

Avoiding a massive AIMS flunkout

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Apr. 30, 2006 12:00 AM

For too many decades, public education was afflicted with a disease known as "social promotion." Teachers were told not to retain any students because it might hurt their feelings. Students were passed from grade to grade whether they learned anything or not and were given diplomas whether they learned anything or not.

Students got the message that whether or not they paid attention in class, or did their homework, they would get passed along. Learning plummeted. Students received high school diplomas without the skills that we expect of high school graduates.

One of the benefits of representative government is its great capacity for self-correction. The public, through their elected representatives, established a requirement that students pass a test to graduate. That requirement takes effect this year.

Two years ago, over 60 percent of the students were failing the test. A number of people panicked and wanted to cancel the requirement. But my position, based on the experience in other states, was that if we stuck to our guns, the students would study harder, learn more and over 90 percent of those who had the credits to graduate would pass the test.

I have been getting telephone calls from teachers and principals, from all over the state, that students are working harder than they ever did before and that parents are more involved than they ever were before.

In Tucson, a principal told me that when the bell rings, the students are in their seats, and he wasn't used to that.

Here are some strategies we implemented for students to pass AIMS:

- We shortened the turnaround time on test results from four months to 30 days. This facilitated summer remediation.
- For the first time, we reported scores, not just for the subject as a whole but for every concept tested. This enabled teachers, tutors, students and parents to know exactly what areas the students needed to study to pass the test on the next try.
- We provided individualized workbooks with problems in the areas of that student's weakness.
- We put sample AIMS questions, which in the past had been kept as a mysterious secret, on our Web site, www.azed.gov, so students could practice questions that tested the same concepts that are tested on the AIMS test itself. These questions are also available to the public.
- We provided free tutoring to high school students who still had to pass one of the

AIMS tests. Of those who took advantage of the tutoring, over 90 percent became proficient or moved from falls far below to approaches proficiency.

Based on focus groups of students who did not take tutoring, we implemented initiatives to persuade those students to take advantage of the free tutoring. Now, we are doing everything but getting them out of bed in the morning.

We are on track. Well over 90 percent of students with the credits to graduate will in fact graduate.

For those who do not pass, they can have a sixth try in July. If they pass the July test, they will receive their diplomas in time for their fall employment or continuing education.

For those who still do not pass, I persuaded the state board to permit them to take the test as many times as they want, at state expense, until they demonstrate that they have acquired the skills they need to survive in today's economy and can receive their diplomas.

We have not given up on anyone.

And we will have ensured that never again will this state graduate a student who cannot read his or her own diploma.

Tom Horne, a Republican, is Arizona superintendent of public instruction.