Chapter 5

Student Assessment and Graduation Requirements

> *Develop an assessment system that better reflects student growth and learning.
> Revise student assessment and graduation requirements in collaboration
> with the business community.*

CONCERN: Adequacy of the State Testing Program and Curriculum for Career-Focused Students

Student achievement is too often determined solely by the results of standardized tests, which fail to tell the full story. The results are not always reflective of learning because of the emotional interference many students experience when taking high-stakes, standardized tests.

The education community does not always fully understand the needs of local businesses and employers. Collaboration between these communities is critical if we are to design curriculum that will position students for post-secondary employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

49. NJDOE and the State Board of Education should revise graduation regulations to allow credit for internships, apprenticeships and cooperative learning opportunities.

50. NJDOE should consider the use of multimodal testing platforms to more accurately measure student growth and learning, and assessments to enable students to demonstrate competency in vocational applications of mathematics and technology.

51. NJDOE should align statewide testing to standards for entry-level employees based on NOCTI (National Occupational Competency Testing Institute) or comparable industry benchmarks.[110]

52. NJDOE should review graduation requirements to ensure that career-focused students have appropriate elective credits available to enable them to secure post-secondary employment.

53. The New Jersey Department of Education should place more emphasis on applied learning or problem-based learning, rather than on theoretical learning, for all students.

54. NJDOE, in consultation with various industry entities, should disseminate information regarding the minimum standards necessary for post-secondary entry-level employment.

55. The business and labor sectors should collaborate with the New Jersey Department of Education to ensure that certification and licensing requirements are consistent with industry standards.

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[110] NOCTI is a not-for-profit consortium focusing on improvement of the American workforce. (See: https://www.nocti.org/aboutnocti.cfm.) NOCTI's Job Ready tests are one of two assessment batteries used by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to measure the occupational competency of career and technical education students. (See: https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Career%20and%20Technical%20Education/Pages/Assessment-Information.aspx.).

56. Education leaders at all levels should initiate a public advertising campaign to re-introduce the concept of vocational education as an alternative to traditional post-secondary alternatives.

57. The education community should use the term, "career-focused learner," in lieu of the term "non-college-bound learner," when referring to the population of students who do not plan to attend college directly after high school but intend to pursue other career pathways.

BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION

Measuring Achievement

Student achievement is too often associated only with performance on academic tests rather than observable demonstrations of skills, including hands-on skills, problem-solving, collaboration, communication and other workplace-readiness or soft skills. These are critical for students who plan to enter the workforce after high school.

When measuring achievement, the New Jersey School Performance Report is highly reliant on the state standardized testing program. But for the non-college-bound student who aspires to enter the workplace after high school, other measures of success may be more telling about the readiness to succeed. Performance- and skill-based achievement would more accurately reflect the student's preparedness and the district's success in preparing him or her for the workforce.

> *Students learn in various ways, and many will perform at levels more reflective of their actual progress when the testing platform is aligned with their preferred learning style.*

The education community does not always fully understand the needs of local businesses and employers. Collaboration among PreK-12 school districts, county CTE schools and the business community, including organizations such as the New Jersey Business and Industry Association, would be invaluable in designing curricula and assessments to position students for post-secondary employment. In addition, by learning about county vocational-technical schools' experience with employers, the greater education community would be able to identify the skills that should be developed and assessed. (The New Jersey Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools provides descriptions of "Manufacturing-Related Programs" in the county CTE districts, which include the skills acquired in these career programs. See Appendix V.)

Multimodal Assessment

In addition to proficiency in mathematics and language arts, indicators of student growth can include social and emotional learning, observable demonstration of entrepreneurism, goal-setting, and collaboration and teamwork. Students learn in various ways, and many will perform at levels more reflective of their actual progress when the testing platform is aligned with their preferred learning style. Therefore, NJDOE should consider multi-modal assessments in addition to any standardized test as it develops a successor to PARCC, the state's current assessment.

For example, the NJDOE might consider incorporating leadership skills into an observable and measurable test. The involvement of students in the development of their own projects ("voice and choice"), including goal-setting and time management, could be a valuable addition to a performance-based assessment.

"Career-Focused Students"

The assumptions that the most intelligent students attend college, and that success is defined by the colleges they attend and the degrees they earn, must be refuted. These assumptions not only stigmatize a large segment of our population, but they are simply not true.

In fact, the term "non-college-bound learner" suggests a negative (absence of college) rather than a positive (focused on career) and should be replaced with "career-focused learner" in all references to this population of students. While this report continues to use the term "non-college-bound learner" because it was part of the original charge, the Task Force recommends that, going forward, all references be to the "career-focused learner."

> *"Non-college-bound learner" suggests a negative—the absence of college—and should be replaced with "career-focused learner" in all references.*

The entire education community must proactively ensure that all parents understand this paradigm shift. Many parents, educators and others are not fully aware that, in the current economy, there is increasing opportunity for students to pursue careers that do not require a college degree, but provide financial and personal rewards equal to, or greater than, careers that do.

Students should be exposed in the early grades to these opportunities, and curriculum and assessment should be aligned so that there is a seamless process for the preparation of career-focused students.

Creating a program of instruction, with assessments that will advance job-readiness, will require adjustment in many areas, including change in the societal and cultural attitudes toward vocational learning

County Workforce Development/Investment Boards

Assuring that our students are equipped to enter those careers will require a persistent and cooperative process with state agencies and broad school-wide efforts within and beyond individual districts. It may be helpful to reach out to entities that have not traditionally worked with public schools to support job training, such as County Workforce Development/ Investment Boards. Another area that should be explored is collaboration among industry/ trades, NJDOE and local school districts to develop internships and other co-operative and entrepreneurial opportunities for student participation.

The current role County Workforce Development/Investment Boards includes the provision of training that qualifies participants for skilled entry-level jobs. As noted in Chapter 2 of this

report, some members of Workforce Development/Investment Boards said that they have more resources than clients and that there is a surplus of funds. This situation may be related to sections of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (*Public Law* 113-128) and related U.S. Department of Labor regulations (20 CFR 681.410) that require states and local Workforce Development Boards to allocate at least 75 percent of the funding received through the Act to programs for out-of-school students.

The Task Force believes that NJSBA should advocate for changes in federal law and regulations to allow Workforce Development/Investment Boards to direct more of their resources to the training of in-school youth. Upon such changes, the state Department of Labor & Workforce Development should ensure that state procedures give county Workforce Development/ Investment Boards the leeway to expand programming for currently enrolled students.

As the Task Force arrived at its recommendations, it raised a number of issues for further discussion, including the following:

- Examining whether the depth of career exploration that occurs in many schools is adequate, or if it only addresses the names of careers without providing further exploration and explanation of the skills needed in a particular area;
- Assessing what steps schools might take to assist students who are not taking CTE courses and feel forced to enroll in college, but have no great interest in attending;
- Crediting hands-on skills toward graduation requirements, and
- Working with the local business community to develop workshops in schools on vocational opportunities.

The Task Force believes technology education teachers are critical to efforts to better serve the career-focused learner. They provide students with problem-solving and design-based instruction that engages students in real-world and meaningful experiences. The recommendations in Chapter 4 of this report, "Teacher Preparedness and Certification," are critical to ensuring the delivery of meaningful CTE programming to our students.