

2005 CCSSO Summer Institute

Discussion Case #1.2

Aligning and Integrating Systems:

Aligning High School Exit with Post-Secondary Entrance/Placement Expectations – Oregon

July 2005

by Salam Noor, Circe Stumbo, and Jamie Poolos

Aligning High School Exit with Post-Secondary Entrance Expectations and Placement Decisions

To ensure that all high school graduates are prepared for college, work, and life, states should develop a seamless transition between secondary and post-secondary education. In most states, however, secondary and post-secondary education are run as entirely different systems, governed by different rules, decision making boards, standards, and, in most cases, state agencies. Within post-secondary education there is also typically a diversity of governance structures. The decentralized systems and hodgepodge of decision making authorities involved in any state contribute to the misalignment between high school graduation requirements and the entrance and placement criteria in post-secondary institutions.

By instituting proficiency-based graduation and entrance or placement requirements, states and their systems of education can ensure that students are prepared to common standards and are well placed to transition seamlessly from their secondary to their post-secondary education experiences. State education leaders should work to ensure their secondary and post-secondary education systems have common understandings of what it means for a student to be prepared to transition from one system to the next, common criteria for assessing students' attainment to those standards, and common data systems.

What did Oregon do?

Oregon has designed a comprehensive plan for P-16 alignment that features novel implementation of progressive, mandated components, including a diploma system with certificates that measure proficiency, proficiency-based admission standards to state universities, and the linking of assessment data directly to standards. The components are described in more detail below.

- As of 2006, Oregon's graduation requirements will require that all students have an education plan and education profile, preparing them for post-secondary opportunities in college or work. Students will demonstrate extended application; participate in career-related knowledge and skills, and in career-related learning experiences. The State Board adopted a policy in 2002 that allows school districts

to award credits toward graduation based on demonstrated proficiency. Policies for proficiency credit are created and implemented by the local school district, **moving the state towards a proficiency-based education system rather than a “seat time” system.**

- **Proficiency-Based Admission Standards System (PASS)** is the Oregon University System’s (OUS) means of admitting students based on demonstrated proficiencies. **PASS clarifies and defines the relationship between the K-12 standards-based reform agenda and college admissions.**
- The Oregon University System/Oregon Community College Dual-Enrollment and Co-Admission Programs maintain formal bilateral agreements among the state’s community colleges to ease the transition for students transferring to an Oregon University System (OUS) campus from an Oregon community college. Dual enrollment and co-admission programs aid student mobility and enhance baccalaureate completion through a variety of economic, administrative and academic strategies.
- Oregon Transfer Module (OTM): The Transfer Module is a subset of courses from an Oregon community college, Oregon University System institution or participating Oregon independent college’s or university’s general education requirements that represent a body of required general education courses common among Oregon’s colleges and universities. The OTM represents the first year of a baccalaureate degree or approximately half of an associate degree (45 credits).
- Linking Assessment Data Directly to Entry Standards (LADDER PK-16) **links high school assessment data to college admissions and class placement decisions** at Oregon Community Colleges and all seven universities comprising the Oregon University System (OUS).
- Pre-kindergarten through Grade 16 (KIDS) initiative is a policy option package to consolidate and standardize Student, Payroll/HR, and Finance systems for school districts and Educational Service Districts (ESDs). **The Oregon Department of Education, the Department of Community College and Workforce Development, the Oregon University System, and Oregon’s K-12 school districts have worked collaboratively to develop and pilot transfer of student records from K-12 to Postsecondary institutions.**
- Accelerated Learning Options: These opportunities allow high school students to earn college credit while in high school, and include established programs such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), as well as federal initiatives such as Tech Prep or 2+2.

What is the state context that allowed for this to take hold?

The Governor appoints both the State Board of Education, which governs elementary and secondary education, and community colleges; and the State Board of Higher Education, which governs all public universities in the state. Oregon statutes require both Boards of Education to meet jointly on an annual basis to discuss and coordinate state policy relative to P-16 education. A Joint-Boards working group meets regularly to develop and coordinate cross sector policies and issues and to craft policies aimed at enhancing linkages and opportunities for students. Requiring these working relationships by law early in Oregon’s path toward education reform fostered relationships between secondary and post-secondary education.

In 2004-05 The Governor charged the Joint Boards of Education with the responsibility of examining the current education system in Oregon and crafting a vision for the future. This directive included alignment of the systems, a clear and common vision for education P-16, a consolidated budget, and a common data system. Currently, four joint Boards working groups have been established to define and agree upon critical elements related to:

- Establishing a common vision for education—P-16;
- setting a common core of rigorous learning standards;
- setting performance and proficiency levels for those standards;
- clearly defining proficiency-based standards and expectations for a high school diploma;
- aligning proficiencies between secondary and postsecondary admission requirements;
- expanding credit options for high school students;
- creating the parameters for an integrated data system; and
- building a strong alliance between education, business, and political leaders.

As a consequence of this joint work, not only is there better formal articulation between the secondary and post-secondary systems in Oregon, there is also better articulation between Oregon's community colleges and four-year public universities. The Oregon University System/Oregon Community College Dual-Enrollment and Co-Admission Programs maintain formal bilateral agreements among the state's community colleges to ease the transition for students transferring to an Oregon University System (OUS) campus from an Oregon community college. Dual enrollment and co-admission programs aid student mobility and enhance baccalaureate completion through a variety of economic, administrative and academic strategies.

What are the challenges before the initiative?

Oregon has long struggled with limited state funding for its initiatives. The state's reform legislation in the early 1990s called for sweeping changes to the standards, assessments, and graduation requirements. As a result, Oregon developed a new system of Certificates of Initial Mastery and Advanced Mastery and performance based assessments. Yet, Oregon had only \$900,000 for the implementation of the state reform initiative in its first year. Funding for education reform has not been increasing significantly since. To give a sense of the magnitude of the challenge, last year the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation contributed \$25 million for its small-school initiative in just a few schools in Oregon, while the state of Oregon has less than \$1 million statewide for the implementation of their complete reform plan.

As there is no state sales tax in Oregon, the state has had tremendous difficulty weathering the budget crises of recent years. Even faced with serious funding limitations, education leaders across the state have worked diligently for over a decade to institutionalize reform and have been faced with tremendous success, such as the initiatives described above. However, a strong contingent of state legislators is currently working to do away with the broader reform initiatives that created the conditions in Oregon for the measures described above to take hold. Because these particular reforms have been codified into state law, it is unlikely that the legislature will try terribly hard to undo them. However, other initiatives that were part of the early systemic reform legislation in Oregon that did not get fully implemented due to funding limitations—such as large-scale performance-based state assessments—are at peril.

Questions for consideration

- What would it take for your state to develop these sorts of articulation agreements between your secondary and post-secondary education systems?
- Who are the champions in each system with in your state? What connections or leverage do you have with them? Who are potential partners with you in an effort to engage these change agents?
- As you develop your state data systems, are you working closely with higher education to connect the information stream?

For more information, contact Salam Noor at Salam.Noor@state.or.us or visit:

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/specialty/pre-post/finalpolicy/>

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53>

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/teachlearn/standards/newspaper/2006/200506standards.pdf>

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=201>

<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=277>

2005 CCSSO Summer Institute

Discussion Case #2.2

Engaging Stakeholders:

Cultivating the Grassroots: Broad-Based Engagement through Community and Stakeholder Dialogue—Nebraska

July 2005

by Circe Stumbo and Jamie Pools

Broad-Based Engagement through Community and Stakeholder Dialogue

One of the most critical roles that state education agencies (SEAs) have in fostering 21st century learning and high school redesign is the engagement of key stakeholders in the process of considering, crafting, and implementing the work. The 2005 Summer Institute suggests that SEAs think about stakeholders in two ways—as grassroots and as grasstops—and about the tools of engagement in two ways—for communications and for engagement.

The “grasstops” are loosely defined as decision makers and opinion leaders. In general, this refers to elected officials, community leaders, or highly engaged or organized citizens. For the 2005 Summer Institute, the grasstops tends to refer to governors and their staff; key state legislators, such as those on education and budget committees; leaders in business and industry; members of state boards of education; local school board members; or other recognized leaders and advocates within education.

The “grassroots” are loosely defined as the general public. That is, the grassroots are those with a stake in education, but not necessarily those leading efforts at educational change. In some cases, the grassroots refers to the general public. In other cases, grassroots refers to a more defined sub-population, such as all high school students and their parents, all teachers, or all taxpayers.

“Engagement” is generally defined as the process of gathering ideas, input, and recommendations from stakeholders to help define, shape, verify, and implement improvement efforts, and to build partnerships and coalitions to facilitate change. “Communications” refers to the process of sharing information and building awareness among stakeholders about a generally pre-defined vision.

Depending upon the specific initiatives and goals, state education leaders will focus engagement efforts on the grassroots, the grasstops, or a combination of both, and will use engagement or communications strategies, or a combination of both. The Summer Institute program suggests that each focus can be fruitful; explicitly determining a focus is critical.

Building on the 2003 Summer Institute, this year’s program further suggests that the changes required for high schools to prepare all students to meet 21st century needs are neither small nor incremental. Instead, they will require major shifts in expectations and understandings of the role and culture of high schools, high school teachers, community partners, and students.

These are not “technical” changes, as described by Ronald Heifetz, but rather they are “adaptive” changes.¹ Adaptive changes such as this require that the people involved in change be actively engaged in defining change—thus stakeholder “engagement” strategies are particularly important in this work.

What did Nebraska do?

At the turn of the 21st century, Nebraska’s education leaders realized that they needed to revisit their goals for public education in light of changing learning needs. They believed it was necessary to define the educational opportunities that every Nebraska student needed to be successful, and to provide the curriculum, staffing, support services, facilities, and funding for an “essential education” in every Nebraska student in every Nebraska school.

Over a two-year period in 2003-2004, state education leaders in Nebraska actively engaged stakeholders to define that “essential education.” The purpose of the effort was to guide immediate and long-range planning for implementation of recommendations at the state and local levels. Through the work of the Commissioner’s Advisory Committee on Essential Education and input from numerous other educators and patrons across the State of Nebraska in professional meetings, conferences, policy partner forums, and community conversations, *The Essential Education Concept and Recommendation Papers* were developed. The State Board of Education was also extensively involved in the discussion of essential education and development of the proposed recommendations.

After the Essential Education Recommendations were formally presented to the State Board in December 2004, they were adopted as policy and put to work to guide the state’s improvement efforts. As a direct result of the *Essential Education* document, the Department of Education also received state money for early childhood development, business development, special education, and others. In addition, it generated so much excitement among the board and legislators that a wholesale buy-in on a change in the funding structure was achieved in the form of the *Creating Essential Opportunities for All Kids Act*. This Act included funding for standards-based reform in the statewide budget. Thus, no one could rely on the excuse of a lack of funding to carry out the plan.

What is the state context? What conditions made the ground fertile for this kind of approach?

In the mid- to late-1990s, as the nation rode the “third wave” of education reform (standards-based reform), Nebraska’s state education leaders were divided in terms of the goals, expectations, and purposes of public education, as well as the strategies for improving Nebraska’s schools. In particular, the elected State Board of Education was split on the issue of standards in Nebraska. Issues related to local control were divisive; while some Board members supported the move to statewide standards, others resisted the idea. To help resolve the split, the State Board initiated public forums around the state to determine the public will in this regard.

During the forums, a group of vocal activists, outspoken against state standards, organized their allies to show up at the public forums. It was difficult for policymakers to

¹ Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994), *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press).

determine whether these activists were expressing widely held views or whether they were the views of a vocal minority.

Some members of the Board had heard of Public Agenda's work in developing state-level strategies, so they brought in Will Friedman to consult with them. The Board decided to take the approach of letting a third party (Public Agenda) take the lead, while Board members attended subsequent public engagement meetings as observers, rather than as leaders.

Through this effort, they found that there was actually strong support for statewide performance standards and that there was not nearly the opposition to the initiative they had supposed. It was enough to sway the Board to break the deadlock and move forward with a plan to develop a system of statewide performance standards.

When it came time to update Nebraska's plan to ensure all Nebraska public schools provide equitable opportunities for all students to receive an essential education,² the State Board chose to follow the same type of public engagement approach as it had some years earlier. The state again contracted with Public Agenda to conduct a series of focus groups and regional community conversations. They invited educators, representatives of higher education, individuals from the local business communities, and members of the general public to gather answers to the question "What is an essential education that all kids should get, no matter what?" They specifically solicited the opinions of "ordinary people" in this effort, asking attendees to create their own vision about what essential opportunities all students should have. Then they fed the results back to the policymakers to use as they developed state policy.

Along the way, the public policy forums and the procedure in general were tracked in a living document that was posted to a public website where people could view it and comment on it. Excerpts of the document were used to catalyze dialog in ongoing public policy forums. Cost figures came from feasibility studies and impact studies. As one board member stated, "Not much in this document is assumed; everything is measured and justified." Once they were satisfied the document reflected public opinion, they took it to the legislature. The results in terms of support for reform and the funding to do it were positive.

Nebraska's fierce belief in local control meant that it was important to engage the public broadly in setting the agenda for education reform. It also meant that it was extremely useful to have a third party—someone who had no stake in the outcome—to serve as the convener of the public forums. This provided for a more trustworthy situation, where the state was not simply mandating policy, but was building policy based on public values and understanding.

It also became clear during the process that the public looks to educators and the Board for initial direction. In the past, when the State Board conducted public forums, they would present open ended questions and ask participants, many of whom are neither educators nor legislators, to frame a plan. What they learned from this experience is that the public in Nebraska looks to them for a plan and then wants the opportunity to have input. As one Board member said, "Give the people a proposal, and they'll improve on it by at least 10%."

² An essential education is defined by the Board as an education enabling students to be proficient in meeting the State's academic content standards and essential learnings; successful at each educational level and in transitioning between those levels from early childhood through postsecondary education and/or career entry; and effective in functioning in and contributing to our culturally diverse democratic society.

By engaging the public in a carefully planned, independent, research-based process, Nebraska was able to develop a clear vision for the future of education, while also fostering support for the kinds of resources needed to successfully implement the plan.

Questions for consideration

- What are best practices related to engaging stakeholders in a broad-based manner? What are the features of a state's policy environment in which this type of strategy can be particularly useful?
- How can chief state school officers use a grassroots engagement campaign to lead the discipline toward future thinking and planning for the 21st century? . . . to improve student outcomes at the high school level?
- What issue, theme, or initiative related to 21st century standards and high school reform would benefit from a public engagement approach? Why is the issue a good candidate for public engagement, as opposed to more traditional policy development and communications strategies?
- What are some of the main obstacles or challenges you would face?
- Who could be your main allies in this process?

For more information, contact Doug Christensen at doug_ch@nde.state.ne.us.

- Public Agenda's report, *Nebraskans Weigh in on Essential Education Opportunities for all Students*, is available for free download at: www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_publications.cfm.

2005 CCSSO Summer Institute

Discussion Case #3.2

Educator Capacity:

Building Capacity to Support Students with Special Needs, with a Focus on Special Education Students—Ohio

July 2005

by the IDEA Partnership, Circe Stumbo and Jamie Poolos

Building Capacity to Support Students with Special Needs

Educators have long been concerned about how to best support students with special needs, particularly students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) codified into federal law a commitment to fully serving students with disabilities through America's public education system. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, coined the No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB, further solidified this commitment. The NCLB provisions related to adequate yearly progress require schools to demonstrate improvements in the performance of their students with disabilities against the same standards as are expected of non-disabled students. If, as a group in a school, students with disabilities neither meet the standards nor show progress toward meeting the standards, a school will be deemed as in need of improvement.³

The teacher quality provisions of NCLB require teachers to have expertise in the content areas they are teaching. Most special education teachers have a special education certificate that declares their expertise in working with students with disabilities, but they may not necessarily have extra training in the content areas they teach. As school leaders attempt to meet the highly qualified teacher provisions of NCLB, they will likely need to change the way classrooms are organized, schedules are arranged, teachers interact, and expertise is defined. High school principals, in particular, will need to consider all of these pressures in the light of what is sound education practice to determine how to best staff, schedule, and design high school instruction.

What did Ohio do?

(NOTE: The next three sections of this Discussion Case are reformatted with permission from the IDEA Partnership's A Living Record, located at <http://www.ideapartnership.org/>.)

³The U.S. Department of Education provides flexibility in determining adequate yearly progress for a portion of students with disabilities, recognizing that, "In addition to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (the 1% already covered under Title I), research indicates that there is another group of students with disabilities, approximately 2 percent of the school-aged population, in need of modified standards and assessments who can make progress toward but also may not reach grade-level achievement standards in the same time frame as other students." (<http://www.ed.gov/news/newsletters/extracredit/2005/05/0510.html>) States have been given a series of options for flexibility regarding how these students needs are accounted for in statewide accountability systems.

In light of the role that principals play in defining a school's context, Ohio determined that principals are key to transforming practice at the building level. Thus, their efforts at enhancing educator capacity to support students with disabilities are focused on principals.

Ohio developed a **state-based professional development model for principals** that will give them

- a solid understanding of Ohio's accountability system;
- instruction on how to use Ohio's Performance Index as an incentive for raising expectations and providing access to the grade-level content aligned to Ohio's academic content standards;
- a better understanding of *Operating Standards for Ohio's Schools Serving Children with Disabilities* (State rules); and
- an understanding of how Ohio's accountability system and State rules align to meet federal law.

Initial project activities involved professional development for principals across the state around Ohio's accountability system and its implications for the kind of instruction that needs to be provided to all students. This component will be integrated with professional development on standards-based assessment and instruction using the *Standards-Based Instruction for All Learners: A Treasure Chest for Principal-Led Building Teams in Improving Results for Learners Most At-Risk* (briefly, the *Treasure Chest*). Published in 2004 by the Ohio Department of Education's Office for Exceptional Children, the *Treasure Chest* is a user-friendly 136-page professional development CD/manual.

The *Treasure Chest* provides an informal but reliable account of how one implements solid, core instructional strategies, while concurrently differentiating instruction for diverse learners which includes those most at-risk and students with disabilities. This is a guide that provides ideas for addressing standards, assessment and instruction, while considering the diverse needs that *all* children bring with them to classrooms across the nation.

Two products are being developed to accompany the *Treasure Chest*. One is a 30-hour web-based course for principals, with video streaming. The other is a *School Leader's Guide* that can be used by principals who want to use the *Treasure Chest* in working with building staff to improve access to grade-level content for at-risk students.

A detailed description of initial project activities follows:

- The two primary partner organizations—the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA)—sponsored joint meetings in each of the associations' ten (10) zones between September and November, 2004. At these meetings, principals were provided accurate and useful information about Ohio's accountability system and how to use it to improve district and building effectiveness in meeting the needs of all children. Evaluation results from zone meetings (showing needs for further training on specific topics) are being analyzed and appropriate follow-up will be planned.
- From January to May 2005, follow-up professional development was provided by the Office for Exceptional Children and the two primary partner organizations, in cooperation with Ohio's 16 Special Education Regional Resource Centers (SERRCs). Follow-up may include consultation, technical assistance, and/or opportunities to participate in professional development offered by the regional centers on particular topics (such as accessing the general curriculum, developing

and implementing schoolwide positive behavioral support plans). Principals also had the opportunity to participate in Communities of Practice that are facilitated by Ohio's State Improvement Grant.

- During winter/spring 2005, the expanded professional development package integrating the accountability component with standards-based instructional strategies, as outlined in the *Treasure Chest*, was developed and piloted with 12 to 14 principal-led teams. This training package will be presented to the leadership team of the Ohio Learning First Alliance for possible replication.

What is the state context? What conditions made the ground fertile for this kind of approach?

The context for collaboration on this project includes a 20-year working relationship among the Office for Exceptional Children, the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA), and the Ohio Association for Secondary School Administrators (OASSA). Their collaboration has included

- a statewide intervention team project to assist principals in identifying and evaluating the effects of instructional and behavioral interventions for any child;
- building-based grants for improving access to and progress in the general curriculum for students with disabilities and other at-risk students;
- training in standards-based instruction and positive behavioral supports for principal-led teams statewide; and
- *Leadership for Results* workshops for promoting a culture and climate of shared responsibility at the building level for the success of all children.

The project also emerges from the context of new State requirements. In Ohio, **entry-year principals are required by law to select and successfully complete a performance-based professional development program prior to earning professional administrator licensure.** Both of the above principals' associations are state-approved providers of this training.

Another factor is Ohio's new accountability system, which was enacted in August 2003. It merges the requirements of No Child Left Behind, components of Ohio's Senate Bill 1 of 2001, and new State accountability requirements—and also provides districts with multiple ways of showing progress. Although accountability workbooks of district and school building data are compiled by the Ohio Department of Education, principals are only beginning to realize that these data are available and can be used to improve instruction.

In addition, until 2001 districts could exempt children with disabilities from the statewide assessment, but now the requirement to include all students with disabilities is affecting the ratings and designations of Ohio's 612 school districts. Between 2001-2002 and 2002-2003, the number of "excellent" districts declined from 109 to 85; the number of "effective" districts dropped from 191 to 171; and the number on academic watch increased from 33 to 52. In 2002-2003, 317 districts did not meet AYP; among these 180 (nearly 60 percent) failed on AYP solely because they failed to meet proficiency levels for the subgroup of students with disabilities. These realities are of great concern to teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

What partners are working with the Ohio Department of Education?

- The *Treasure Chest* was authored by Margaret Searle, president of a consulting firm that provides teamwork and leadership training for business and education – in collaboration with an OAESA/OASSA-sponsored development team that included

school principals, general and special education teachers, representatives of Ohio's special education regional resource centers (SERRCs), and ODE's Office for Exceptional Children and Office of Curriculum and Instruction.

- This professional development for principals organized around the *Treasure Chest* is sponsored by and being conducted in cooperation with OASSA and OAESA, will be expanded and offered to other partner organizations through the Ohio Learning First Alliance (OLFA). OLFA (which represents the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, education service center superintendents, the Ohio Education Association, Ohio Federation of Teachers, Ohio Congress of Parents and Teachers, Ohio School Counselors Association, the two primary partner organizations, and others) passed a resolution to collaborate in extending participation and replication opportunities to its member organizations.
- The Office for Exceptional Children, in cooperation with its primary partners—OASSA and OAESA—will extend invitations to participate in project work to additional partners identified through the policymaking partnership. Specifically, the Learning Disabilities Association of America, American Occupational Therapy Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and American School Health Association have participated in initial project activities and will continue to be involved as plans are finalized for expanding activities in conjunction with the Ohio Learning First Alliance.
- The *Treasure Chest* document and CD are being made available to other Ohio organizations. All principals in the State have received a copy of the document and CD, which includes the accountability presentation used during each of the ten OASSA/OAESA-sponsored zone meetings held in fall 2004. Additionally, copies have been disseminated by the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Ohio's sole federally funded parent training and information center (PTI).
- Information will be shared through the Ohio Department of Education Superintendent's newsletter, the Office for Exceptional Children's quarterly Highlights in Special Education; the newsletter of the Ohio Coalition for Education of Children with Disabilities; and the newsletters and bulletins of the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators and Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators. Information will also be shared with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Questions for consideration

- What are other states doing to build the capacity of educators (teachers and school leaders) to better serve students with disabilities? Are other states focusing their efforts primarily on teachers or on principals? Why?
- What approaches to teaching special populations of students are promoted (intentionally or unintentionally) through the implementation of state and federal policies?
- What is the unique *state* role in improving educational opportunity for students with disabilities?

For more information, go to <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/> and <http://www.ideapartnership.org>.

2005 CCSSO Summer Institute

Discussion Case #4.2

Evaluating Results:

Alternative and Multiple Measures of Student Performance — Rhode Island

July 2005

by Elliott Krieger, Circe Stumbo, and Jamie Poolos

Alternative and Multiple Measures of Student Performance

The definition and assessment of desired student performance at the high school level are powerful levers of change at the disposal of state education leaders. State departments of education are familiar with the setting of standards and statewide assessment of student progress toward those standards. However, some state education leaders think that the common manner in which standards are ultimately articulated (in graduation requirements defined by Carnegie Units) and student performance is assessed against those standards (by large scale exit exams that can be high stakes), is flawed. They believe that these traditional tools provide the wrong incentives and disincentives toward change.

Thus, a number of states are moving toward differing systems of standards and assessments. While many states do have high stakes exit exams as the measure of a student's mastery of the knowledge and skills needed to graduate, other states are working on alternative and multiple measures of student performance to measure the same goal.

What did Rhode Island do?

Rhode Island has recently outlined its new Diploma System which shifts the emphasis from graduation requirements based on Carnegie units to graduation based on demonstrations of proficiency. All students in the class of 2008 must have their diplomas "validate" that they are proficient in six core content areas (mathematics, English language arts, science, social studies, arts and technology) and applied learning. Each high school must use "multiple measures" to validate student achievement in these six core areas and the relevant applied learning standards. The Regents' Regulations specify that students must demonstrate proficiency "through at least two of the following: departmental end-of-course exams, a Certificate of Initial Mastery, portfolios, extended 'capstone' projects, public exhibitions, and the use of technological tools." Districts will have to show evidence that all students have access to the rigorous coursework necessary for achieving proficiency. Likewise, coursework and expectations for student learning must be mapped to Grade Span Expectations and other national standards.

The Regents' Regulations also stated that the state assessments may be used to measure students as part of the graduation requirement. State assessments, however, "should not be the sole grounds to prohibit promotion or graduation" and may not count for more than "10 percent of all weighted factors contributing to promotion or graduation." Assessment results are to be included on all high-school transcripts.

What is the state context? What conditions made the ground fertile for this kind of approach?

Rhode Island has long been known for its independent spirit. Traditionally, public education in Rhode Island has been a matter of local control. There was no standards-based statewide assessment system until 1997. Until last year, the state published general “frameworks” rather than specific grade-level standards of expectations for English-language arts, mathematics, and science. Rhode Island has no statewide curriculum in any subject area. Except for a bare minimum of course requirements established in the 1980s by the Board of Regents (16 Carnegie Units), graduation requirements had also been under local control. Each of the 32 school districts with high schools had its own diploma system.

The first three years of state assessments brought disturbing news to Rhode Islanders. As Education Commissioner Peter McWalters memorably put it in his annual address to the General Assembly: *The longer you're in the system, the worse you do*. High-school test scores lagged behind the elementary-school scores, and they were showing no signs of improvement. In part, this was a result of the state investments, which had been directed almost exclusively toward the lower grades. The Board of Regents and the Commissioner decided to begin a high-school reform initiative.

The process began with a two-day High School Summit, in November 2000, attended by many stakeholders in public education, higher education, and the business community. This summit sought to bring together the wide range of experiences and work in high schools that had been going on in pockets throughout the state in the preceding decade. The report from the Summit set forth eight “Broad Areas for Transformation” in high schools, one of which was labeled: “Students Must Learn What Matters,” which became the guiding principle that shaped the new Rhode Island Diploma System. The key points in this principle were:

- How well students are doing against specific standards needs to become a hallmark of the high-school experience.
- Each student should have a personal learning plan that shows what standards have been mastered.
- All learning within the high school should be real-world and contextual so graduates are ready for postsecondary education or challenging postacademic work.

The recommendations from the High School Summit were developed by staff at the R.I. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) and presented to a Second High School Summit, in March 2002. At this second summit, the recommendations were clarified and refined. The Board of Regents, through its High School Reform Subcommittee, reviewed all recommendations and presented proposed regulations to the full Board. The Regents’ new High-School Regulations were approved by the Board in January 2003.

In early 2005, R.I. Governor Donald L. Carcieri, who has made education a priority in his administration, established a PK-16 Council, which includes members from the business community and the Governor’s Economic Policy Council, as well as advisory members from Achieve, Inc. This council will help to benchmark the Rhode Island graduation requirements, with the goal of building a seamless system connecting high schools and higher education. The ultimate goal is that the high-school graduation requirements should match the requirements for admission to a public institution of higher education in Rhode Island. All Rhode Island high-school graduates should be well prepared for a college education and the challenges of the world of work.

Implementing the Regulations

With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Education Alliance at Brown University, and RIDE organized three "networks," each focused on a different method of demonstrating proficiency: Portfolio, Exhibition (senior projects), and Common Tasks. These networks are comprised of practitioners from schools with experience in running these assessments, incorporating applied learning into their graduation requirements. These networks are preparing state-wide guidance on the requirements for these assessments as well as how to establish portfolio, exhibition or common tasks systems in schools. In addition, some of the schools in the networks, with help from modest grants-in-aid from RIDE, became demonstration sites serving as models for other schools in the state. During the 2005-06 school year, RIDE will undertake the review of the proficiency-based graduation requirements in each school district. This process will begin with self-assessment and peer review and it will culminate in May 2006 with Commissioner's Review and Approval of the requirements.

To gain approval, districts will have to show that all students have access to the rigorous course work necessary for achieving proficiency – RIDE calls this the "opportunities to learn." They will have to show that their demonstrations of proficiency are aligned with the state standards and they must include "multiple measures" of proficiency. They must also be fair to all students, including those identified as special populations and from diverse backgrounds; they must be consistent across students, occasions, and time; and they must be sufficient, coherent, and sustainable. Proficiency in any one school or district must be comparable to proficiency in other schools and districts across the state.

Questions for consideration

- What are states doing to address the challenges they face in evaluating (and improving) student results at the high school level?
- What is the nature of the public's attention to high stakes exit exams? How have states worked with their publics to promote good educational policy around determining a student's qualifications to graduate?
- How do graduation requirements relate to assessment and accountability at the high school level?
- What are alternative and multiple measures of student performance at the high school level?
 - How do they support a system of statewide accountability?
 - Are they feasible, technically and monetarily?
 - How can states ensure consistency across multiple measures of student achievement?

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