

NJS Presents**Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Advocacy of an Exit Test for History/Social Studies in New Jersey*****By William Gorman****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.157>**

As states like New Jersey navigate the issue of graduation requirements, most states have gone to what is called “high stakes” exit testing for the purpose of awarding high school diplomas. These tests typically emerge to be Mathematics and Language Arts/Reading based. In states like New Jersey, though, these exit tests have given way to subject based tests in things such as Biology and Algebra. Social Studies is not tested, but should be, if the state claims to care about producing well-rounded students prepared to fulfill their civic duties as voting adults. William Gorman, an educator with 30 years’ experience, lobbies for such testing in this editorial.

As states like New Jersey navigate the issue of graduation requirements, most states have gone to what is called “high stakes” exit testing for the purpose of awarding high school diplomas. Whether these tests are commercially produced or state prepared, the same question always arises: what subject areas should be tested and what is the body of knowledge that students should be tested on to graduate with an accredited diploma?

Most states have opted to develop a testing program that tests in early to mid-elementary grades, middle school, and then typically a junior or senior year test. The subject areas that are tested are often an indicator of where those in charge place educational importance or priority to measure student competency. As a result, these tests typically emerge to be Mathematics and Language Arts/Reading based. In states like New Jersey, these exit tests have given way to subject

based tests in things such as Biology and Algebra. While I would agree that these types of tests are very important, those entrusted with making these decisions are losing sight of one most important element: what of other key subjects that ALL students should have a key core knowledge and understanding of? In New Jersey, after the decline of the H.S.P.A. assessment, and with the development of these subject based tests in Mathematics, Science, and Language Arts, there was years ago some discussion about whether or not there should be some type of exit test in Social Studies. While these discussions went on at the state level, the state ultimately abandoned plans to commit to such a test. The only question that can be asked here is: why? At the time, the response was limited resources.

As a history educator with more than thirty years of experience, I was shocked and saddened by the state's decision. Such a judgment was lacking in foresight. This type of judgment also indicates, in my view, a value judgment that History and Social Studies education are not all that important to those in the positions of authority. As an example, one of the components that is covered within the required two years of United States history for graduation is the United States Constitution. I have seen more recently any number of polls (Gallup and Pew Research Center) that have indicated how little Americans, and more specifically, graduating students, know about our governmental system or United States history. As a result of the above lack of competency that is displayed, if those graduating do not have a good grasp of Social Studies, this certainly can impact their ability to be functioning citizens who are well prepared to contribute to their democratic system. One must not forget that within Social Studies education the subjects included are such things of value as: government, geography, economics, and U.S./World history.

It has been interesting to see, as a result of such polls and surveys done within the country that some states are already beginning to reassess their exit testing programs to include Social

Studies related subjects. As an example, Mississippi recently passed legislation that will require all graduating seniors to pass a state-mandated exam in Civics/United States government in order to receive a diploma. It would seem to me that for students to be able to contribute successfully to society they need to have a basic understanding of the concepts of the Social Studies related subjects that I relate and address here. How is one to be able to function successfully without a basic understanding of economics and government? How is one able to have a proper understanding of American society without understanding the role of our past in our present and future? I would argue that those in state government and within the legislature need to show a commitment to Social Studies education that would demonstrate the necessity and importance that it ought to play in the creation of a future generation of state residents. The only way to do this, in my eyes, is to begin to assess the discipline of Social Studies as a key core component of subject-based tests that ought to be given for the granting of a truly accredited diploma in the State of New Jersey. The fact that states such as Mississippi, which has a much lower median income and state expenditure on education, has already committed to such an assessment suggests to me that we can surely commit to such an assessment ourselves.

This assessment also **SHOULD NOT** be a commercially prepared test as has been done with exit tests such as the previously given H.S.P.A. Social Studies and History educators on both the college and secondary level should be involved in the creation, design, and implementation of such a test.

I no longer want to hear from the state that they are committed to History and Social Studies education if they are not willing to begin to place true value on our subject area as an area of knowledge. It is not only about content but also about the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and other such valuable skills that students can gain from our subject area that have been too long

overlooked by those who make the decisions at the state level about “what is important for students,” enough to be assessed.

For the sake of the future of the state and educational credibility, it is time for those who teach History and Social Studies to push for such an assessment. Our subject has for too long been given a back seat without those making such decisions about assessment to realize the necessity and importance that knowledge of it gives to create better and more informed voters and citizens. I would love to hear from anyone who would like to discuss or pursue such an initiative with me.

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