

Letter to the Arizona Republic – February 2005

In a column last Sunday, State Senator Slade Mead argued that the AIMS test was “a disaster waiting to happen.” He argued that passing the test should not be a requirement for graduation from high school, as it is scheduled to be for the class of 2006, this year’s juniors. Rather, he argued, those who cannot pass the test should still be able to graduate, with those passing receiving an “honors endorsement.”

In 1996, when this year’s juniors were in third grade, the legislature passed a law directing the State Board to “develop and adopt competency tests for the graduation of people from high school” and establish passing scores for each test. After two postponements, the deadline was finally set for 2006, eight years after passage of the legislation.

The legislation reflected a strong demand from the public that there be an objective measure to make sure that students with diplomas have the proficiencies that we expect of high school graduates. From 2006 on, we will never again graduate a student who cannot read his own diploma.

The AIMS test primarily measures: (1) whether or not a student can read a paragraph and understand it well enough to answer questions about it; (2) whether or not a student can write a passage that is clear, appropriately organized, and grammatical; and (3) whether or not a student can do math problems, at a reasonable level, and arrive at correct answers.

There is only one way to teach to these tests: to have the students do more reading, more writing with appropriate coaching, and more math problems. Indeed, that is what is happening in our schools. If we were to drop the graduation requirement, it would be a huge letdown in the motivation of students, and of their parents to make sure that the students acquire proficiencies that they will need for the rest of their lives.

When I walked into my office Monday morning, my first message was from a principal of a high school in a high poverty area, who was in a panic that Senator Mead’s proposal might be adopted. She knew that her students were making an intense effort to acquire the necessary proficiencies to pass. If the only difference were between honors and a regular diploma, they would be satisfied with a regular diploma, and their efforts would radically diminish. Principals and teachers from all over the state have been telling me how much more seriously this year’s juniors are taking their studies, compared to their older siblings, and the large increase in parental involvement, to make sure that their children acquire the necessary proficiencies to graduate. Removing the incentive is exactly the wrong thing to do.

Senator Mead suggests that the AIMS test should be “an accountability tool rather than a barrier.” The problem is that that is exactly what it has been for the past several years. Schools are judged based on the percentage of students who achieve proficiency. Schools, in turn, put pressure on the teachers, and sometimes condition financial incentives on the number of students who test proficient. But the students can blow off the test if they want, and it makes no difference to them.

As a result, teachers are begging the students to do their best, and students are saying “why should I?” The result is a kind of a reverse leverage that students are given over teachers, which is not healthy.

The students must have an incentive to pass.

Senator Mead argues that “high school is much more than just taking one test.” This is not just “one test.” Students have five chances to pass: once in the sophomore year and twice in junior and senior years.

By the time they have two more years of course work and four more chances to pass, combined with the intervention programs to help students that we are requesting from the legislature, I believe that over 90 percent of those who would otherwise graduate will pass the test. The proficiencies that they obtain in the process will be important to them for the rest of their lives.

Tom Horne, State Superintendent of Public Instruction