

What Business and Higher Education Leaders are Saying About Michigan's Education Standards

Column: Stay the course on rigorous K-12 standards

John Engler and Daniel Hurley 12:09 a.m. EDT September 17, 2015

We have a preparation gap in Michigan, and it's threatening the future opportunities of thousands of young people graduating from our high schools. Each year, 35 percent of our high school students who go on to college are not prepared for freshman level courses and need to enroll in remedial courses in mathematics and/or reading.

Those students have a steep hill to climb to stay in college and earn a meaningful degree or credential. Too many end up dropping out.

The good news is Michigan educators have been working to address this problem by introducing more challenging academic standards in elementary, middle and high school — standards that are aligned with the expectations students will face when they enter college and the job market. Michigan's employers and its colleges and universities overwhelmingly support these efforts because we know first-hand the opportunities for students who graduate high school college- and career-ready. And we know that Michigan's future economic prosperity depends on getting this right.

This fall marks a pivotal moment in our state's efforts to raise expectations and performance. State officials will release the first set of test results based on the new, higher Michigan Academic Standards. The Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress, known as M-STEP, is a more accurate assessment of our students' academic progress. The assessment asks students to demonstrate and apply their knowledge and skills such as critical thinking, analytical writing and problem solving — skills that young people need to be successful in our businesses and college campuses. While no single test can provide a complete picture of achievement, when combined with student grades and teacher reports, the assessments provide important information about student progress, helping teachers and parents know whether students will be ready for college and careers each step.

As we've seen in other states that have boosted K-12 learning standards, we may see lower scores on these new state tests initially. But this should not be cause for alarm. As is the case with any change, there is a period of adjustment as teachers and students transition to the new standards and tests. Any change in test scores simply reflects the higher standards our schools have been aiming for, standards that help ensure that Michigan students are ready for the increasingly competitive global economy.

Improving students' performance through higher standards is a far better approach than creating a false sense of accomplishment through higher test scores derived from weak academic standards. It is vital that parents, the public and policymakers understand this.

While parents, students, elected officials and business leaders may initially be taken aback by the results of the new M-STEP assessments, we should see them for the progress they really represent. A strategy that begins with high expectations and is matched by high standards, and an accurate measurement of where each child stands will help young people succeed in school and life.

We must remain resolute in ensuring that our K-12 students are fully equipped for success in college and in their careers.

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