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## PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

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### End of Course Testing in Georgia High Schools

By *Miriam Lang*

The requirement for end-of-course testing to replace Georgia's current high school graduation test surfaced on January 30, 1999, when Representatives Porter, Jamieson, Taylor, Ashe, and O'Neal co-sponsored House Bill 308. This bill amended the Quality Basic Education Act to require that secondary school students pass end-of-course tests in order to receive credit for Algebra I, American and Georgia Government, American history, American literature, Biology I, Chemistry I, Geometry, and Writing and Composition. According to this bill, the "State Board of Education no later than July 1, 2000, would be required to adopt end-of-course assessment instruments...and shall establish a passing score for each such instrument. On and after September 1, 2000, students would not receive credit for these courses unless they earned a passing score" (Georgia School Superintendents Association, 1999-2000). The bill passed the General Assembly and became law on July 1, 1999.

In August, 1999, Governor Roy Barnes met with the 64-member Education Reform Study Commission to discuss end-of-course testing of high school students. Governor Barnes strongly supported end-of-course testing, stating that these tests would "help to determine where children stand academically." He added that, "It's better to be discouraged when you can do something about it than when you're in the unemployment line." (Salzer, 1999). Based on the Education Reform Study Committee's recommendations, Barnes pushed the Governor's A+ Education Reform Act through the Georgia General Assembly early in 2000. The Act stipulated that the Department of Education should "promulgate a schedule for the development and administration of all end-of-course tests by December 1, 2000." The Act also allowed local school boards of education to "have the option of allowing scores on end-of-course assessments to be counted as part of a student's grade in the course" (Official Code, 2001).

In August, 2000, the Georgia Department of Education Advisory Panel conducted 10 statewide sessions "to gain insight and seek information from stakeholders regarding issues surrounding the end-of-course tests, as delineated in the Governor's A+ Education Reform Act of 2000." Parents, teachers and administrators were asked to respond to a series of ten questions. These included questions pertaining to which courses would be tested, the sequencing of the tests, who should be tested, equity in testing, and whether course credit would depend on the tests (Advisory Panel Summary, 2000).

On October 4, 2001, NCS Pearson was awarded the electronic testing contract. This method of testing was selected because it would dramatically reduce scoring and reporting demands by providing immediate results to schools. NCS Pearson selected schools from volunteers across the state to pilot the test. Schools were chosen based on sampling criteria to ensure adequate representation from the entire state with respect to region, race/ethnicity, and gender (NCS Pearson, 2001). During the week of December 3-7, 2001, the pilot

tests were administered. The purpose of the pilot test was "to gather information about the test performance rather than individual student performance; therefore, results [would] not be made available to schools or school systems" (Floyd County Schools, 2001).

The current plan is that "all eight end-of-course tests will be administered for the first time in Spring 2003." Thereafter, tests will be administered three times per year, in winter, spring and summer (Georgia Department of Education, 2002). This will accommodate those school systems operating on a block schedule, as well as summer schools. The Muscogee County School District has mandated that the end-of-course test will count as 20% of the student's overall grade as allowed by Official Code 20-2-281 (Arnold, 2002).

Although other states have implemented end-of-course testing, the concept is still in its early stages and hard data concerning possible outcomes and repercussions associated with the tests are not yet available. Tennessee in 2000 stipulated that "students entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2001-2002 must successfully complete the requirements in order to receive a regular diploma" (High School End-of-course Tests Policy, 2002). At this point in Georgia, no decision has been made concerning how end-of-course tests will count towards graduation. The Georgia Department of Education reports, "The decision will be finalized once the testing and graduation rules are revised. The rules are scheduled to be revised later in the test development process" (2002).

Governor Roy Barnes was the driving force behind the A+ Education Reform Act which called for the development and administration of these tests. While some members of his Education Reform Study Commission embraced the idea whole-heartedly, others had questions about the tests. Those in favor of the tests saw them as a diagnostic tool for students in that "the program would inform students early on about their readiness for college, technical school or a job.... It would also help students choose the right high school courses through the remainder of their careers to achieve the skills they need for life after they graduate.... It would give a lot of credibility to the high school diploma" (Salzer, 1999).

Other members of the Commission worried that parents would be frustrated about what the tests would show about their children. An added concern was the proliferation of tests. State Board of Education Chairman Otis Brumby urged the task force to eliminate some of the exams students take: "We've got so many tests, I don't believe people focus on them because there are so many. I think we have so many they don't have an impact" (Salzer, 1999).

In Columbus, Shaw High School Principal James Arnold opposes the tests. He cites the policy requiring administration of the same test to students in courses with the same QCC objectives, for example Algebra I and Applied Problem Solving with Applied Algebra, and Euclidean Geometry and Informal Geometry. These courses approach the same objectives from different perspectives, one theoretical and one applied. Thus the students who take the applied approach will be at a distinct disadvantage in questions pertaining to manipulating variables and theorems, for example. He also expresses concern about the lag time and accuracy of test results: "It's possible that a student would take summer school because they thought they needed it when they don't and vice-versa." He cites problems with the Criterion Referenced Tests given in spring of 2001 in Muscogee County. All of the tests were graded incorrectly and

were thrown out. Above all, Arnold says, "I have a problem with not permitting teachers to decide who passes their class. You can't tell me that a teacher who has had personal contact with a student for 90 days doesn't know whether that student should pass or not" (Arnold, 2002).

I have several reservations concerning this policy. There are many students who do not test well. Their performance on tests does not truly reflect their knowledge of the subject matter. At the same time, there are students who test very well and who have an advantage with a multiple choice tests even though they may not have bothered to master the techniques necessary to reach the answers by themselves. Also, students who do not test well may have excellent study habits coupled with a high level of motivation that would indicate they would indeed be successful at the next level. The reverse may be true of some students who test well.

I share Dr. Arnold's concerns with respect to giving the same test to students in different classes. I fear that teachers who teach the applied or informal classes, as mandated, will be at an unfair advantage as will their students. Tennessee has provided and funded extensive staff development to all its Algebra teachers to overcome this discrepancy (High School End-of-Course Tests Policy, 2002), but Georgia has not done the same. It may very well be that Georgia teachers of applied mathematics will turn those courses into clones of the theoretical courses as a matter of self-preservation.

A final concern that I have has to do with the fickle nature of public education and politics. With a newly elected Governor in Georgia, these tests may no longer be a first priority, and all the money, time, and energy spent in studying and implementing this program may be in vain.

### Refereneces

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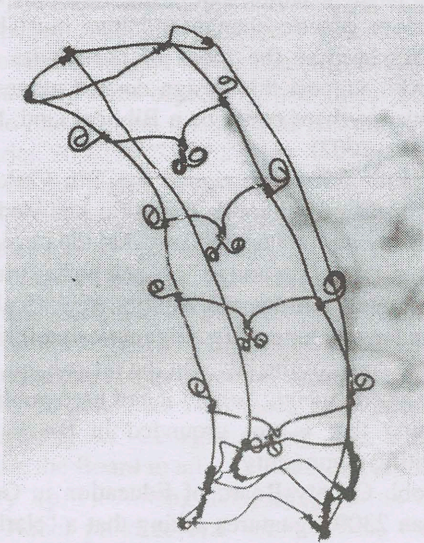
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