

# Experts answer questions about standards, testing

We posed these questions commonly asked by parents and journalists to various experts in the field of education.

**Q. Where did MEAP tests (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) tests come from?**

A. The state Department of Education started them in 1970, said Robert E. Schiller, superintendent of public instruction. Reason: The State Board of Education made improving instruction a priority goal.

**Q. You say "Improving instruction." But now the state is using these tests for two other purposes — student competency and state diplomas. Who made that decision?**

A. The state Legislature, in the 1991 school aid act. In fact, according to Dorothy Beardmore, state board of education president, using the test to

evaluate student competency and grant state-endorsed diplomas was added at the 11th hour in a Michigan Senate-House conference committee on education. The appropriation bill without the knowledge of state board of education.

Beardmore said the state board of education was unaware of the addition until after it had left the conference committee and was voted on by the full legislature.

Now, under the 1991 school aid act, to receive any money, local school districts "shall award a state-endorsed high school diploma to a pupil" only when the pupil passes one of three sets of tests.

**MEAP** — The student must achieve "at least category 2 on the reading portion of the MEAP grade 10 test, at least 60 percent of the objectives on the mathematics portion of the grade 10 test, and at least 50 percent of the objectives on the science portion of the grade 11 test."

"A locally developed and state-approved basic proficiency test."

**A passing score on the GED (general educational development) test.**

Pupils who miss may take the test again.

In practice, most area districts use MEAP.

**Q. Can the local district add local requirements?**

A. Yes. For a state-endorsed diploma, the local district can use "in addition to any other requirements established by law or by the board of a district for a high school diploma," according to the 1991 law.

**Q. We hear that in 1997 only state-endorsed diplomas can be awarded.**

A. True. "Beginning with the graduating class of 1997, a pupil shall not receive a high school diploma unless the pupil achieves

passing scores on the assessment instruments developed under this section" — Sec. 104n of the state aid act.

In other words, we'll have state-wide graduation requirements, but they will be based on skills, not how many years a student endured math, English and science classes.

**Q. Are MEAP test scores adequate as a sole indicator of what students know?**

A. "No," says the state's MEAP Handbook. "MEAP tests only indicate what students know about the selected objectives tested. To determine the status of student knowledge in other areas, other assessments must be made," such as "teacher observations."

**Q. Should I use MEAP test results to compare or rank schools?**

A. In general, no, says the MEAP Handbook. "MEAP results can help identify schools and districts 'with needs in reading, mathematics and science.' Reason: 'School districts and the people they serve are quite diverse.' Without careful interpre-

tion, 'uninformed persons may draw erroneous conclusions' by looking at MEAP ranks alone.

**Q. I hear the term "norm referenced test." Is that different from MEAP?**

A. Yes. "Norm-reference test information is usually used to determine how a student is doing relative to the performance of other students on the same test. MEAP tests provide information on whether or not a student has attained a specific skill or performance objective," says the MEAP Handbook.

**Q. Say, this sounds like a lot of state control. Whatever happened to local autonomy?**

A. Local districts are free to design their buildings, hire administrators and teachers. But the notion of complete local control never existed, not even from day one.

The 1835 constitutional convention adopted the proposal of Isaac E. Crory, a Marshall attorney, and John D. Pierce, a missionary preacher. Willis F. Dun-

bar, in "Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State," tells the story.

"They agreed Michigan's school system, like Prussia's, should be centralized and should be controlled by a responsible official . . . from the lowest grades through a university and coordinated by a central body. Dunbar adds, 'It was the sort of plan Thomas Jefferson advocated and sought in vain to persuade Virginia to adopt.'"

Gov. Stevens Mason appointed Pierce state school superintendent — first such constitutional office in the nation. Pierce successfully advocated three major reforms:

- Tuition free, tax supported public schools.
- Compulsory education.
- Training and minimum wages for teachers.

Dunbar concludes, "Pierce was far ahead of his time." So the notion of unfettered local control in education never was true in Michigan. But not until the 1970s and '80s has the State Board of Education used all the constitutional power at its fingertips.

## Scores from page 1A

### Pass and graduate

Starting with the class of 1994, a student must pass all three portions of the test to qualify for a state-endorsed diploma. In all, 76.7 percent or 584 10th graders passed the math test. The moderate, or passing, score was 500. That means 169 10th graders will have to retake the math test.

"The students didn't know the implications going into the test last year," said Carolyn Mahalak, the district's coordinator of evaluation for assessment and special projects.

### Math scores better

Significant increases were also reported in fourth- and seventh-grade math scores. Of 743 fourth-graders, 63.8 percent or 474 pupils reached the satisfactory level. That's better than the 66.4 percent in 1991.

Of 825 seventh-graders, 56.6 percent or 467 students hit the math standard. The number was 49.8 percent last year.

In reading, 57.3 percent of the 10th-graders scored satisfactory or better compared to 54.2 percent in 1991. Students needed to score 300 or better on both parts of the reading test to achieve a satisfactory score.

Of 749 10th-graders, 85.1 percent passed the reading test. To merely pass, a student needed to score 300 on either the fiction portion or informational material. That means 112 10th-graders will have to retake the reading test.

Reading scores increased significantly for fourth- and seventh-graders. Of 743 fourth-graders taking the test, 54.6 percent had a satisfactory score. That compares with 48.9 percent in 1991.

Of 825 seventh-graders, 48.8 percent hit the state mark. That's

a five percent increase from the previous year.

Scores in science remained stable. Of 821 fifth-graders, 88.6 percent reached the state standard. That was the third highest percentage in the county, behind Birmingham and West Bloomfield.

To reach a satisfactory science score, students had to complete 75 percent of the objectives.

Of 748 eighth-graders, 73.3 percent scored satisfactory. That compares with 74.2 in the previous year.

The percentage of 11th-graders achieving the state mark rose 4.4 percent from 56.3 in '91 to 60.6.

To qualify for a state-endorsed diploma, a student must complete 60 percent of the objectives. Mahalak said 45 11th-graders will have to retake the science portion.

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