



Schools Should Stand Behind Their Diplomas

by Michael S. Shibler, Ph.D.

Summary

Too many Michigan students leave high school without mastering basic math and reading skills, forcing colleges and businesses to foot the bill for bringing students up to speed. More districts should follow the example of Grand Rapids-area Rockford Public Schools, which guarantees that its graduates possess basic skills by requiring them to pass competency tests before receiving their diplomas.

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At least one-third of Michigan students require remedial education after they've left the K-12 schools.

Most people would agree that a high school diploma should mean something. It should mean that the person holding the diploma possesses certain academic skills such as the ability to read or do basic math. Unfortunately, in an increasing number of instances, a diploma means no such thing.

A September 2000 study from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy quantified how much money Michigan institutions of higher learning and businesses spend to accommodate the lack of basic academic skills among high school graduates and employees. The bad news: At least one-third of Michigan students require remedial education after they've left the K-12 schools. It's costing the state's businesses and universities more than \$600 million annually to address this widespread lack of reading, writing, and arithmetic skills.

The study did not condemn K-12 schools. But it should serve to encourage districts in Michigan to guarantee their communities that they are equipping students with basic academic skills. Study author Dr. Jay P. Greene recommended that districts: a) adopt a test that students must pass before receiving diplomas; and b) hold themselves financially liable for graduates who need remedial education.

Are any school districts addressing the concerns raised by the study? I am proud to report that Rockford Public Schools recognized the importance of, and need for, accountability measures long ago and implemented an innovative program to guarantee that our graduates possess basic academic skills.

In fall 1989, the Rockford Public Schools Board of Education surveyed the community to determine what expectations residents and district employees have for their school system. One of the questions asked if students should be required to demonstrate proficiency in basic reading and mathematics prior to earning a high school diploma. Over 94 percent of the respondents said yes.

In 1991, following a comprehensive pilot program, our Board of Education implemented a competency testing component as part of the requirements for a high school diploma. This component requires

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students to take mathematics and reading tests during the spring of their freshman year. If a student fails either or both of the tests, he or she must select one of several options for remedial training. Successful completion of both tests is a prerequisite for earning a high school diploma from Rockford Public Schools.

Students completing all course work and other requirements for a diploma *except* for passing both competency tests are issued a “certificate of completion” in place of a diploma. Students may return after their senior year and retake the tests and, if successful, are only then issued a diploma.

If an employer who hires a Rockford graduate believes that the former student does not possess the basic reading and writing skills necessary to do his or her job, the employer is encouraged to contact me with those concerns. I will then offer the graduate remedial classes in the area in which he or she is deficient, free of charge, through our adult education program. Information on this service is prominently displayed on each diploma, and is communicated throughout the greater Grand Rapids area.

The competency testing initiative was implemented with the ninth grade class of 1991, having a direct impact on the 1995 graduates. The class of 2001 will be the seventh senior class required to meet the competency testing requirement for a high school diploma. I am unaware of any other Michigan school district that offers such a program or that otherwise guarantees the real meaning of its diplomas.

Since the initial community-wide questionnaire in 1989, three additional surveys have followed, each including the competency testing questions. Results continue to be overwhelming: Parents strongly support maintaining this requirement for a diploma.

The testing initiative is not intended to be punitive in nature. It was developed instead both to encourage students to be active participants in their education and to promote the community’s and employers’ confidence in local schools.

I encourage all public school districts in Michigan to hold themselves accountable by adopting competency testing that reflects the expectations and desires of their local communities. Doing so would ensure that the diplomas they grant are truly representative of academic achievement.

Our communities and children deserve nothing less than a quality education from every public school in our state. It is time we all stood behind our diplomas.

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(Dr. Michael S. Shibler is superintendent of Rockford Public Schools in Rockford, Michigan. More information on education reform can be found at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

Rockford Public Schools guarantees that students graduating with a diploma possess basic skills in mathematics and reading.

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