

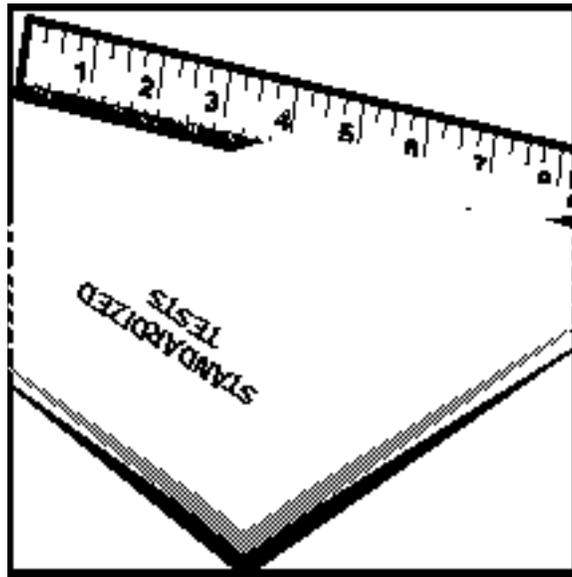
# WILL WISCONSIN EVER BE UP TO 'THE TEST'?

LEAH VUKMIR

**A**ccountability is the latest buzzword in education reform. From California to Florida, and from Texas to Virginia, "high stakes" consequences are being attached to statewide tests in an attempt to spur education reform efforts. Policy makers in these and many other states are requiring students to pass statewide examinations as a condition for school funding rewards, grade promotion and high school graduation.

But students in Wisconsin will not be asked to step up to the same plate of accountability, at least not in the near future. In a decision that sent shock waves throughout the state, the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee voted in June to kill the first ever high school graduation test. What prompted the legislature's response? What lies ahead for Wisconsin students? What accountability measures should Wisconsin adopt?

Acting upon Governor Thompson's executive order issued January 13, 1998, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) was charged with the developing a high school graduation exam that Wisconsin public school students would be required to take as a



requirement for high school graduation. The High School Graduation Test would be given starting in the 2002-2003 school year.

Wisconsin parents, teachers, district administrators and students were notified of the exam earlier this year through a public relations campaign by the DPI. Sample questions were widely distributed to all districts in an

effort to inform all involved parties as to what would be expected of students. The final test, however, was never fully written and was predicted to cost \$10-12 million dollars for development and administration in the first year alone.

Opposition to this new form of testing was immediate and led by parents from largely high-achieving districts. In the north shore Milwaukee suburb of Whitefish Bay, a grassroots organization called Advocates for Education distributed newsletters outlining their opposition to the test. Their attack on accountability seemed to center on claims that

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“high stakes testing will be detrimental to education and unfair to children.” Concerned that a “one-size fits all” test would have the power to determine whether their children would graduate from high school, these parents actively lobbied PTA organizations and other parent groups around the state. Ironically, the children in most of these districts go on to take ACT and SAT exams for college entrance - exams that are certainly not low stake endeavors.

Echoing the concerns of some parents, State Senator Russ Decker (D-Schoefield), reported to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (June 9, 1999) that the test would place “too much pressure” on children. Other parents fretted over concerns that their children might not finish the test on time because of poor reading skills, or that some children are poor test takers and would suffer poor self-esteem if they did not pass the test. (Never mind the poor self-esteem they would develop if they were allowed to graduate as illiterates.) DPI officials helped fuel the hysteria by announcing dire predictions of mass student failure on the yet to be developed test. This raised questions about the education establishment’s commitment to high stakes testing in general. Is it possible that failure to adopt a high school graduation test was precisely what DPI had hoped for in the first place?

Adding to the emotionally charged atmosphere were parents who threatened to hold legislators responsible if their children failed the test and were unable to graduate. In the end, an organized statewide letter and phone campaign that kept legislative aides working overtime, and the looming threat of parental lawsuits were powerful enough persuasion for the legislators to kill the test.

With no plan for accountability in the works, Wisconsin’s cutting edge reputation in school reform is now in jeopardy. According to a January, 1999, report by the Education Commission of the States, 25 states currently have or will have some form of “high stakes” exit exam in the next few years. Leading the charge with the most comprehensive K-12

accountability plan is the state of Texas where children are tested yearly in grades 3-8 and social promotion is abolished in grades 5 and 8. Currently all 11th graders must take an exit exam and by the year 2004, Texas students expecting to obtain a high school diploma must either pass an exit level academic skills test or pass a combination of “end-of-course” tests in Algebra I, Biology I, English II and/or U.S. History. (It is probably no coincidence that Texas, along with North Carolina, has made greater gains in math and reading on the National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) exams between 1990 and 1997 than any other states.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Texas, Wisconsin students are tested in grades 4, 8 and 10, but there is no further statewide measure of student achievement that is available to provide taxpayers, parents, and elected officials with the assurance that the state’s high school graduates have attained mastery of a common core of knowledge. Given the level of state funding provided to the local districts it would seem reasonable to institute some accountability measure. Additionally, only a percentage of Wisconsin students take college preparatory exams such as the ACT and SAT, therefore a measure assessing **all** high school seniors would yield particularly useful and never before obtained information.

A statewide assessment of basic academic skills of 12th graders would also be useful to business leaders who continually bemoan their applicants’ and workers’ poor writing and computational abilities. Can Wisconsin really expect its young adults to compete in the global economy if they are not even given the opportunity to meet minimal high school graduation requirements? A final compelling reason for a 12th grade exam is to determine the effect, if any, that educational faddism has had on generations of children who have been exposed to everything from whole language reading and inventive spelling to “new-new” math. If these teaching methodologies truly work, then the education establishment should have nothing to fear from the testing.

Given the political opposition, what options currently exist for salvaging a Wisconsin accountability system? One alternative, proposed by Parents Raising Educational Standards in Schools (PRESS), involves the use of the General Education Development Exam (GED). Instead of a high stakes examination that would determine whether or not a student could graduate from high school, PRESS representatives proposed the use of the GED for informational purposes only, that is, as a way to assess the general competency levels of the state's high school seniors. All 12th graders in the state would be required to take the exam in order to graduate. Students would not be required to pass the GED in order to graduate, but instead would merely be required to take the test as a condition of graduation. Individual student test scores would be made available to parents and the reporting of district scores would be made available to the Wisconsin State Legislature and public.

Several factors make the GED an attractive option. The test is designed to measure the academic skills and knowledge students are expected to acquire during four years of high school in the U.S. and Canada. The GED is a norm-referenced exam that covers core subject areas of math, science, social studies, arts and literature and writing skills. Versions of the test have been given since 1942, and it is a statistically valid, reliable, and cost-effective measure of student knowledge currently used as the basis for issuing high school equivalency diplomas in all 50 states.

The American Federation of Teachers report entitled, "What Secondary Students Abroad Are Expected to Know," (AFT, 1995, pp. 86-87) cites the GED exam as one that "best captures the achievement level of students who

are not necessarily planning to attend college." The GED is comparable to gateway exams taken by average-achieving students in France, Germany and Scotland. Given the fact that no measure of Wisconsin student achievement is available after the 10th grade, and in particular, no measure of college and non-college bound students, information revealed by the GED could be particularly useful.

Sample test questions from a GED study guide reveal the need for students to have a foundation of basic math and grammar skills as well as a grasp of basic science and social studies principles. (See sidebar on next page.)

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Reaction to the proposal by State School Superintendent John Benson was swift and negative - often a sure sign of an idea's merit and potential for success. In a statement to the *Wisconsin State Journal*, Benson dismissed the GED as "not appropriate as a high school graduation test. It will test our students on material they haven't necessarily studied or that we as a state have determined is not as important as that contained in our state stan-

dards." Imagine that: material expected of students seeking their high school equivalency diploma is different than that expected of students completing four years in high school. How is it possible that the state could endorse two very different sets of standards for achieving the same goal? In the double-speak world of the seasoned educational bureaucrat it appears anything is possible.

The current stall in the budget debates in Madison has put the GED issue on hold, but Representative John Gard, chair of the Joint Finance Committee, has reacted to the idea. "I think the GED proposal has a lot of merit and is a fair middle ground. We already know the test works," remarked Gard.

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS from: "Everything You Need To Score High on the GED"**  
1998, Arco Publishing, 15th Edition

MATH

A. 30% of the senior class are women. 60% of the class have blue eyes. What percentage of the women in the senior class have blue eyes?

1. 18
2. 20
3. 30
4. 40
5. Not enough information given.

B. How many years will it take for \$2000 invested at 6% to earn \$240 in interest?

1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5

C. Multiply  $(x + 3)(x + 4)(x + 2)$  to get:

1.  $x^3 + 9x^2 + 26x + 24$
2.  $x^3 + 14x^2 + 24$
3.  $x^3 + 14x^2 + 26x$
4.  $x^2 + 14x + 24$
5.  $x^2 + 26x + 24$

SCIENCE

D. The noble gases have 8 electrons in their outermost shells. These elements tend not to react with other elements to form compounds. Which of the following elements belongs to the group of noble gases? (Periodic Table supplied)

1. oxygen (O)
2. neon (Ne)
3. sulfur (S)
4. hydrogen (H)
5. nitrogen (N)

E. The force of gravity accelerates an object through space at  $9.8 \text{ m/sec}^2$ . An object, initially at rest, falls freely near the earth's surface. How long, in seconds, does it take the object to attain a speed of 98 meters per second?

1. 1
2. 10
3. 98
4. 980
5. 1000

SOCIAL STUDIES

F. Below is a table of tax rates.

<u>Income</u>	<u>Tax</u>
\$0 - 6,000	0%
6,0001 - 16,000	15%
16,001 - 28,000	25%
28,001 - 60,000	30%

The tax shown on the table above is best described as:

1. negative income tax
2. value added tax
3. progressive tax
4. regressive tax
5. surtax

ENGLISH

G. Sentence: **Services provided by several other occupations, such as personnel officer and counselor, are similar to these, yet have important differences.**

What correction should be made to this sentence?

1. change provided to providing
2. change the spelling of personnel to personal
3. change counselor to councilor
4. change the spelling of similar to similer
5. no correction is necessary

H. Sentence 1: **United States consumers have learned a very basic fact of life, the days of unlimited low cost energy are over.**

Which of the following is the best way to write the underlined portion of this sentence? If you think the original is the best way to write the sentence, choose option 1.

1. fact of life, the days
2. fact of life. The days
3. fact of life; The days
4. fact of life, and the days
5. fact of life for the days

Answers: A (5), B (2), C (1), D (2), E (2), F (3), G (5), H (2)

Governor Thompson's office, however, distributed a press release from the American Council on Education (ACE), developers of the GED exam, stating ACE's opposition to the use of the test as a high school exit exam. ACE's primary concern is that the "outcome of the GED Tests would shift from serving as a second opportunity for adults to earn a high school equivalency diploma to becoming a barrier preventing traditional high school seniors from graduating." Fearing that student failure on the exam would deter students from retaking the test as adults, ACE therefore opposes the tests use as a general high school exit exam.

But because PRESS is proposing using the GED test only as a barometer of student achievement, not as an exit exam, it is conceivable that the ACE could be persuaded to allow the test's use in Wisconsin. If the test is used solely as a diagnostic tool, and not as a barrier to graduation, ACE fears should no longer be an issue. Finally, statewide use of the GED tests could be an especially lucrative opportunity for ACE as well. It remains to be seen, however, if enough political muscle can be flexed for this to happen. One must wonder if Wisconsin education officials also fear student failure on the GED test, not because it would be a barrier to graduation but rather because it may expose underlying deficiencies in Wisconsin's educational system.

Beyond the GED proposal, other possible plans for education policy makers to consider include:

- 1. The development of a high school level exam similar to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).**

Often referred to as the "Nation's Report Card" the NAEP exam is currently given to samples of students throughout the country at grades 4, 8, and 12 in the subjects of math, science, geography, reading, and United States history. Versions of the test have been given since 1969. Two states, North Carolina and Kentucky have developed assessment systems using NAEP frameworks and samples of released NAEP questions.

- 2. The use of commercially available testing systems in grade 12.**

A variety of established testing systems are already available for assessing high school students. The Stanford 9 developed by Harcourt Brace is currently being given yearly to all California students in grades 2-11. The California Test of Basic Skills developed by McGraw-Hill and the Iowa Test of Educational Development are other alternatives that could be pursued for the assessment of 12th grade students. Wisconsin has contracted with both Harcourt Brace and McGraw-Hill in the past on the Knowledge and Concept multiple choice/short answer exams. Wisconsin students only take the exams in 4th, 8th, and 10th grades.

The obvious advantage of these exams, as with the NAEP, is their established validity and reliability, no development costs, and relatively reasonable administration costs. That psychometricians outside of Wisconsin's educational establishment independently develop these exams would also appeal to parental concerns over DPI's undue influence over standards and testing processes. As nationally normed tests of basic academic skills, these exams would provide a measure of how Wisconsin students are performing relative to students in other parts of the country.

Opponents of these testing mechanisms will likely argue that it will be difficult to align these exams to Wisconsin's current state academic standards. Given that tests such as these typically assess defacto curricula and standards for core subjects to which all high school students should be exposed, it would be interesting to hear explanations for why Wisconsin's standards would be markedly different in the first place.

One final alternative for Wisconsin policy makers to consider before proposing any state testing system is to revisit and revise the current set Model Academic Standards. It is no fluke of nature that states making the greatest progress in accountability reform have standards that are significantly more focused on specific academic content. States such as Texas,

North Carolina, Virginia and California also have standards prescribed for *each* grade level (K through 12), in contrast to Wisconsin's standards that are set for grades 4, 8, and 12. During the development phase of the Model Academic Standards, groups like PRESS urged education policy makers and Governor Thompson to adopt standards at each grade level. PRESS argued this would not only provide parents and teachers with a clear road map of expectations, but would also help avoid the threat of lawsuits the state could incur over the use of tests based on these standards. Perhaps an overhaul of the current state standards should be the starting point from which any debate over accountability in Wisconsin begins. Their weakness will continue to dog this debate and ultimately delay meaningful accountability reform.

It remains to be seen in which direction state policy makers will turn in addressing school accountability, however, one fact appears certain. Should Wisconsin opt for no testing mechanism at all, it will be difficult to foresee the development of any accountability measure in the near future. That option seems least desirable of all.

#### Notes

1. "Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas, National Education Goals Panel, November, 1998, p. i.