

Are We Serious About Improving Education?



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THU | April 20
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Land Use, Construction and
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WED | April 26
Environmental Quality
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WED | April 26
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Beginning this year, high school seniors are not supposed to receive their diploma unless they have passed the state high school examination. This has been coming on for the last several years and was enacted as a part of overall reforms to focus students on a baseline level of achievement. Students may take the exam multiple times, and they must pass it just once in order to graduate.

Now that the deadline is upon us, and up to 45,000 students statewide may not pass the exam—thus, may not get their diplomas—the hue and cry is out there to abolish the exam. People decry the concept as unfair. They say the exam is biased. They say that students should be allowed to complete a “senior project” rather than showing competency through passing an exam. There are lots of excuses and rationalizations for letting the kids off the hook.

But the reality is that life won’t let people off the hook. Prospective employers won’t let people off the hook. If they can’t display the language and mathematics skills they need for a given job, no “project” will suffice to help them as adults when they enter the workforce.

Now it looks like the courts may decide.

But why? This is a matter of public policy. For years we have seen achievement scores decline. We have seen young people graduate who can’t read or do basic math—yet they have diplomas that attest to their educational achievement. The only way to really know whether they have learned anything is to test them, and the best way to test them is on a standard that applies to all.

Not only is it the only way to measure students, it is the best way to measure the schools. This problem also rests at the door of educators—the principals, administrators, counselors, teachers and elected officials that govern our educational institutions. If our schools are not teaching students the basic skills they need to pass the tests, we must address those failures. For example, when a student doesn’t pass the exam as a sophomore or junior, what does the teacher do? The system must be held accountable for students’ progress.

On that note, the educators must also face consequences. The consequence for a student failing the exam and not getting a diploma is serious; however, the consequence for educators who aren’t getting the job done is negligible, often little other than being shuffled to another school—a “dance of the lemons,” as some call it.

Let’s wind the clock back and recall all of the debate about raising standards in schools and testing to determine competence. Remember the discussion about abolishing social promotion and making sure that students don’t graduate for marking time in their seats? These exams were the solution. And now that we are on the verge of implementing the policy, we may back away from it.

Some school districts are talking about issuing a “competency certificate.” That is ludicrous. Either the student meets the requirements or not. Creating a new piece of paper that is designed to put a pretty face on a bad picture is not a solution. Attempting to work around the law is a bad lesson for our students.

We must start somewhere. The answer is to stick with the exam and make sure that our young people—and our schools—know that we mean it. They must study. They must attain a certain minimum level of competence of achievement. Then, and only then, will those who need the incentive begin to take this seriously.

And that’s *The Business Perspective*.



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The Business Perspective is an award-winning weekly opinion column by Rusty Hammer, President & CEO, L.A. Area Chamber

L.A. Business THIS WEEK

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