

Low High School Graduation Standards in the USA

I. Introduction

The United States of America is a first world country and is a world leader in international politics, economics and trade. However, the country faces an educational crisis with rising high school drop out rates. This leads to a population of unemployable work skills or students having to take college remedial classes because of their poor high school educational background.

Statistics indicate that only fifty two percent of public high school students from the largest cities in the United states fail to graduate after four years. Seventeen public school systems have less than fifty percent. The average high school graduation rate for these fifty cities is at fifty eight percent. Alarminglly, the national average of high school dropouts is as high as seventy percent, which is more than one million public high school students annually. The high school drop out rates are higher in urban areas compared to the suburbs with twelve cities showing a difference of twenty-five percentage. There is a growing city-suburb gap with Baltimore and Maryland having the widest range with thirty four percent compared to eighty one percent. Other cities include Columbus, Ohio with forty percent versus eight two percent, New York at forty seven percent versus eighty two percent, Los Angeles at fifty seven percent versus seventy seven percent and Atlanta at forty six percent versus sixty one percent. The poorest United States city Detroit only has a high school graduate rate of twenty four percent (Monfils, 2009).

This scenario has been described as a catastrophe with three out of every ten students failing to graduate. Individuals who fail to graduate from high school are at a risk of being imprisoned by as much as eighty percent. There has also been a difference amongst ethnic groups with African Americans having the highest rates of failure to complete a high school

education. Northeast and Midwest states have higher drop out rates and have been described as the “rust belt” where income inequality is the highest. As many would point out, lower family income fuels the rise of high school dropouts (Chrispeels, 2009).

The United States has different high school graduation requirements for each state and even for each district. Requirements are in place in order to establish a common criteria to which students must be able to achieve before they receive their high school diploma or their certification of completion. In spite of the varying differences of high school graduation standards, the common graduation requirement is the high-stakes testing. This is an exit exam that is requires students to attain a passing score in order to graduate (Alenuma, 2009).

In 2002 President George W. Bush signed in to law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This law mandated schools to increase the number of high school graduates by testing their students for their academic progress. Achievement testing was required by states even for students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A debate has ensued with regards to the effectiveness of both laws particularly in raising the high school graduation standards. Furthermore, questions have risen whether the same requirements should be applied to all students (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2004).

II. Literature Review

Those in favor of high stakes testing claim that this improves the United States high school graduation standards. Primarily, it encourages students to focus on key learning goals that will enable them to achieve a passing score. The high stakes testing exam also motivates teachers and school systems to enhance their educational and instructional methods that will better equip students to pass the exam. Proponents also believe that equal testing should be given to children with disabilities as means to develop their full potential. Students with disabilities are also believed to benefit from the high stakes exam by encouraging them to

learn better. The high stakes testing was the solution to the failing education system and was a means to mitigate the rising high school drop out rates (Monfils, 2009).

The high stakes testing was first implemented in a few states before it became a national exam. States such as New York has been implementing the test for more than one hundred years. Florida, Nevada, Alabama and Virginia also implemented high stakes testing in the 1980's. The federal government has implemented educational reforms such as under the Clinton Administration where the 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act was reinstated. It also has been a priority under President Bush as part of his goals 2000. These initiatives have increased federal intervention in state-level education policy making with the underlying national goal of one hundred percent of students achieving high quality educational standards. The high school graduation standards were deemed to increase through the implementation of a single system using a standards-based assessment and accountability (Thomas, 2009).

Research on the effects of high stakes testing has been conducted however; there is a disparity with the results. In a study conducted by Amerein and Berliner they tracked the high stakes testing on achievement over a period of time and used in for K-8 and high school levels and compared this with the national average. The results were inconclusive as National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores varied randomly and they were unable to find consistent effects of the high stakes testing. However, in a study conducted by Rosenshine it was found that NAEP scores were higher in states that implemented the high stakes testing policy compared to states that did not. Based on his research, he still determined that high stakes testing was not an effective policy in increasing the high school graduation standards. Simply, most researches conducted indicates that the United States still continues to have low high school graduation standards (Au, 2008).

Further studies made indicated that results in NAEP exams whether in the fourth or eighth grade level do not conclusively prove the effectiveness of high stakes testing. As students go from one grade to another, research has indicated that there are no achievement trends for states implementing the high stakes testing compared to others who did not. Thus, its implementation as a form of accountability and effectiveness do not show any marked improvements in raising high school graduation standards. Other studies have indicated that high stakes testing also increases the number of dropouts for African American and Hispanics students. Furthermore, high stakes testing does not show student progression in key areas reading, science and mathematics (Au, 2008).

High stakes testing is currently mandatory for seventeen states. However, each state and district has their own version of a test or form of requirements that students must achieve before they are able to graduate from high school. Some school districts require a final project and a completion for a number of units. Others have implemented course curriculum completion and a final high school examination before allowing any student to graduate. In general, for those states without a high stakes testing; a standardized test is given which the local education board approves. In this case, students take the same exam under similar conditions wherein the scoring is systematically the same. It is a commercial norm-referenced test that meets the state-criterion or standard based exams. The exam consists of a multiple choice and open-ended responses (Thomas, 2009).

Either of which, the testing system including the high stakes exam are not deemed as a reasonable tool in lifting high school graduation standards. First, a testing system can be unfair to students since there are students who are not able to test well. A standardized test assumes that all students taking the same exam are under the same conditions. However, there are students who have test anxiety making it impossible for them to demonstrate their ability through a standardized exam. This can lead to lower scores that in turn is seen as a

negative reflection of the school district and to a larger extent the state. The standardized testing done statewide assumes that all students have equal access to the test material. However, many schools have poor funding and have a larger teacher to student ratio. Teachers in school districts also do not have a subject area certification since this is not required in some states. The lack of funding also hampers the school facilities such lack of books, computers, libraries and laboratories. More importantly, family background of students varies statewide. There are students who come from lower income families without proper access to housing, health care and nutrition. High stakes testing, standardized testing and other forms of requirements students must attain do not take into account this large disparity (Thomas, 2009).

Significantly, statistics indicate that high stakes testing failure is highest among minorities and students with disabilities. The system is in fact unaccountable while the responsibility is placed on the students since they are pressured to pass the exams. This indicates the unequal educational opportunity distribution across all states. Those who are unable to pass the high stakes testing are required to be retained that has led to increased grade retention rates and higher number of high school student drop outs. Numerous researches have indicated that grade retention does not improve the student academically in fact; they suffer emotionally from having to repeat another school year. A student loses his or her self-esteem and even more so develops a lack of interest in school that makes them more likely to drop out. Studies have indicated that graduation tests or other forms of requirement increases the high school drop out rate especially for students who are already performing below average in school. The same testing and requirements are also seen as not an effective means of improving learning in the high school educational system (Au, 2008).

The testing system also changes the instructional methods of educators and school systems wherein they focus in instructing only the materials needed to pass the exams. This has resulted in an elimination of important subjects such as social studies, art and science. More importantly, the testing system does not take into account other forms such as research papers and laboratory experiments. The instructional method has been tailored to suit the testing system such as doing only limited reading followed by a multiple-choice question. Writing skills are underdeveloped since only five paragraphs are required. All of these methods suit a testing program but does not meet real life skills. As a result, there is a trend of narrowing the school curriculum provided for students most especially in the public school system that impacts low income students. Students from under funded schools only receive test coaching that does not actually prepare them for further learning or help them be abreast with college level standards. The same schools dedicate their libraries with test prep materials that does not encourage students to engage in wider reading. More importantly, teachers are trained to be test coaches that negatively affects their professional development (Monfils, 2009).

The main problems of the high stakes testing, standardized test and other forms of requirements is that it cannot measure other important forms of learning. It also creates a classroom environment that inhibits and ultimately turns off students from the joy of learning if they are simply required to pass an exam. The process of instruction to prepare students is not an adequate means of increasing the quality of learning nor does it raise high school graduation standards. Significantly, the high stakes testing system also reduces the number of quality teachers since they have to adhere to the school policy of teaching the test to students. More importantly, the system makes schools more accountable but they are subject to pressures from the school board district and politicians (Monfils, 2009).

Currently, the federal government monitors the schools based on the results of high stakes testing and standardized tests. However, since the instructional method has changed the results is an inflation of scores, which is an inadequate measure of actual improvements in learning. This method misleads the public to show that schools are improving and their high school graduation standards are indicators of success. The academic content of tests are dictated by the states however, it remains a weak measure of academic progress. The testing system is counterintuitive to the No Children are to be Left Behind act since it does not take into account other factors that affect learning. This includes community resources, student mobility and poverty (Monfils, 2009).

III. Recommendation

To address the low high school graduation standards, the following practices have been noted in raising student achievement. First, schools must adopt a functional school mission that prepares high school students for both work and college level studies. The academic core curriculum must be enhanced to include four years of college-preparatory English that requires students to read and write more frequently and should be measured to a certain extent be at par with college level standards (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2004).

It is also recommended to apply four years of mathematics including Algebra I to III, trigonometry, pre-calculus and a mathematical analysis course. The recommended curriculum also includes three years of college-prep, lab based science courses wherein students have frequent lab activities that allows them to better understand concepts, classification systems and other scientific knowledge. It also includes three years of social studies that includes frequent reading and writing on historical and contemporary events. Finally, students must take a computer proficiency course that includes Microsoft proficiency and web

development. It is also recommended that students must use computers in preparing assignments and research in all academic subjects (Alenuma, 2009).

It is also recommended that high schools modify their curriculum to concentrate on career and technical subjects. This will enable them to develop employable work skills and increase their interest in academic learning once they are able to understand the practicality and impact of these courses to their future lives. This includes a mathematics and science concentration with four or more credits in each course and a one credit for advanced placement level. It should also include a humanities concentration with four credits in each college-preparatory English and social studies with a minimum of one course at the advanced placement level. Other course subjects are also recommended such as economics, psychology, literature, debate, journalism, fine arts and debate. Finally, students must have a career and technical courses curriculum with four credits each including a planned sequence of career and technical course of choice (Chrispeels, 2009).

IV. Conclusion

The United States low high school graduation standards continues to be a prevailing problem. The high stakes testing, standardized testing and other forms of requirements are not a suitable basis to determine improvements in high school academic standards. In fact, these forms hamper the educational system by encouraging high school dropouts and creating a teaching the test method. These methods highlight an even greater social problem that the United States must address such as lack of public school funding and poverty. It is recommended that high schools should adopt a curriculum that emphasizes on career and technical skills development and college level preparatory courses. This better prepares students for higher levels of education, as it will serve to improve high school graduation standards by enriching the academic content.

Annotated Bibliography:

Alenuma, S. (2009). *Race and Educational Reform in America: History, Strategy and Ethnography*. New York: David Publishing Company.

A comprehensive analysis on the reform initiatives implemented by the United States government to achieve educational reform. The book discusses the social issues that directly impact the quality of high school graduation standards. It provides statistical and historical data on the poor performance of high school students including an assessment of the high stakes testing and other forms of testing requirements.

Au, W. (2008). *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*. New York: T & F Books

This book discusses the complexities of the high stakes testing and other standardized tests. It discusses the historical and social impact of these methods as means to increase the levels of high school graduation standards. It provides a thorough review of the high stakes testing including test subject matters and provides recommendations for improvements.

Chrispeels, J. (2009). *Improving Schools and Educational Systems: International Perspectives*. United Kingdom: T & F Books

This book provides an overview of educational systems worldwide including the United States. It includes a analysis of effective curriculums that improves educational systems. The author provides historical background on effective educational methods including an assessments of standardized testing used by other countries.

Hochschild, J. and Scovronick, N. (2004). *The American Dream and the Public Schools*. New York: Oxford University Press

An examination of the problems of the American public school system including a review of school funding and testing. This book addresses the low high school graduation standards of American public schools including a proposal framework that will improve the academic standards of American public schools. This book provides a historical background including statistical information of school performance and high school graduation rates.

Monfils, L. (2009). *The Ambiguity of Teaching to the Test: Standards, Assessment, and Educational Reform*. New York: LEA

An evaluation of teaching instructional methods as a result of the high stakes testing and other state initiated testing programs that students must pass in order to graduate high school. The book is a comprehensive analysis of the standards and assessment methods used and compares its efficacy in reforming the American educational system. Research statistical data was conducted to determine the impact of teaching the test methods including its effects on increasing academic learning for high school students.

Thomas, M. (2009). *High-Stakes Testing: Coping with Collateral Damage*. New York: LEA

This books describes the nature of high stakes testing and identifies the collateral damage caused by these methods. It provides a framework for problems and successes associated with using these method to mitigate low high school graduation standards. The author provides case studies and makes recommendations for educational reforms.