

February 26, 2019
Senate Education Committee

I write in **Support of SB 456** - Removing Barriers to Graduation by Eliminating the High School Essential Skills Requirement

Two years ago my dear friend and former teaching partner, Dorothy Syfert, asked me to consider volunteering at North Eugene High School's Essential Skills class to help tutor high school seniors in writing.

I was eager to help out.

The seniors in this Essential Skills course were placed there because they failed the SBA stand test as juniors, and had one last chance to clear the Essential Skills requirement in order to graduate in June. Our state requires students to demonstrate prof in the Essentials Skills of reading, writing, and math in one of five ways *in addition to* passing all required courses and earning a passing GPA.

Besides the SBA test, they could score high enough on SAT or ACT, take some online test called WorkKeys, or pass a "work sample" in school. These kids did not take SAT or ACT - not college-bound, so the work sample option was their best bet.

I don't know about you, but I remember when I was in high school in Wisconsin, I earned my diploma by taking and passing all the required courses and earning a passing GPA. Did any members of this Committee have that same experience, or did you have to take a test to prove beyond your high school coursework that you were worthy of a diploma?

The reason I ask you is because our state is now only one of 11 states requires a passing of a test to earn a diploma. Twenty-seven states, according to FairTest, used to do this, but no longer do. California got rid of theirs 2 years ago and awarded 38,000 retroactive diplomas as an apology. New Jersey's State Supreme Court just ruled theirs was unconstitutional based on discrimination.

I am not against high school students demonstrating proficiency on essential skills because I am a retired Oregon teacher, so I know they should - it's a big part of their educ. But I ask, Why isn't a high school transcript with a GPA considered a strong indicator that they did meet the expectations?

Do we in Oregon believe in wide-spread grade inflation?
Do we think our high school teachers play favorites?
Or are incompetent judges of student work?
Are we worried that our high schools have low standards?

Why the suspicion? Why the extra layer? Why the final hoop?

I took the volunteer position at North Eugene High because I know how to teach writing, I know how to work with kids who are turned-off learners, I know how to work with low-income students, with kids of color.

But what I found in the Essential Skills high school course was resistance, avoidance, and embarrassment. The students had to give up an elective to take this - let's face it - "dummy English" class, but they knew it was the only way for a chance to walk w their class in grad in June. The writing prompt - the required topic - was selected from a bank of prompts from the ODE - it was deadly boring, uninspiring, complete turn-off.

Some gave up and didn't come to class. Some had given up a long time ago with years of stand test failures. I wonder if the Essential Skills Requirement is contributing to drop out rates.

There's a better way: use in-class, teacher-designed work sample performance tasks - not generic boring ones - that are actually part of the course required work - connected to what they are studying and scored by the teacher and occasionally a 2nd judge. It is fair, it is doable, and it works. It requires some training and some coordination.

What we're doing now is unfair, demoralizing, and targets the very kids we are trying to protect with equity.

Thank you,

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