



Why End-of-Course Accountability and Assessments
Might be Right for Your Students



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We all know that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has changed the way we view curriculum, instruction, and the assessment of student learning. It is evident that curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be in alignment, and that we should always include within our instruction the content and standards for which we are holding students accountable. However, do students in grades 3–8 need the same type of assessment and the same depth of content coverage as students in high school?

NCLB testing is required in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Currently instruction and assessments for grades 3–8 appropriately address a wide range of third through eighth grade standards for mathematics, English language arts, and other content areas. However, when students enter the later grades of middle school and high school, their courses are more content specific and should address a deeper level of course standards. For example, a geometry course will address both more complex and more specific standards than the general mathematics content taught in earlier grades. Yet in many states high school students are frequently held accountable for and assessed only on the wide range of mathematics standards rather than course-specific standards.

Currently, a number of states (e.g., Arkansas, Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) have transitioned or are beginning to transition to end-of-course (EOC) assessments in high school, replacing the global mathematics or English language arts assessments. These end-of-course, curriculum-based assessments address course-specific standards and are generally administered upon completion of a course (e.g., Algebra I or Biology) to evaluate whether the student has learned the relevant information in that subject area in order to receive credit, to move to a subsequent course, or to graduate.

End-of-course assessments are designed to test students on what they learned immediately upon completion of a course versus waiting until students have completed multiple courses or even testing a student before course completion. Several studies by researcher John Bishop of Cornell University show EOC accountability to be a promising strategy to promote student learning.¹



The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) followed a nationally representative sample of students who were in 8th grade in 1988 over the course of six years. After controlling for differences in students' family backgrounds, the characteristics of their high schools and communities, and other variables, John Bishop found that students in New York, one of the first states to implement EOCs, registered significantly greater gains between 8th and 12th grade than students in other states on standardized assessments that were administered to the NELS:88 sample. This was true for students who had low, average, and high grade point averages (GPAs) at the end of 8th grade. In addition, Bishop found that New York students who had low GPAs (C-) in 8th grade were significantly more likely to attend college than their counterparts in other states. Bishop has found similarly promising outcomes in analyzing data from the 1991 International Assessment of Educational Progress and the 1994-5 Third International Mathematics and Science Study.²

Additional results from Bishop's research indicate that accountability for EOC assessments caused teachers to set higher standards and spend more time teaching cognitively demanding skills. Students tended to be more attentive in class, more engaged in their learning, and more conscientious about completing homework. Moreover, teachers were less likely to give "inflated" grades and relationships between teachers and student improved, as did relationships among students themselves. Finally, when students who took EOC assessments in science, mathematics, and reading were compared to students who did not, the students who were held accountable for EOC assessments outperformed their fellow students by 45% of a grade-level equivalent in science and mathematics and by 65% of a grade-level equivalent in reading.³

When aligned to course standards, end-of-course assessments can take on many formats and functions, depending on district needs. Frequently, EOC assessments are administered at the end of a specific course to verify learning against course standards, to provide a grade or credit for a completed course, or as a graduation requirement. Recently, EOC assessments have been used to allow students to opt out of a course. Additionally, EOC assessments are becoming a benchmarking tool given periodically throughout a course to incrementally check student learning. This function of EOC assessments enables the teacher to adjust instruction during the course to meet students' needs.

Districts across the nation are faced with excessive high school drop-out rates and low numbers of graduates attending or completing college. Many students are unprepared for college or employment. Non-graduates and ill-equipped graduates are frustrated and cost everyone due to their need for additional training. In addition, these individuals' lifetime earning potentials are significantly restricted. The research of John Bishop and others has shown us that holding teachers and students accountable for course standards is a potentially road to student success.



References

- ¹ *High School Accountability and Assessment System, Issue Papers, U.S Department of Education, The High School Leadership Summit.*
- ² Bishop, J., F. Mane and M. Bishop. *Is Standards-Based Reform Working ... and For Whom? Working Paper 01-11.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Center for Advanced Human Resources Studies, 2001. See also: Bishop, J. 1998. *Do Curriculum-Based External Exit Exam Systems Enhance Student Achievement?* Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 1998.
- ³ *A Steeper, Better Road to Graduation*, John Bishop, Hoover Institution, Education Next, Copyright 2007 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University.

