

OGT: We hardly knew you

State considers end-of-course exams to replace cumulative test that derailed thousands of students from graduation. New tests are likely to be even more rigorous.

by Maureen Kelleher

In response to recommendations from a national policy group, state education officials are exploring ditching the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) for so-called end-of-course exams. Officials contend the change would reduce the soaring numbers of college freshmen in remedial courses. Yet Ohio high school students are struggling to meet current standards, as evidenced when 9,000 failed to pass the OGT in time to graduate last June.

Some groups have even called for replacing the OGT with the ACT exam, customarily used to determine college admission.

The exploration and debate come as the state gears up to require all high school students to take four years of English, four years of math, including second-year algebra, three years of science and social studies. New requirements will also include five credits to be chosen among fine arts, foreign language, and career and technical courses. Students entering high school in 2010 and scheduled to graduate in 2014 will be the first required to take the so-called Ohio Core curriculum.

The OGT went into effect for the first time for seniors who were on track to graduate in June 2007. Students have seven chances to pass the five-part cumulative exam. As of March, 9,000 students had not passed and had one last shot at the exam in July. The state has not compiled data for the number of students who passed. But in Cleveland, for example, by July, 2,121 seniors out of 9,000 or 24 percent of the class, had passed the OGT and graduated, according to a district spokesperson. However, it's unclear how many of the total class were actually required to take the exam.

Ohio is pursuing alternatives to the

current high school graduation test in part to align high school standards more closely with college expectations. Last February, the Washington, D.C.-based think tank Achieve, Inc. released a report commissioned by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), with detailed recommendations for "Creating a World-Class K-12 Education System" in the state.

Reasoning that higher standards would pull up the quality of instruction, Achieve called for a set of statewide end-of-course exams in core subjects. These would replace the OGT, which a 2004 Achieve analysis found measures proficiency in coursework usually completed in middle school and early high school. Students in other countries master the same material by the end of 8th grade, the 2007 report says.

"In its current form and in the grades it is currently administered, the OGT is simply not capable of measuring students' readiness for postsecondary pursuits," the report warns.

New York is the only state with a long history of using end-of-course examinations. For more than a century, New York high school graduates could earn an honors diploma by taking and passing five exams in core academic subjects. Graduates of the class of 2001 were the



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Mitchell Chester, senior associate superintendent for the ODE Office of Policy and Accountability, says the state is looking at new forms of high school assessments.

first required to take and pass the exams at a high level simply to graduate. A 1998 study by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education showed that New York's high school students had higher SAT scores than students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds in other states, and attributed the difference in part to the exams.

Such end-of-course exams, which would replace teacher-designed semester finals, can also serve as a warning flag that a student will need extra help to avoid taking remedial college courses, says Jennifer Dounay, a high school policy analyst with the Education Commission of the States.

Ohio has already joined a consortium of states working with Achieve to develop common end-of-course exams for Algebra II. In 1999, a U.S. Department of Education

study, "Answers in the Toolbox," found that students who successfully completed Algebra II in high school had much stronger rates of persistence and degree completion in college than those who did not.

"We're committed to exploring a new generation of assessments," says Mitchell Chester, senior associate superintendent for the Office of Policy and Accountability at ODE. In addition to joining the multi-state consortium, Ohio is investigating ways to incorporate complex, teacher-scored assessments into state testing, similar to exams given in the International Baccalaureate program and at the United Kingdom's Cambridge University.

Elsewhere, the battery of tests associated with the ACT college entrance exam also are being promoted as a way to raise standards and force improvement in teaching. This battery, called the Educational Assessment and Planning System (EPAS), spans 8th through 10th grades, with the ACT itself being administered first in 11th grade. Already, 14 states, including Ohio neighbors Illinois and Michigan, have incorporated the ACT or

the entire EPAS into their testing systems.

Chester says ODE has reservations about embracing this tactic. "We think there are limitations to the ACT," he says. "It won't provide useful feedback as to how students are doing against high school curriculum. It's more a predictor of college success."

But others in Ohio disagree. By substituting the ACT for the OGT, "You take testing that is geared to high school graduation and switch to testing geared to college admissions," observes Joe Rochford, vice president of the Stark Education Partnership, a nonprofit that convenes institutions from preschool through college to increase the number of college graduates in the area. "You change the mental playing field for both teachers and students. Teachers begin to adjust course content."

Dounay notes that Illinois and Colorado, the first two states to incorporate the ACT into their high-school testing programs, "saw an increase in postsecondary enrollment numbers among low-income and minority students."

However, she also observes that Ohio

is in good company pursuing end-of-course exams because they can be built to measure closely students' performance on state curriculum. "A lot more states are looking at end-of-course as opposed to ACT because it's based on course content. End-of-course exams can be a little more tailored than ACT." Also, students who don't think they are college-bound may dismiss the ACT but try hard on an end-of-course exam that will have an impact on their final grade. "It adds a lot of relevance for students," she notes.

But Rochford argues that, with a good alternative at hand, developing standardized end-of-course tests would waste Ohioans' time and money. "We need the dream of college for our urban kids now, not sometime in the future when end-of-course tests are developed. The money Ohio spends on its current testing system and future development can better be allocated, I believe, to the needs of our urban districts." ■

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HOW "BIG 8" FRESHMEN FARE

About 44 percent of Ohio's 2003 graduating class enrolled in state colleges and universities, representing more than 80 percent of all grads who went to any college, public or private. Graduates from the state's eight major urban districts who enrolled in college that year were more likely to be first-generation college students than freshmen elsewhere in the state. As a group, their first-semester GPAs were lower, they were more likely to need remedial courses, and they were more likely to quit after their first year than their peers statewide. Only graduates from Canton went on to a second year of college at nearly the same rate as other Ohio students. Dayton had the fewest continuing for a second year. Cleveland grads took the most remedial courses and had the lowest GPAs.

BIG EIGHT GRADS HAVE WAY TO GO FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

	% GRADS AT OHIO COLLEGES	% FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS	% REMEDIAL STUDENTS	AVERAGE FIRST-TERM GPA	PERSISTENCE TO SECOND YEAR*
AKRON	35	50	47	2.3	68
CANTON	34	59	51	2.5	80
CINCINNATI	36	46	44	2.4	71
CLEVELAND	35	61	76	1.9	64
COLUMBUS	35	49	58	2.2	69
DAYTON	33	62	73	2	63
TOLEDO	36	51	62	2.3	67
YOUNGSTOWN	27	52	66	2.3	72
STATEWIDE	44	43	41	2.7	81

* Persistence to second year does not include students who transferred out of state after their freshman year of college.

Source: Ohio Board of Regents