

This week's issue:

**SHOULD A STANDARDIZED TEST BE A REQUIREMENT FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION?**



Many state laws require that high school students pass a **standardized** test to graduate. These laws are passed to make sure high schools challenge their students. Businesses often complain that high school graduates cannot read and do math needed on the job. Colleges worry that not all high school graduates can do college work. The tests are used to see who has the skills expected by employers and colleges.

Standardized tests **assess** students' ability to write, read critically, and do challenging math. The tests are geared to the skills people need in jobs and in college. Supporters say standardized testing is fair because all students are graded using the same **criteria**. For example, writing might be graded by how many examples the students give.

Some people think graduation tests are unfair to students who are learning English. These students might know the information but have trouble understanding the test questions. Other students might have trouble focusing their attention. Their test scores might not show what they really know.

Students in different schools learn different things. The standardized test might not **correspond** to what some students were taught in a particular school. Students in another school, however, might find the test matched what they learned in class, which some people argue isn't fair. Some people also worry that standardized tests make teachers just cover what is on the test. Teachers might not **formulate** lessons that will be interesting to their students.

Other people think that standardized testing is valuable, but that there should be different ways for students to show that they are ready to graduate.

Do standardized tests hold all students to high standards? Or do they unfairly keep some students from graduating?

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standardized | assess | criteria | correspond | formulate

## USE THE FOCUS WORDS

**standardized** (*adjective*) the same for everyone

➡ **Sample Sentence:** In many states, high school students must pass a **standardized** test to graduate.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Should there be a **standardized** curriculum for all students in the U.S.?

**assess** (*verb*) to judge the quality of; to evaluate

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Many tests **assess** students' ability to write, read critically, and do challenging math.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** How do you **assess** whether a friend is still upset with you after you've had an argument?

**criteria** (*noun*) standards or rules used to make a decision

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Keisha met all the **criteria** in her math class and earned an "A" for the semester.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What are your **criteria** for deciding that a movie or book was excellent?

**correspond** (*verb*) to match

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Standardized tests might not **correspond** to what some students were taught in a particular school.

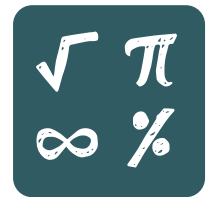
🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Do you think your grades **correspond** with the amount of effort you put into your classes?

**formulate** (*verb*) to invent by thinking about

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Each year testing companies **formulate** new exams.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Do you **formulate** better ideas in a group or by yourself? Explain.

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## DO THE MATH

We want high school graduates to meet important **criteria**. They should read well. They should **formulate** ideas logically and express them clearly. They should understand basic ideas about math, science, and social studies. What is the best way to **assess** whether students meet these **criteria**? Is a **standardized** graduation test too harsh? In Massachusetts in 2010, several thousand students failed to graduate because they failed one or more of the state tests.


**Option 1:** Of the 69,008 Massachusetts 2010 high school seniors, 2,556 failed the MCAS math exam. Which answer **corresponds** to the percentage of the class that failed the exam?

- A. about 2.4%
- B. about 3.7%
- C. about 4.1%
- D. about 6.7%

**Option 2:** Under a Massachusetts state rule, students must pass all three MCAS exams to graduate: the Science exam, the English exam, and the Math exam.

Of the 69,008 Massachusetts high school seniors in 2010:

- 1,958 failed the English MCAS
  - 2,556 failed the Math MCAS
  - 2,933 failed the Science MCAS
- a. Based on these numbers, what is the smallest possible number of students who could not graduate because of the tests? (Hint: Remember that students could have failed all three exams, so the amounts could overlap.)
- b. Based on these numbers, what is the largest possible number of students who could not graduate because of the test? (Hint: Remember that each student could have failed only one exam, so the amounts could not overlap at all.)

 **Discussion Question: Standardized** tests must change each year to prevent cheating. Each year testing companies **formulate** new exams. Teachers and experts review each question. A good exam question meets these **criteria**: it **corresponds** to what students should be learning in class, and it fairly **assesses** what students know. These carefully prepared exams are expensive. For example, the state of Massachusetts spends \$35 million each year on making its **standardized** test. Is this a good use of state money? Why or why not?

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## THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

The students in Mr. Seemy’s class are going to high school next year, and some of them are concerned about taking the new high school exit exam. The class is debating whether passing a **standardized** test should be required for students to get a high school diploma.

Camila and Josef think an exit exam is a great idea and are happy about the new test. “We need strict **criteria** to figure out who should get to graduate,” says Josef. Camila agrees with Josef and adds, “How can we be sure that students deserve a high school diploma unless we **assess** what they know?”

Malik isn’t so sure. He says, “I don’t think a **standardized** test is the right way to go. What about kids who take all the right classes and get good grades but still don’t pass the test? And what about teachers who feel they should teach only the skills that **correspond** to the test?”

“Those are interesting questions, Malik,” says Mr. Seemy. “You’re raising the issue of high-stakes testing. It sounds like you are beginning to **formulate** a hypothesis about the effect exit exams will have.”

Malik thinks for a moment. “I bet a lot of kids would drop out of school if they had to take a test. My hypothesis is that more kids will drop out of high school in states that have exit exams like ours.”

Malik, Camila and Josef were very interested and found information on the internet about high school dropout rates in the U.S. They selected three states that recently started to require exit exams and studied the data.

	Percentage of high school dropouts, by year:		
	Arizona	California	Idaho
<b>2004</b>	6.7	3.3	3.1
<b>2005</b>	6.2	3.1	3.0
<b>2006</b>	7.6	3.7	2.7
<b>2007</b>	7.6	5.5	2.6
<b>2008</b>	6.7	5.0	2.0

first year diplomas withheld

**Question:** Do **standardized** high school exit exams affect dropout rates?

**Malik’s Hypothesis:** States that have exit exam requirements will have higher dropout rates after requiring students to pass an exit exam.

**Data Source:** National Center for Education Statistics - “Event dropout rates for public school students in grades 9-12, by state: School years 1993-94 through 2007-08.”

In 2006, the states in this data set began withholding diplomas from students who didn’t pass exit exams. Did dropout rates increase starting in 2006 or thereafter? Cite specific information from the data table.

Was Malik’s hypothesis supported by the data or not? Cite specific evidence that supports your conclusion.



