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Oregon will test 11th-graders using 10th-grade tests

By **Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian**
March 03, 2010, 7:22PM

Oregon is moving its 10th-grade tests in reading, writing, math and science to the 11th grade, saying many students need another year of high school to learn the skills covered on the tests.

The tests were written for sophomores, and **the minimum passing scores** were set based on how sophomores performed on the tests. But, beginning next school year, they will be given to juniors, and the state's high schools will be judged by how many of their students pass the exams by the end of junior year.

Oregon got **permission from the U.S. Department of Education** to make the standard easier for schools.

When Oregon sophomores take the tests, **a lot of them fail**, particularly in math. Last year, 46 percent of 10th-graders flunked that test, 45 percent failed the writing test and 42 percent failed in science.

Low passing rates on the state reading and math tests are the main reason that Oregon high schools get **worse ratings** on state and federal accountability reports than the state's elementary and middle schools.

Educators are hopeful that, with another year of instruction under their belts, more high schools students will be able to pass.

The testing window now in place for sophomores runs from October through mid-May, meaning they must take the exam "when there are still at least four weeks of instruction left in their sophomore year," says **McMinnville High** principal Kris Olsen. "We want to ensure that all kids have an opportunity to be exposed to all of the 10th-grade curriculum before they have to take this test."

Most schools will continue to give the tests to sophomores, then focus on helping those who fail to learn the missing skills before retesting them as juniors, Olsen said.

Jack Jennings, president of the non-profit Washington, D.C.-based **Center on Education Policy**, has tracked how states have changed their testing programs since the 2001 passage of the federal No Child Left Behind law, which increased accountability and sanctions for schools that post low test scores. Some states lowered the scores a student needs to pass the state test to help schools avoid low ratings.

Jennings could not recall another state moving its high school exams to a higher grade, and said it suggests Oregon may be lowering its expectations for its schools or its students.

"It does seem unusual to move a 10th-grade proficiency set of tests to the 11th grade," he said. "If you thought 10th-graders could do something, and then you shift the measurement of that skill to 11th grade, it at least raises the question of whether they have lowered the standard."

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Schools will still be able to give the tests to sophomores, and those that pass won't have to retest as juniors, said Susanne Smith, communications manager for the Oregon Department of Education. But all students who have not passed before junior year will have to take the exams that year, and schools will be judged according to how many of their students pass by the end of junior year.

Students have always been permitted to retake state tests as juniors if they failed them as sophomores. But most students did not do so, state officials say. Of roughly 25,000 sophomores who failed at least one test, about 6,000 retook the math test and about 2,000 retook the reading tests as juniors, according to Jon Wiens, accountability specialist at the state education department.

The Oregon Board of Education decided several years ago that, beginning with this year's sophomores, students will have to pass the state reading test to get a high school diploma. This year's freshmen will have to pass the state writing test, too. And today's eighth graders will have to pass in reading, writing and math to get their diplomas.

Smith, the department spokeswoman, said the state is not lowering the standards on any of the tests, it is merely giving schools and students more time before the results count.

"The ultimate goal," she said, "is to get those kids ready to graduate."

-- **Betsy Hammond**

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
March 03, 2010, 5:23PM

This is the second time that the standard has been lowered. A very few years ago they tried lowering the passing score from 239 to 236. Now students get another year to 'learn' (and those who drop out in the meanwhile will also help some districts' percentages).

This raises the possibility that standards are being lowered? What other possibility is there?

Oregon has thrown in the towel on real improvement.

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Posted by **markfelt**
March 04, 2010, 1:52PM

The changes in passing RIT scales was mandated by the Federal Government. There was an evaluation of all of the states' tests. Oregon's elementary tests scales were raised and the grade 10 math test was lowered.

The 236 RIT scale is NOT a raw score. It is an evaluation based on the test questions' difficulties. There are different test questions for each student, not just a single test. The RIT scale is not a raw score.

Also, the test are given during the sophomore year and can take place months before a topic has been covered. It is wise to give the tests AFTER the sophomore year.

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Posted by **baddogcarl**
March 04, 2010, 4:43PM

There was no federal mandate to change the cutoff scores. That's nonsense.

As for the 10th graders taking the 10th grade test (how could THAT be fair?) if the curriculum isn't covered until the 11th grade, how does one explain the fact that over half of the 10th graders are passing? Were they just born knowing this stuff? Learned it on the playground.

Oregon is just playing games with test scores. Comes from a lack of vision.

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Posted by **ktrujillo**
March 04, 2010, 4:49PM

And a dearth of leadership.

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Posted by **supergeezzer**
March 03, 2010, 5:35PM

Everyone involv ed in the Oregon educational system ought to be ashamed for what they are doing to students and parents. In th ereal world, when someoneis underachieving, they are forced to either improve by studying on their own time to pass tests, or by be placed in a lesser position. If it is students who can't pass the tests, that fault lies solely on the back of

teachers and their systems. Lowering standards ought to be illegal, and heads should roll starting at the head of the organization. Don't these people have any pride?

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Posted by **deltakilo**
March 03, 2010, 6:02PM

All that education cash they keep screeching about taking from us in the form of higher taxes seems to be working out fine, I see.

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Posted by **lephtcoast**
March 03, 2010, 6:12PM

Sounds like we need to throw more money at schools.

Oregon spends more per student than Washington (about 10% more), but by most accounts, the Washington schools are better.

Here are two questions: What is Washington doing different/better than Oregon? Why can't Oregon learn from what Washington is doing?

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Posted by **WinstonRed**
March 03, 2010, 6:17PM

as someone who struggled with school, this is really upsetting. shouldn't we be challenging the kids who are lagging, not lowering the bar especially by an entire year.

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Posted by **ewebetcha2**
March 03, 2010, 6:19PM

Talk about retarded!!
So now we are dumbing down the tests because kids just aren't smart enough to pass these simple tests??

WHY OH WHY DO WE KEEP GIVING OREGON PUBLIC SCHOOLS MORE MONEY????!!!!

CLEARLY!!! THEY ARE NOT DOING THEIR JOBS!!!!

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Posted by **Shills**
March 03, 2010, 7:33PM

Forrest Gump said it best - "Stupid Is, as Stupid Does"

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Posted by **obamasabum**
March 03, 2010, 7:42PM

It's a pity that Oregon students are either stupid, or poorly taught. Which is it? If the answer is #2, why are we giving the teachers a new contract with guaranteed raises (non-performance-based) when no one else in our society is getting pay raises other than those terrible, greedy Wall Street bankers with their big bonuses?

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Posted by **shallowender**
March 04, 2010, 8:48AM

You left out Poorly Parented and just plain Poor. The massive amount of data that socioeconomic status is the number one predictor of school success (grades, test scores) can't be ignored just so you can bash the unions.

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Posted by **obamasabum**
March 05, 2010, 8:13AM

Poorly parented I can understand, but poor (as an excuse for low test scores) I can't understand. Some of the most intelligent people in our world's history (Einstein, for example) came from incredibly poor families. Poor does not equal dumb.

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Posted by **FirePritchard**
March 05, 2010, 8:56AM

it's because schools hire coaches to be teachers, and they end up teaching the kids who need it the most.

it's a SHAM

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Posted by **forbalance**



March 03, 2010, 7:46PM

Perhaps the teachers could create some new math problems based upon sample PERS statements? At least the public would get something out of the tax dollars being thrown at that program.

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Posted by **Nykolina**
March 03, 2010, 8:35PM

Gee, my state retirement statement shows that there is less money in my account than has deducted from my paycheck. PERS Tier One, the only people who get the guaranteed 8% ENDED in 1995!

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Posted by **foxworthy**
March 03, 2010, 8:07PM

Smarter than a fifth grader, but barely!

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Posted by **timmytom**
March 03, 2010, 8:11PM

how liberal. just lower your standards and everything will be fine. no wonder illegal aliens are outsmarting the american people.

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Posted by **lynne97030**
March 05, 2010, 12:05PM

not if they spell like you do, timmytom

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Posted by **teacher00000**
March 03, 2010, 8:52PM

I can't believe I'm getting involved in this discussion, but, here's some information to consider.

Right now, High Schools are judged by a test many students take in the Fall of their Sophomore year. That means the students have been in HS for a little over a year. By pushing the test until the Junior year, we will get a better

picture of how high schools are doing.

The math portion of the exam covers material up to Algebra II. Most good math students take Algebra II as sophomores, meaning they are taking the math test before they've had all the requisite learning. Many students don't take Alg. II until their Junior year. Moving the test back a year gives students a chance to see the material in class before being tested on it.

The Science test covers material through biology (including genetics). Many students take biology as sophomores and haven't covered the requisite material before their test time comes.

Shifting the test back a year does nothing to lower standards. Graduation requirements haven't changed. We're just giving students a reasonable chance to pass exams after they've studied the material.

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