
High-Stakes AIMS is a Brutal Test That Hurts the Students

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The Republic's faith that the AIMS test will improve the effectiveness of our schools is based on the misconception that it measures a "specific set of skills that the state spelled out seven years ago." ("Let's use AIMS in the right way," Editorial, Friday.)

The "state," in this case, was fewer than a dozen volunteers who met one weekend in October 1995 at a Scottsdale resort for an "Academic Summit" (so named by then Superintendent of Public Instruction Lisa Graham Keegan). The mathematics panel, for example, included no math teachers or math specialists; when asked why, one Arizona Department of Education official remarked: "We don't want to know what they know. We deliberately cut them out of the process."

The resulting "summit" was in fact a group of laypersons easily manipulated by Keegan's hired consultants and corporate partner "facilitators." The most ridiculous miscarriage to emerge from this weekend of frantic confusion was the math standards. Brought to the summit by Keegan's consultants, the math standards survived a months' long charade of public feedback that left them virtually unchanged.

The standards served as the blueprint for the AIMS math test. Much has been written about this test. A past president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics labeled the AIMS math standards a ridiculous basis for a high school exit exam. Suffice it to say that the AIMS math test is readily recognized to be an examination so difficult that only a minority of college graduates could pass it.

But what of the claim that the AIMS test represents what Arizona high school graduates need to know to function in the world of work? I recently completed a study in conjunction with Cheryl Edholm, formerly of the East Valley Institute of Technology. About 50 employers in Maricopa County - representing manufacturing, health services, retail, legal services and the like - were shown a representative sample of Grade 10 AIMS math questions and asked, "Do your employees use math like this? Do you require it of them?" A sample of their employees was asked, "Do you use the math tested by these questions?"

The answers were overwhelmingly "no."

Ninety percent of the employers reported that their employees did not use such skills in their daily work. An equal percentage reported that they do not require such skills, and the employees confirmed that AIMS math is not a part of their work lives.

These results are no surprise to anyone who has seen the test; it involves advanced algebra, trigonometry, analytic geometry, and probability and statistics. By contrast, the most difficult math question on the Texas high school exit exam asked the student to estimate the size of an envelope required to hold an 8.5- by 11-inch piece of paper folded in thirds (a diagram was provided for assistance).

Lisa Keegan discounts the findings of ASU researchers David Berliner and Audrey Amrein that high-stakes test have been an ineffective reform because the "preliminary version of (their) study was published in material edited by Gene Glass, whose opposition to AIMS-like testing is fervent. (" 'Study' of AIMS-like tests shows a low regard for children," My Turn, Jan. 3)

The "material" in question is a peer-viewed scholarly journal that has in its decade of existence published research on both sides of the high-stakes testing controversy. Keegan's characterization of my opposition to such testing was accurate, however. It is a costly and brutal mistake that punishes students, demoralizes teachers and benefits no one.

The Republic has urged newly sworn-in Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne to "take aggressive steps to make sure that all schools have adopted a curriculum that includes the skills tested by AIMS and that they're actually teaching it." This is bad advice. He should scrap the current version of AIMS and put as much distance as possible between himself and the failed efforts of his predecessors.

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