

## Removing the incentive is the wrong thing to do

By Tom Horne

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The doctrine of "social promotion," taught by our colleges of education, resulted in students being passed from grade to grade, and graduated, whether they learned anything or not.

By 1996, the public had discovered that there were high school graduates who could barely read, write or do arithmetic. In response to public demand, the Legislature passed a law directing the State Board of Education 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 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. The current proposal would permit graduation based on "social promotion C's," and seat time, regardless of how little the student had learned – even if the student could barely read, write or do arithmetic. This 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.

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 about 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.

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, absent a high-stakes graduation requirement, 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.

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 our intervention programs (including \$10 million for tutoring) to help students, I believe that more than 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. Let's not rob that from them by folding when the incentives are needed most.

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