



CONCERNING KIDS

Contents:

The Ohio Graduation Test:
Background for Decision
Makers - page 1

The Ohio Graduation Test
as a Measure of College
Readiness - page 2

The Broader Context of
Ohio's State Tests - page 3

Action Steps to Help More
Ohio Students Pass the
Ohio Graduation Test -
page 5

Questions for further
Discussion - page 6

KidsOhio.org is an Ohio-led, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to improve the lives and education of Ohio's nearly three million children, especially disadvantaged youngsters. To learn more, visit us on the web at www.KidsOhio.org.

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The Ohio Graduation Test: Background for Decision Makers

The Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) is Ohio's exit exam for high school students. Ohio's graduating class of 2007 is the first class required to pass this test in order to graduate. As of the most recent administration of the test in March 2007, *approximately 93 percent of seniors statewide passed all five sections.*

Since about 9,000 seniors still had not passed all five sections of the Ohio Graduation Test after the March 2007 administration, and as result were not able to graduate with their classmates, the test has been a subject of debate and discussion.

What is the debate over the Ohio Graduation Test?

Those who question the Ohio Graduation Test are concerned that some students struggling with one or two sections of the test are good students who are otherwise successful in their schools. Some are also concerned that the test may cause some schools to narrow their curricula, focusing more on the test than on developing the skills the test is designed to assess.

Those in favor of the test point out that student achievement standards are inconsistent from school to school. Further, proponents of the test assert that it provides a way to gauge whether all students are acquiring a core base of knowledge and skills; that it does not preclude a creative, diverse curriculum; and that it is an important tool for identifying and closing achievement gaps.

What are the facts about the Ohio Graduation Test?

Ohio is among 22 states with high school graduation tests as a graduation requirement (including large, diverse states such as CA, NY, FL, and TX).¹ The OGT replaced the ninth-grade proficiency test as Ohio's exit exam for high school students. The testing requirements for the OGT were established by the Ohio General Assembly in 2001 based on recommendations by the Governor's Commission for Student Success. The graduating class of 2007 was the first class who had to pass all five sections of this test in order to graduate. The test:

- Assesses tenth-grade-level knowledge.
- Has fewer multiple-choice questions, more short essay questions.
- Measures in-depth understanding of concepts and applications, rather than memorization skills.
- Has five sections: reading, writing, social studies, math and science.
- Requires students to score at or above the Proficient level on all five sections in order to graduate.^{2,3}

The class of 2007 had seven opportunities to take those sections of the OGT that they have not passed, most recently in March 2007. Students have an additional opportunity to take the test throughout the month of July.

How did the class of 2007 perform on the Ohio Graduation Test?

As of March 2007, approximately 93 percent of seniors statewide passed all five sections of the test, compared with 77 percent at the beginning of the school year.⁴

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the class of 2007 passed all five sections of the test on their first attempt. That is almost twice the passing rate of the class of 1994 on their first attempt at the ninth-grade proficiency test (33 percent).⁵

What were the passing rates for the class of 2007 in Ohio's 8 high-poverty large urban districts?

In Ohio's eight large urban districts, the percentage of seniors who passed all five sections of the OGT by the end of the 2006-2007 school year ranged from 57 percent in Cleveland to 94 percent in Cincinnati. Passing rates for the class of 2007 in all eight of Ohio's large urban districts are reported in column [b] of the table below.⁶

The table also includes the percentage of disadvantaged students by district (column [c]). Note that some districts with high rates of disadvantaged students also had high OGT passing rates. For example, the Canton City School District's OGT passing rate for the class of 2007 was as high as the statewide passing rate, but the percentage of disadvantaged students served by the district is over twice that of the statewide average.

[a] School District	[b] Percent of Class of 2007 Seniors who <u>Passed</u> all Five Sections of the OGT	[c] Percent of District's Students who are Disadvantaged
Cincinnati	94	64
Canton	93	72
Statewide	93	35
Akron	92	77
Toledo	90	67
Columbus	88	74
Youngstown	84	69
Dayton	84	65
Cleveland	57	100

Sources: Col. [b] The Enquirer, based on information reported by the districts; Col. [c] Ohio Department of Education Power User Reports for the 2005-2006 school year.

Note: Col. [b] numbers are preliminary and subject to revision. Akron, Youngstown, Columbus, and Dayton's *failure rates* (100 less the number reported above for the district) may include students who also did not have enough credits to graduate. "Economically disadvantaged" is abbreviated as "disadvantaged."

The Ohio Graduation Test as a Measure of College Readiness

What does the ACT say about Ohio students' college readiness?

While 93 percent of Ohio's 2007 senior class passed the OGT, several studies suggest that many Ohio students need to be better prepared for college and the workforce:

- Based on the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, students from Ohio's class of 2006 would meet significant challenges from college-level course work. In Ohio, 66 percent of the class of 2006 took the ACT.⁷ While performance varied from subject to subject, only 24 percent of ACT-tested students from Ohio's class of 2006 met the ACT Benchmark Scores for all four ACT test subjects.⁸
- Ohio ranks 29th in postsecondary and workforce readiness according to a 2007 report from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.⁹



What does Achieve, Inc. say about the Ohio Graduation Test?

Achieve, Inc. is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization with a board comprised of six governors and six CEOs, including Jerry Jurgensen of Columbus-based Nationwide, one of the largest insurance and financial services companies in the world.¹⁰ Achieve's 2007 report "Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio" calls for an increase in the rigor and relevance of Ohio's current high school assessment system.¹¹ According to Achieve, the OGT does not indicate whether a student will successfully transition into college or a career, nor does the test align well with the proposed Ohio Core, an initiative that sets out a more rigorous curriculum for Ohio's high school students.¹²

Achieve recommends considering the phasing out of the OGT in favor of end-of-course exams in order to ensure consistency and rigor in instruction and to reduce the overall number of tests that students must take. For instance, Ohio could institute a statewide end-of-course biology exam for all students enrolled in high school biology courses. The test would replace local final exams and test whether all biology students are learning the same key concepts by testing to a standard consistent across the state.

End-of-course exams are currently used in 13 states (and planned to be implemented in 15 others) and, in advanced courses, can serve as an indicator of postsecondary readiness. Currently, Virginia, Maryland, New York and Oklahoma all require students to pass a select group of end-of-course exams in order to graduate.

The Broader Context of Ohio's State Tests

What are Ohio's state tests by grade?

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law requires that all youngsters in grades three through eight be tested once a year in reading and math and for states to establish standards in these subjects. Starting in the school year 2007-2008, states must also test students in science at least once in elementary, middle and high school.

Ohio goes beyond the requirements of NCLB by adding writing and social studies tests. Ohio's state-administered tests are listed below by grade:

Grade	Test
3	Reading, Mathematics
4	Reading, Mathematics, Writing
5	Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies
6	Reading, Mathematics
7	Reading, Mathematics, Writing
8	Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies
10 (11-12 as needed)	Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Writing (OGT)

Source: Ohio Department of Education, Testing and Assessment webpage.

Note: K-12 Limited English Proficient students are required by State and Federal law to take an annual assessment of their English proficiency: the Ohio Test of English Language Acquisition.

In addition to Ohio's state-administered tests, school districts may administer their own assessments.



How can tests be used as a tool to improve Ohio's educational system?

There are key skills that cannot be measured through paper and pencil tests. These include the ability to build relationships, racial and ethnic tolerance, creativity, innovation, collaboration and teamwork. However, test results help teachers and school districts assess students' grasp of core knowledge and skills and provide targeted intervention where necessary. Since all students take the same test, the results provide a consistent basis for analysis and comparison across students and groups of students.

One such use of test results is to identify groups of students whose educational needs are not being met. For instance, statewide performance on the OGT for the 2005-2006 school year indicates a 14- to 29-point achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students:

OGT Section	Passing Rate among Non-Disadvantaged Students	Passing Rate among Disadvantaged Students	Achievement Gap
Reading	93	78	15
Writing	92	78	14
Mathematics	88	67	21
Citizenship	86	62	24
Science	81	52	29

Source: Ohio Department of Education Power User Reports for the 2005-2006 school year.

Note: sample includes all students taking the OGT (not just seniors.) "Economically disadvantaged" is abbreviated as "disadvantaged." Numbers are rounded.

Data such as these inform educators and policy makers about where to focus their attention to improve the education of Ohio's students.

Progress has been made with the help of tests, but how can Ohio continue to improve at all levels?

There has been a long history of bi-partisan support in Congress and in Ohio for raising standards and for helping students and teachers perform at higher levels. With the help of assessments like the OGT, Ohio has made significant improvements in the education of its students. According to *Education Week*, Ohio's K-12 public school system ranks 10th in K-12 achievement—based on measures of absolute levels of performance and on improvements or changes over time.¹³

However, there is still much room for progress. The Achieve, Inc. report also points out that while Ohio has taken some steps, the state must develop more rigorous standards and assessments for continued improvement:

"Research indicates that the best systems in the world create a high challenge for their children that includes high standards and rigorous, equitable assessments. This will require Ohio to go beyond the strong progress in this area over the last 10 years by aligning K-12 standards with knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and the global economy and by benchmarking its standards against those of high-performing states and especially nations that compete with the United States."¹⁴

A 2007 report by the U.S. Department of Education on state proficiency standards also suggests a need to raise the bar in Ohio. The report ranks states according to the how their 8th-grade state proficiency standards stack up against the standards of the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam. Ohio's standards ranked 25th out of 34 in 8th grade reading and 14th out of 36 in 8th grade math.¹⁵



Action Steps to Help More Ohio Students Pass the Ohio Graduation Test

The landscape of Ohio's state assessment system may continue to change. In the meantime, educators and policy makers can take steps to help more Ohio students pass the OGT.

- 1) *Analyze test results.* Test results provide a powerful way of pointing to what is working and what is not and identifying needed improvements.
 - Identify which parts of the test were the most challenging, and which concepts and skills teachers and students need to focus on.
 - Identify classrooms, schools and districts with high passing rates—especially those with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students—as a starting point for finding practices that get results.
 - Examine the data at the school and classroom level to identify problem areas that do not show up in district averages. For example, OGT passing rates for the class of 2007 in the Cleveland Municipal School District varied dramatically from school to school—from as low as 26 percent to as high as 98 percent.¹⁶

- 2) *Monitor and foster student progress.* Students have several opportunities to pass the OGT. Schools can supervise and support a student who is struggling with the test.
 - Analyze attendance, discipline, grades and credits earned to shape intervention and target extra help. This approach can also be used prior to 10th grade to identify students at risk of having difficulty with the test.
 - Require remedial coursework in subject areas with which the student is struggling.¹⁷
 - Develop mentoring and coaching for test-taking strategies and the academic standards measured by the test. The Ohio Department of Education has launched a new website (www.success.ode.state.oh.us) to help students prepare for state tests.

- 3) *Commit to the continued improvement of Ohio's schools.* The stronger Ohio's schools are, the better prepared students will be for the test when they reach 10th grade.
 - Analyze the progress that Ohio has made to elevate our state to 10th in the nation in public school K-12 achievement. Identify areas that need work.
 - Consider the recommendations of independent studies such as the Achieve, Inc. report.
 - Use “value-added” measurements of achievement and progress. This valuable tool analyzes a student's assessment results from year to year to measure a student's growth over time—rather than only analyzing results at the class, school and district levels. Value-added measurements will be introduced to Ohio's K-12 schools in Fall 2007. Since all Ohio students are now issued unique student ID numbers, it will be possible to follow student progress much more accurately.¹⁸
 - Raise expectations for students. A 2005 report from the Education Trust found that in schools serving a majority of economically disadvantaged students and demonstrating greater-than-expected growth over three years in academic performance, a key factor for that success is higher expectations of all students, regardless of their students' prior academic performance.¹⁹



Questions for further Discussion:

- Should Ohio move toward multi-state, nationwide or global measures of achievement, given that state test results are not comparable across states? (Ohio recently took a step in this direction, by joining eight other states in the voluntary creation of a multi-state Algebra II assessment.)
- Should Ohio consider phasing out the OGT in favor of end-of-course exams in core subjects, as recommended by Achieve, Inc.?
- How should teachers, schools and districts be held accountable for student achievement on the OGT?

Endnotes:

- 1 - "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year." Center on Education Policy. 16 August 2006.
- 2 - A student's performance on each section is scored as Limited, Basic, Proficient, Accelerated or Advanced. For score ranges for each achievement level as of March 2007 see "Ohio Statewide Testing Program Rules Book." Ohio Department of Education. 12 March 2007.
- 3 - Students who pass only four of the five sections of the OGT may graduate if they meet all of the following criteria. The student must have: (1) missed a passing score by 10 points or less on one section; (2) a 97 percent high school attendance rate; (3) not been expelled in any of the last four school years; (4) a grade point average of at least 2.5 out of 4.0 in the subject area related to the section of the OGT that the student did not pass; (5) completed all curriculum requirements in the failed area; (6) attended intervention programs; and (7) a letter recommending graduation from the student's high school principal and each of the student's high school teachers in the subject area related to the section of the OGT that the student did not pass. Decisions on eligibility will be made on the local level. The alternative eligibility criteria is from Ohio Revised Code §3313.615. Ohio Department of Education. www.ode.state.oh.us.
- 4 - "Graduation-test failures squelch seniors' plans." Jennifer Smith Richards. *The Columbus Dispatch*. 23 May 2007.
- 5 - "Up to the task: With right effort, Ohio students will make the grade with new exam." *The Columbus Dispatch*. 26 May 2007.
- 6 - Keep in mind that these passing rates are for students who made it all the way to the second semester of their senior year. Based on average daily membership data from the Ohio Department of Education, the enrollment history for Ohio's class of 2007 is as follows: 9th grade - 156,014; 10th grade - 139,883; 11th grade - 130,981. According to the *Columbus Dispatch* (see endnote four) Ohio had roughly 130,000 seniors in Spring 2007. The causes behind enrollment trends may be complex and require further study.
- 7 - This compares to the 40 percent of 2006 high school graduates nationwide who took the test. "2006 Average ACT Scores by State." ACT, Inc. 2007. <http://www.act.org/news/data/06/states.html>.
- 8 - "ACT High School Profile Report: The Graduating Class of 2006: Ohio." ACT, Inc. 2007. <http://www.act.org/news/data/06/pdf/states/Ohio.pdf>.
- 9 - "Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness." U.S. Chamber of Commerce. 2007. www.uschamber.com/reportcard.
- 10 - www.Achieve.org.
- 11 - "Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio." Achieve, Inc. 2007.
- 12 - Under the proposed Core curriculum, in order to graduate from high school, Ohio students who begin ninth grade after July 1, 2010 must complete 20 credits including 4 English units, 4 math units including Algebra II, 3 science units including physical science, biology, and chemistry, advanced biology, or earth/space science, 3 social studies units, ½ health unit, and ½ physical education unit.
- 13 - "From Cradle to Career: Connecting American Education from Birth through Adulthood." State Highlight Reports. *Education Week*. 2007. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/01/04/17shr.h26.html?qs=cradle+to+career>.
- 14 - "Creating a World-Class Education System in Ohio." Achieve, Inc. 2007. Quote from page four.
- 15 - "Mapping 2005 State Proficiency Standards onto the NAEP Scales." U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. 2007.
- 16 - "More crises on schools' last day: 43 percent of seniors fail state exam." Scott Stephens. *The Plain Dealer*. 7 June 2007.
- 17 - Districts are required to provide intervention to students who score below the Proficient level on the OGT as per R.C. 3301.0711. See "Ohio Statewide Testing Program Rules Book." Ohio Department of Education. 12 March 2007.
- 18 - www.battelleforkids.com.
- 19 - "Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students." The Education Trust. 2005. www.edtrust.org.

