fair, accurate, valid and unbiased. Finally, the goal of any assessment program must be to offer information that can be used to improve instruction. For a testing program to fully meet the goals expressed above it must utilize multiple measures and be respectful of student differences. Graduation from high schools in Alaska should mean much more than the capacity of a student to pass one test covering a limited scope of three skill areas. Employers may expect that a student with a high school diploma can read, write and compute at a level of proficiency reflective of a high school graduate. In reality, an employer should expect much more breadth and depth of skill from their high school graduates.