

Impact of Standardized Testing on High School Completion Program (HSCP) Eligibility and Outcomes

Introduction

The High School Completion Program (HSCP) was created by the Vermont Legislature through Act 176 and began serving students in July 2006. HSCP was incorporated into the Flexible Pathways Initiative under Act 77 in 2013 and updated in November 2018, Title 16:

[16 V.S.A. § 943](#): Title 16: Education, Chapter 023: Courses Of Study, Subchapter 002: Flexible Pathways To Secondary School Completion, § 943. High School Completion Program

(a) There is created a High School Completion Program to be a potential component of a flexible pathway for any Vermont student who is at least 16 years of age, who has not received a high school diploma, and who may or may not be enrolled in a public or approved independent school.

The intent of the law is to create a pathway for students to achieve a diploma from their local high school. This program has been touted as a proficiency-based-model for the country that offers a flexible pathway to a quality high school diploma.

Statewide Student Data in FY2018

- 2,448 total students served in Vermont by Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) Providers
- 96,898 hours of service hours provided by AEL Providers
- 891 students were enrolled in the HSCP
- 41,879 hours of service provided by AEL Providers to HSCP students
- 271 students earned their diploma through HSCP

Background

Over the years, access to the HSCP for our most vulnerable and at-risk students has been eroded due to the increased use and rising thresholds of a minimum standardized test score as an eligibility requirement for entering the HSCP. Unfortunately, Vermont students are being denied access to this flexible pathway because their standardized test scores do not meet the minimum requirements established by the Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE) which currently states:

[HSCP Participation and Prerequisite Skills](#)

A certain initial skill level is necessary to indicate readiness for the High School Completion Program. As previously referenced, students assessed at NRS level 5 and above can be special group enrolled in the DataWorks system as an HSCP student. Below this level, only those students whose assessment demonstrates a minimum of NRS Level 4 in reading, writing and math may be enrolled in the HSCP special group type identified as Below NRS 5 in DataWorks, and only when prior approval has been requested and granted using the prior approval form.

We believe this policy is discriminatory and violates the intent and heart of the HSCP law as passed and reaffirmed in 2013 and 2018 because it assumes the NRS 4 or 5 levels accurately reflect the skill level, readiness and ultimate eligibility of Vermont students. These standardized tests scores were never intended to be the determining factor to assess a student's readiness for the HSCP - especially those students who have additional barriers such as a learning disability, traumatic brain injury, new Americans or those with English as a second

language. We also know that standardized tests unfairly impact students who experience poverty, are people of color, are from diverse cultures or other disenfranchised populations in Vermont. As indicated in the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results, only 22% of low-income Vermont students scored proficient or higher at 8th grade math while 39% of all Vermont students score proficient at math. The disparity between low-income and non-low-income test scores clearly indicates that low-income students perform significantly worse on standardized tests than the average.

This issue has increased exponentially in the past year due to the transition of the standardized tests to a new, more rigorous format. In Vermont we are now required to use only the TABE (Test for Adult Basic Education) Reading, Writing and Math assessment tests. In 2003, this battery of tests took a typical student less than 2 hours to complete. Today, this test takes over 5.5 hours and has increased in difficulty due to its focus on a more college-ready curriculum. Our Federal grants for Adult Basic Education and English Language Learners, mandate that our students be assessed in at least one standardized test (VT AOE requires all 3 tests), however it does not require a minimum test score for participation. The HSCP eligibility requirement is a self-imposed policy by VT AOE. Additionally, the HSCP is funded solely with state funds and therefore federal testing mandates do not apply.

As adult education and literacy providers, we believe standardized tests can be a good tool in helping our instructors assess the academic needs of our students, help focus our instruction and to monitor a student's improvement in essential skills. Relying on standardized tests as a determination of entrance and/or graduation for HSCP is counterproductive to the mission of the Flexible Pathways Initiative.

Conclusions

- The standardized testing policy established by VT AOE appears to be contrary to the new laws mandating proficiency-based education.
- Standardized testing creates an inequity among those who are the most disadvantaged.
- The HSCP is the only approved pathway, outside of the public and private school system, for a student to receive a high school diploma. VT AOE's standardized testing policy denies students who do not meet the minimum testing threshold participation in this flexible pathway to graduation. Without a high school diploma, Vermonters are often stuck in low wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement or additional training that would lead to better employment and a better life.
- In the state of Vermont, standardized test scores are not used for entry into nor graduation from a public high school. Each local high school determines if a student, including HSCP students, has met their district's requirements for graduation. In contrast, the VT AOE requires that students meet a standardized testing threshold to access the HSCP.
- For those students who have not been successful in a traditional school setting and/or do not test well, this standardized testing policy can set them up for failure once again. It creates confusion, uncertainty and anger among the students, schools and our local service provider network and deters referral and recruitment efforts.

Recommendation

We recommend that the use of standardized test scores as an eligibility or graduation criteria from the HSCP program be removed.