

K–12 Quality and Assessment

GLOSSARY

Core curriculum

Subjects that comprise a required course of study. Michigan schools are required to teach all students math, science, reading, history, geography, economics, American government, and writing. What is taught within each subject and how it is taught is left to the local school districts; if they wish, they may follow the state's model core curriculum, adopted in the early 1990s.

High School Proficiency Test (HSPT)

Now the Michigan Education Assessment Program High School Tests in Mathematics, Sciences, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies; administered statewide to eleventh graders and measures their knowledge, ability to solve problems, and critical thinking skills.

Michigan Accreditation Program (MAP)

Recognition that a school has met certain standards set by the State Board of Education and the legislature.

Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP)

Statewide academic testing for fourth and seventh graders in math and reading and fifth and eighth graders in science, writing, and social studies; each student's performance is measured against "content standards." The high school version is administered to eleventh graders.

Michigan school reports

Data compiled by local school districts regarding such matters as enrollment, dropout and graduation rates, number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches (used as a proxy for gauging how many may be at risk of academic failure), student-teacher ratio, and average teacher's salary. The reports are available from the school districts.

BACKGROUND

There is considerable debate about the quality of K–12 education in Michigan, the most suitable ways to assess youngsters' academic performance, and how assessment findings shall be used. At the controversy's center are the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) and the recently revamped High School Proficiency Test (HSPT).

Michigan Educational Assessment Program

The MEAP tests began in the 1970s as a way for state educators to assess student performance at various grade levels. The MEAP tests are administered to fourth and seventh graders in math and reading and fifth and eighth graders in science and writing. The high school test was instituted in the 1995–96 school year, revised and renamed in 1997, and tests eleventh graders.

The MEAP is updated roughly every ten years; the math and reading tests last were updated in 1991 and 1989, respectively, and are scheduled for revision just after the turn of the century. The MEAP science and writing tests are new, introduced in 1996, and will not be updated for some time. In 1999 a social studies component will be added. Since the 1970s, the MEAP has evolved from testing basic skills (i.e., the minimum knowledge a student must have in various academic areas) to testing essential skills (i.e., those necessary to enable the student to function in a higher-education setting and as a member of the modern work force). Test content is based on goals/objectives set by the Michigan Board of Education and reflected in the state's model (suggested) core curriculum.

MEAP High School Tests in Mathematics, Science, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies (formerly the High School Proficiency Test)

The High School Proficiency Test first was administered in 1996, replacing MEAP testing of tenth and eleventh graders. The test generated such public furor about its nature, length, and use, that in 1997 the legislature enacted reforms. Henceforth, the high school tests

- will be administered to high school juniors during the last 30 days of the school year and also to tenth graders who wish to enroll in college classes while in high school,
- may not exceed eight hours in total (originally, the test lasted 11 hours), and
- will award one of four scoring levels in each subject, which will be recorded on the student's transcript (originally, "proficient," "novice," or "not yet novice" was noted on the student's diploma).

In addition, the laws require that (1) some tutoring to be given students who have a history of low performance on MEAP tests in earlier grades, and (2) Michigan educators be trained in scoring the test's writing portion.

The State Board of Education is implementing the required changes to the test and has renamed it the MEAP High School Tests in Mathematics, Science, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies.

Michigan Accreditation Program

Prior to 1990, school accreditation in Michigan was voluntary. Public Act 25 of 1990 requires all Michigan elementary, middle, and secondary schools to participate in the Michigan Accreditation Program (MAP). As enacted, the bill set 109 standards against which schools were evaluated; the State Board of Education reduced the number to ten in 1997. Accreditation currently is based on

- compliance with relevant portions of the school code;
- a statement by the school that it meets State Board of Education standards pertaining to administration and organization, curriculum and staff, facilities, school and community relations, and the school's improvement plan (a strategy to improve students' academic performance); and
- student performance on the MEAP tests.

Based on these requirements, a school receives one of three designations.

- *Summary* accreditation is granted to a school that meets the requirements listed above and has had 66 percent of its students achieve a satisfactory score in each MEAP subject area in two of the previous three years.
- *Interim* accreditation is granted to a school that fails to meet one or more of the above requirements but had 50.1 percent or more of its students achieve a satisfactory score in one or more MEAP subject area in any of the previous three years.

- An *unaccredited* school is one that fails to meet one or more of the above requirements and also had fewer than half its students achieve a satisfactory score in any MEAP test in any of the previous three years; after three years of unaccredited status, the state superintendent of education may appoint an administrator to operate the school, permit parents with children in the unaccredited building to transfer them to any building in the district, ensure that the building has a state-approved improvement plan, or close the building.

Twenty-two elementary and middle schools are unaccredited. No high school is accredited because, due to the difficulties with and changes to the high school test, there are not yet three consecutive years of eleventh-grade scores.

DISCUSSION

Standardized Testing

Most people agree that standardized tests—including the MEAP and formerly, the HSPT—measure *something*, but many believe it is only how well a student does in taking the test. Critics argue that “one size fits all” testing cannot adequately measure academic preparation for college or true mastery of skills at a particular grade level.

Others point out that using standardized test scores as a measure of quality in comparing one school or district to another excludes such critical factors as parent involvement, student mobility, and socioeconomic status. For example, the *Detroit Free Press* pointed out that the MEAP fourth-grade math test was passed by 84 percent of Bloomfield Hills students but only half of Detroit Public Schools pupils. But more than 70 percent of Detroit's fourth graders qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches, compared to 2 percent of Bloomfield Hills students; such a measure is based on family income, and it is believed that there is an association between low income and low academic achievement. Such huge differences, standardized test opponents argue, must be taken into consideration in using the tests as a basis for judging school performance.

Standardized test supporters respond that in the absence of such tests, parents, employers, and colleges would have little idea if children in one district are better or more poorly prepared for future employment or education than are children elsewhere. Furthermore, supporters argue that the Michigan School Reports—which include such data as a school’s graduation rate, the number of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, and student-teacher ratio—make plenty of information available to parents and others who wish to know more than just an overall MEAP score.

Standardized test supporters also argue that such tests are more than simple multiple-choice tests and measure more than just a student’s rote knowledge. The HSPT was instituted, its supporters say, because there was a need to measure how students apply existing knowledge, solve problems, and use critical thinking skills.

High School Testing

Criticism of the HSPT (now the MEAP high school tests) is fierce. Many parents—and a handful of legislators—call for eliminating state-sponsored high-school testing altogether. The most vocal critics argue that they still do not know the answer to the simple question, “Why should students take such a test?” The SAT and ACT tests, these critics argue, already help students and parents gauge preparation for college, and there is a host of other tests for students headed from high school into the work force or technical training. No Michigan post-secondary institution requires MEAP scores as a condition of consideration for admission, and—despite the business community’s initial enthusiasm for an endorsed diploma—no employers are reputed to require MEAP scores as a condition of employment consideration. Therefore, using the scores as the basis upon which to affix a label to a youth—“proficient,” “novice,” or “not yet novice,” for example—serves no constructive purpose; indeed, having a youth’s diploma or transcript permanently stamped with one of the latter two labels most certainly will work to his/her disadvantage.

Parents point out that standardized tests, by definition, are based on a standardized core curriculum, but there is no mandate that schools statewide teach

such a curriculum, and this also disadvantages students—particularly those hoping to enter college—who happen to live in a district that deviates from the curriculum on which the tests are based. For example, if a particular geometry principle is included in the test, but students in district A have not been taught it, they will be at a disadvantage in comparison to students in district B, who have.

Parents and educators both complained that the HSPT offered little explanation to students who did not perform well; writing tests, for example, were neither returned to students nor critiqued, thus students and teachers could not learn what needed to be improved before the student retook the test. Even some test supporters agreed that the original HSPT took too long to administer.

Supporters of high school tests argue that a single, statewide testing focus is among the concept’s strongest points. They believe that a single focus will encourage school districts to align their curriculum more closely with the state’s model core curriculum, thus giving parents assurance that children are receiving a solid education and employers confidence that the new graduates they hire will have certain basic skills. (This latter concern was one of the driving forces behind the HSPT and the “endorsed” diploma—employers were complaining of uneven proficiency among the new graduates they are hiring.)

Because the testing still is comparatively new—only the third class of juniors will take the test in spring 1998—many supporters believe that the controversy is only a “growing pain” for the testing program. As educators and parents come to understand the content and intent of the program—and as time passes and the tests are revised and improved—supporters believe that objection to the high school testing will decrease.

The reforms enacted by the legislature in 1997 generated their own controversy. The test had to be shortened, and some say this has diminished its effectiveness. And while the legislature added a statement of purpose, some supporters and opponents alike believe there still to be no clear reason students should take it.

Other Quality Issues

State Takeover of Poorly Performing Districts

When school buildings fail to achieve state accreditation for three consecutive years, the state superintendent of education is empowered to appoint an administrator to take over operation of the school (to date, this option has not been exercised). Governor Engler proposes that such takeover be extended to entire districts. Supporters of bills to accomplish this argue that in poorly performing school districts, state trustees could break through the “usual way of doing business” and create a new learning environment. Opponents decry the loss of local control, suggest that more money directed toward programs to keep at-risk students would be as or more effective than state trusteeship, and question how the state trustees would transfer district control back to local residents.

“Social” Promotion

Senate Bill 898 would prohibit “social” promotion—moving students on to the next grade despite their not having met the necessary academic standards. Supporters believe that by setting skill expectations for each grade, parents and teachers can ensure that students enter each new grade sufficiently prepared to learn the new skills that will be presented. Opponents believe that the measure duplicates standards already in place as a result of the MEAP, other assessment, and accreditation.

Class Size

Michigan’s average class size is among the largest in the nation. Nationwide, the average K–3 class size is 21.9; Michigan’s is 25.5. President Clinton has proposed that \$12 billion be spent nationwide over seven years to reduce class size in these early grades; of the slightly over \$1 billion allocated for FY 1998–99, Michigan would receive about \$49 million. At the state level, P.A. 142 of 1997 appropriates just under \$20 million to reduce K–3 class size (to no more than 17 students per teacher) in schools in which more than 50 percent of the students qualify for free lunches (this figure is used as a proxy by which to

estimate the number of students who may be at risk of academic failure). But while the public continues to support reductions in class size, experts are divided on the reductions necessary to dramatically affect student performance.

Core Curriculum

The wisdom of mandating a statewide core curriculum likely will resurface again as debate continues over standardized testing. Although Michigan schools are required to teach math, science, reading, history, geography, economics, American government, and writing, what they teach within each subject area and how they teach it is a matter of local control and varies among districts. The state’s model core curriculum, adopted in the mid-1990s, is a guide that districts may choose to follow. Supporters of a mandated core curriculum argue that it is the only way to ensure that students across the state graduate with the same essential skills—skills that are tested by both the MEAP and the former HSPT. Opponents argue that such mandate would interfere with one of the most dearly held aspects of the Michigan public school system: local control. Supporters of statewide adherence to a core curriculum point out that local districts still would be free to decide how to teach the core courses and also to offer supplemental studies.

See also Community Colleges; Job Training; K–12 Funding; State-Local Relations.

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K-12 QUALITY AND ASSESSMENT

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