



Voice For Greater Minnesota Education

To: Senate Majority Leader Bakk
Senate Minority Leader Hann
Senator Kevin Dahle
Greater Minnesota Senators and Representatives

House Speaker Thissen
House Minority Leader Daudt
Representative Kathy Brynaert

From: Fred Nolan, Minnesota Rural Education Association Executive Director
Re: Support for the Assessment Portions of the Senate and House Omnibus Education Bills
Date: April 19, 2013

The current GRAD rule and required GRAD tests will reach a crisis in 2015 when the waiver exempting students from achieving a passing cut score on the math GRAD will expire. This will significantly affect the current sophomores in high schools. Commissioner Cassellius assembled a Working Group to address this, and they issued their [report in December](#). I had the honor and privilege to serve as one of the two co-chairs of this working group.

The Working Group identified four critical problems with the current system of “autopsy” GRAD tests at the secondary level:

- Too Much Testing: Now it takes seven or eight major standardized tests (two per year) for a student to move from 8th-12th grade, to graduate and to enter college because they take MN MCA’s and GRAD tests and a college entrance suite. It can take many more tests should a student do poorly on any of these tests.
- System Misalignment: Two reports from the Minnesota business community (*Higher Education Partnerships for Prosperity* by The Itasca Project based on research and analysis by McKinsey and Company and *How to Make Minnesota the Skilled Workforce State* by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce) identify system misalignment as a major economic development issue in Minnesota. The Chamber states it most directly in their 2012 report,
A ‘skilled workforce state’ requires effective education and workforce development at every point in the pipeline. Minnesota’s education-to-workforce pipeline, spanning pre-K to post-secondary education, needs repairs to remedy the misalignment.

This misalignment is critical as it is estimated that 70% of Minnesota jobs will require some form of post-secondary education by 2018, but currently only 47% of Minnesota college students complete a degree within eight years.

- Single Point Testing with Arbitrary Cut Scores is too thin a reed upon which to base graduation and the granting of a diploma. Too many students who would be eligible for graduation based on course work will not graduate in Minnesota’s current GRAD tests and cut scores. In a detailed study, Bloomington documented that 19% of their seniors would be ineligible for a diploma when the current math GRAD waiver expires in 2015 but would be “college eligible.”
- The Substantial Remedial Costs incurred and lessened likelihood of degree completion by students who are not fully ready to take college level courses. 40% of recent high school graduates who enrolled in a Minnesota public higher education institution currently take at least one non-credit bearing developmental course, creating a significant fiscal burden for students, and significantly decreasing their likelihood of completing a degree or certificate.

MREA members, representing 160 Greater Minnesota school districts, adopted [MREA's platform](#) which addressed assessment and called for:

- Assessments to be useful to parents, families, students and teachers,
- Minnesota moving to a system of assessments that look forward to where a student is going, is efficient and provides information in real time.

The House and Senate Education Policy Committees addressed this issue head on. House Chief Author Rep. Kathy Brynaert and Senate Chief Author Sen. Kevin Dahle captured the reform well in their original bills. The education policy and finance committees took testimony on the Working Group report and others with concern on Minnesota's system of assessments.

The resulting changes before you in the omnibus education bills are dramatic and necessary. They will move Minnesota to a system of assessments that look forward to where a student is going and are efficient in the use of students' time, in five steps (summarized from House Research):

- An orderly Transition,
- The use of College Recognized Exams,
- Graduation Based on Credit Achievement, Standards Achievement Recorded,
- Career Planning Required,
- The creation of a Career Pathways Advisory and Technical Education Task Force

The controversy surrounding this proposal appears not to be about the change to a suite of exams providing truer measures of college readiness, but on whether there will be a single "cut score" on any exam for a high school diploma. The professional education community has moved well beyond single point scores and sees that multi-measures of competency, not just test scores, are more balanced and accurate measures. It is akin to how you as legislators see your legacy as a total body of work vs. the "report cards" you get from single issue advocacy groups.

Regardless of your position on "cut scores," this discussion at this time is singularly uninformed. We have never given a college entrance exam to nearly 100% of our students. With the implementation of the State Longitudinal Education Data System (SLEDS) in the higher education bills, Minnesota will have the data within a few years to have an informed, thorough discussion of how well our graduates were prepared to enter college, technical schools, certificate programs, apprenticeships and the military. Today's debate is not the final answer to this question. Have it again with data in a few years.

Finally, I want to warn you, that with this change, Minnesota will no longer have the #1 ranking in ACT scores. This change takes courage on your part and that of Minnesota's educators and school districts. Commissioner Cassellius made this very clear to the Working Group at our final meeting. The education community is not recommending this change to avoid scrutiny.

In conclusion, MREA is recommending these changes because it is the best way forward in secondary assessment for kids, their futures and ours as a state. It puts "children first." I urge you to vote "YES" for the assessment changes as proposed in the omnibus education bills.