

December 7, 2007

Dr. Jerry Berger
Chair, Oregon Board of Education
Oregon Department of Education
255 Capitol St., NE
Salem, OR 97310-0203

Dear Dr. Berger,

I'm writing to you as chair of the state board, and I'm asking you to please share this letter (which I will send both in print and as email) with the other board members.

I'm a representative for higher education on the "Standards and Assessment" Task Force charged with making recommendations on how to implement the Essential Skills.

I think the Board's adoption of these Essential Skills as high school graduation requirements is an important opportunity for K-12 education in Oregon, and I'm anxious to see this avoid the path taken by previous opportunities such as the CIM/CAM program and the PASS.

But I'm concerned about the path we are taking as we try to develop assessment recommendations. At the November 16, 2007 meeting of the Assessment task force, I felt troubled by the agenda set by ODE staff. Here are three specific events that triggered this concern.

- One member of ODE staff at that meeting stated that the immediate purpose of the meeting was to provide a rationale for high schools to continue to require work samples so that the practice of requiring work samples wouldn't be lost with the sunset of the CIM requirement.

- One piece of paperwork distributed for us to use in brainstorming work was organized around the question "in addition to work samples, what other assessment options should be used to measure Essential Skills."

- Another member of ODE staff told us that it was the State Board's intention to implement multiple means of assessment for each Essential Skill.

My concern is to avoid the trap of producing a pretty set of assessment criteria that turn into busywork hurdles for students and which provide no guarantee of proficiency at anything. We have experience with just exactly this sort of problem with the CIM, and it would behoove us to learn from history rather than repeating it. The reason I'm writing this letter is that I'm worried that the agenda being set by ODE staff may inadvertently lead to such an outcome, and I'm hoping you might consider a mid-course correction.

Let me be blunt about the problems I see. I am the head of the undergraduate mathematics program at University of Oregon. All of our entering freshman have at least 3 years of mathematics including algebra II. All of our entering students have 4 years of English composition and literature in high school. Most of them have good grades from high school (the requirement for admission is a "B" average, but most of our students have done better than that). Nevertheless, a majority of our students are not properly prepared for the lowest level credit bearing math course we teach: Math 111 (college algebra). This is in spite of the fact that much of the material in college algebra is taught in high school algebra II courses. Similar problems

exist (though they are more difficult to categorically document) in the ability our entering students have to extract information from written material, and in their ability to communicate clearly in writing. Put simply in the context of writing, far too many of our students come to college unable to put together grammatical sentences or well-structured paragraphs. These problems reduce the chances of their success in college, and reduce their efficacy in college even if they ultimately make it to degree. My impression on listening to representatives from business and industry is that the deficiencies they see in high school graduates are very similar to the ones I've just summarized.

I am not trying to cast blame for this situation on high schools. I think our teachers are in a bind and are doing their best. The pressures our high school teachers face (pressures from students, parents and administrators) are to keep high school graduation rates as high as possible - we live in a culture where students in good standing who do their seat time expect to graduate from high school (and their parents have the same expectation). A teacher or principal who interferes in a serious way with this expectation is likely to be involved in an unpleasant maelstrom of controversy. So I don't think this problem can be solved by telling schools to do better (though many of them could do better), nor by telling teachers to teach better (though again, many of them could teach better). I think this can only be addressed centrally, for better or worse, with mandates from the state.

This brings me to the Essential Skills. The eight essential skills approved by the Board as necessary prerequisites to high school graduation are, I believe, sensible ways to try to address these problems. Certainly the nature of these essential skills varies, but at least four of them are central to the problems that higher education, business, and industry perceive to be endemic among our high school graduates. I believe that precisely what is necessary to succeed in higher education and to benefit from this experience are the abilities to:

- read and interpret a variety of texts
- write for a variety of purposes
- apply mathematics in a variety of settings
- think critically and analytically

Anyone with these skills can learn virtually anything, and can ultimately succeed at most college majors regardless of his or her starting place in any specific content areas.

Our task force's challenge is to recommend to you a way to *assess* the Essential Skills that will actually result in high school graduates possessing these skills and that will be meaningful beyond high school. While I don't believe standardized tests are a panacea, I believe that at least the first three of the four Essential Skills I refer to above (and maybe all four) can be measured reliably with some kind of standardized test instrument, and are unlikely to be measured reliably by, for example, work samples.

I think the goal of having multiple means of assessment for the essential skills is laudable. Given the pressure we know exists on principals and teachers to make sure students in good standing graduate (regardless of the actual level of their skills) I question whether the goal of ensuring our graduates have meaningful proficiency at the academically oriented Essential Skills is consistent with the goal of providing schools and districts with assessment measures to be locally determined and evaluated and which can be completed by students with unlimited assistance by third parties.

I would argue strongly that, at least for the first three skills I listed above, we consider single assessment mechanisms, such as a statewide standardized test to replace what used to be the CIM level tests in reading, writing and mathematics.

Hal Sadofsky
Head of Undergraduate Mathematics Studies

