

**HIGH EXPECTATIONS, NOT HIGH STAKES TESTS:
WHY ONE TEST SCORE SHOULD NOT BE A BARRIER TO GRADUATION
AND COLLEGE DREAMS**

40% of Rhode Island students in the 11th grade are now at risk of not graduating in 2014 based solely on their low score on one or more subtests of the state assessments (NECAPS).

The NECAP is the MAKE-OR-BREAK requirement that puts these students at-risk of not graduating. It is not lack of credits, portfolio requirements or any other graduation requirement that is leading to this train wreck. It is disingenuous to claim that state assessments are not the sole measure for a diploma system when in fact they have become the sole measure putting so many students at risk of not graduating.

Retaking the NECAPs doesn't cure the problem. The latest information disseminated by RIDE to schools and parents is that everything is going to be all right: cram for the re-takes, take another NECAP in the fall of your senior year, maybe again in the spring. If you just score a few questions more correctly, you will be allowed to graduate.

- *There is no guarantee* – or even accurate ability to predict -- how many students will actually improve. For those that don't, there is no graduation. The NECAP is the Make-or-Break.
- *The “minimal improvements” on the NECAP promoted as those needed to graduate have not been formally adopted by the Board of Regents as required by regulation and are therefore of questionable legal validity.* How much a student needs to improve on the NECAP is described only in RIDE guidelines, which hold no force of law and could be changed tomorrow. The regulations, which *are* law, require the Board of Regents to develop these standards. The Board of Regents did not do so before it was absorbed into the new education oversight body, which has yet to convene.
- *For improvement to happen, districts will have to allocate significant resources to NECAP boot camps—resources they do not have.* Students in the most economically distressed districts will not get what they need to have a chance to improve. Even those districts that come up with such resources will have to take them from somewhere else -- where they may actually do more good for student achievement (e.g., early investments in closing achievement gaps in elementary school) or where they promote a rich well-rounded education (e.g. fine arts).
- *Students with test anxiety or with learning challenges in even a single area (e.g., dyslexia, math learning disability) who could do very well in college in their areas of strength will likely be prevented from graduating.* This does not further high expectations and outcomes.

Retaking the NECAPs for marginal improvements in the 11th hour of the 12th grade is a misallocation of resources and priorities. Even if some students do manage to squeak by and graduate by getting three or four more algebra problems correct, we should be asking – why are we doing this? Is it worth the agony, anxiety and uncertainty? The cost? Will it further postsecondary outcomes?

- *Students in the 11th and 12th grade need to know whether they are graduating.* They can't wait until spring of 12th grade to apply for or accept college offers, apply for financial aid, etc. Many will be discouraged from doing so.
- *Students in the 11th and 12th grades need to focus on their strengths, those that they will be pursuing after high school.* Let's face it, if you scored substantially below proficient in math you probably aren't planning to be an engineer. Students need to take classes in areas of strength and interest, pursue internships that garner letters of recommendation, study for SATs. Putting all this aside to cram for a 5-8 question improvement on a NECAP does nothing to improve the meaningfulness of their diploma or to further postsecondary outcomes.
- *All the research demonstrates that closing the gaps in student outcomes needs to happen by third grade and that high stakes tests reduce graduation rates without improving student outcomes.*¹ Limited resources need to be allocated to closing opportunity gaps in early grades, and maintaining grade level achievement after that. Today's 11th graders aren't helped by erecting barriers to graduation – they need help focusing on their post-graduation dreams. High stakes tests don't improve outcomes – high supports, early and continuously, do.

No, there isn't a safety valve: why waivers and "alternative tests" won't work. Families and students have been told that if all else fails, there are alternative tests, waivers and appeals available to those students who don't improve enough on their NECAPS to graduate. But the Regulations and the Guidance show a bleaker picture:

- **Alternative tests** listed as "approved" in current RIDE guidance are by and large MORE challenging than the NECAPs and therefore not a viable alternative. If you scored "substantially below proficient" on math on the NECAP, do you take comfort in knowing you will be allowed to graduate if you do well on the Advanced Placement Calculus test?²
- **A waiver** of the state assessment requirement "may be granted in *extremely rare* cases where it is clearly established" that the state assessments were not accurate and this student really IS proficient.³ By its own terms, this is a possibility only for the very few.
- **An appeal** from the denial of a diploma is available, but will usually be futile. In order to prevail, a student would have to demonstrate that he or she "meets or exceeds the minimum level of proficiency required for graduation by the state."⁴ Districts are not permitted to ignore the make-or-break requirements of NECAP scores without equal evidence that is usually unavailable.

WITH 40% OF RHODE ISLAND STUDENTS AT-RISK, IT'S TIME FOR HIGH SUPPORTS AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS, NOT HIGH STAKES TESTS

¹ Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (August 2011). *Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters Issue Brief*; National Research Council. (2011). *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.

² Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *Secondary Regulations Guidance*, May 2011, at 12.

³ *Id.* at 15.

⁴ *Id.* at 15.