

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

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By Lori Fayhee

Florida's public school Testing Season is now in full swing through May 7th. As in the movie, *The Hunger Games*, with our students as the 'Tributes,' the odds are never in their favor. Florida's expensive, excessive and high-stakes tests do not measure student mastery. The State Board of Education sets the curve to determine how many students pass these tests. Each year, approximately forty-three percent of all students in grades three through eight and roughly fifty percent of all students in grades 9 and 10 fail the reading test. On the first run of the Florida algebra end-of-course (EOC) exam, students achieved top scores by answering approximately 58 percent of the questions correctly. Due to public outcry and a vocal Opt Out movement, Florida Legislators are calling for better and fewer tests. Senate Bill 964 would delete the ninth-grade language arts Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) and the EOC exams in algebra 2, civics, geometry, and U.S. history; require a paper-and-pencil alternative for online exams; and allow districts to use national tests in place of the 10th-grade language arts section of the FSA. The elimination of four EOCs will provide relief to our high school students, but the remaining algebra 1 and biology EOC exams will still account for 30-percent of a student's grade in these classes. State Statute already allows for the use of a national test, the ACT or SAT, to be used in place of the Language Arts FSA graduation requirement but the required concordant score is higher than that required for most college admissions.

Florida's high-stakes testing graduation requirement has been enforced since 1983 and students who meet all other graduation requirements but do not pass the test receive a Certificate of Completion but no diploma. Since 1999, students' FCAT (now FSA) scores are tied to school grades, which factor into school funding, student advancement, and whether a school requires costly intervention. The stakes are high. Security is high. Only the testing company can review the completed test. Children who fail the test are denied promotion to the fourth grade, required to attend remedial classes, or are denied a standard high school diploma regardless of grades or class standing. Students denied a high school diploma can't get into many colleges, can't enlist in the armed forces or qualify for well-paying jobs. Less than 14 states require an exit exam to earn a high school diploma.

Published studies confirm that low-income students score lower on these standardized tests than more affluent students, and yet, counterintuitively, schools that receive low grades, based on student scores, receive less funding than schools with higher student scores. More recently, student scores are also tied to teacher evaluations, employment, and pay, which has reduced our pool of qualified teachers. The percentage of Florida students leaving public high schools before their fourth year, without a standard high school diploma, remains at over 21 percent.

For a stronger Florida economy and a lower crime rate, we need more local control and less government overreach in our public schools. Our highly educated teachers deserve the time and autonomy to teach more and test less. Uniform classroom textbooks still offer chapter tests which determine student mastery. Please urge your legislators to put your tax money back into the classroom and stop spending it on unproven and excessive testing.