

Defining what matters in education

Guest column

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. —

Redefining Success

Previous models of accountability and assessment in the state of Tennessee can be best described as proficiency models. Both the Tennessee Proficiency Test, which started in 1970 and the TCAP Competency test that started in 1995, established benchmarks that were well within reach of the average student.

Oak Ridge has historically seen success in meeting these goals with almost 90 percent of its students. The nature of these benchmarks, the level of questioning, and cut scores used to determine Proficient or Advanced status levels made it difficult to quantify a student's actual achievement as it relates to workforce readiness and college readiness. Students who scored proficient on these assessments may have still been unable to enter the workforce without significant training in basic workplace competencies. Students who scored advanced on these assessments may not have been able to gain entrance to colleges or universities based on college entrance examinations without significant remediation and developmental courses. This variability in actual outcomes has led the state to replace the proficiency standard with a college/workforce readiness standard applied to all students.

The notion of college/workforce readiness applied to all students has been the topic of much debate. Lost in the debate, however, is the message of how much higher this standard is from previous standards.

The difference, quite simply, is night and day. In fact, it is difficult to find a cliché that captures the full magnitude of the difference. The reason for this drastic difference is twofold:

1. The college readiness standard measures students on a more rigorous set of performance standards. Under the previous proficiency models, students in Oak Ridge, as well as across the state, were divided into achievement categories based on whether they were Below Proficient, Proficient, or Advanced. Using the previous standards, the students in the top half of the advanced category were capable of meeting the new college readiness standard. Students who scored advanced but were in the bottom half of the group or in the top half of the proficient group would struggle to meet the college readiness standard. Students who were in the bottom half of the proficient group or below proficient would not meet the current college readiness standard. In order to understand what this represents in Oak Ridge, consider the top chart:

That chart shows that in Oak Ridge, using the previous proficiency standards, 59 percent of eighth-graders were advanced; 38 percent were proficient, and only 3 percent were below proficient. In other words, 97 percent of the students met the proficiency standard. However, the next chart shows a very different picture when applying the college readiness standard.

When you apply the new standard, only 47 percent of eighth-graders in Oak Ridge met or exceeded the standard. The magnitude of this difference can be seen in each of the four subjects included in the accountability model: English, reading, math, science. (Note: Social studies standards are addressed in the reading subtest.)

2. Applying college readiness standards to all is a significant step and a departure from previous practices across the state and in Oak Ridge. A key component of the Tennessee Diploma Project is the elimination of the two-track system, where students would essentially decide toward the end of middle school to pursue a college preparatory track or a vocational track, also known as Career and Technical Education track. Under a two-track system, students seeking to enter the workforce after high school or enter a trade school or community college for the purpose of developing specific workforce skills would tailor their program around a group of classes requiring a specific level of skill attainment.

A student in this track might take a course like Principals of Technology in lieu of physics. Students would learn the application of physics in technical/mechanical environments but would not address the upper level math skills that a physics student would encounter in preparation for college-level physics or mathematics. The physics student and the Principals of Technology student are essentially two different students on two different tracks, and likely two different destinations after high school. Under the Tennessee Diploma Project, these two tracks go away or are merged into one track called College and Workforce Ready. While the two classes will continue to exist, the

expectation is that all students reach a level of skill that will enable them to meet the standards of college level mathematics. The rationale being that in today's workforce everyone will have to possess a higher skill set in order to compete in an ever changing and demanding global marketplace. While these students would each have taken TCAP exams and certain End of Course exams, only the college preparatory student would take college entrance exams like the ACT and SAT. However, a major component of the TDP is that all students will take a battery of college readiness exams starting in the eighth grade. Developed by the ACT, the exams are as follows: EXPLORE (8th Grade), PLAN (10th Grade), and ACT (11th Grade).

Clearly, success under the previous standards was a very different proposition compared to where we find ourselves today. As a result, we must establish new benchmarks, aligned to a new trajectory, and pointed toward new annual targets. Previous targets were based on 85-plus percent meeting the standard each year; new targets will be based on the knowledge that as many as 50 percent or more may start out below the standard and another 20 percent, while meeting it, will need significant work to move above the standard. This new trajectory can be viewed on the new Oak Ridge schools' Dashboard (set for release in January 2010). The ORS Dashboard is consistent with the goals of the Tennessee Diploma Project, SCORE, and the state Department of Education.

The Dashboard is divided into four categories: Readiness for Middle/High School, Excellence in High School Performance, Completion of High School Standards, Readiness for College/Workplace.

The premise of the Dashboard is that if College/Workforce Readiness is the ultimate goal, then this is what we must target, measure, and monitor. For the parent, the question is simple: Is my child progressing toward college and workforce readiness or not? In the end, that's what matters.

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