

August 20: Reporting Back...The GRAD Exam

Question 1: What is the main concern/problem with the GRAD exam?

1. Bad press. The test itself may be long and take extra time (which is a problem), but its biggest problem is simply perception. In an anti-testing environment the bad press that the GRAD has gotten may lead us to institute something that is even more problematic. (e.g. lower standards, or suspect measurements).
2. There is no problem with the GRAD exam if the standards and benchmarks are the focus of teaching math in the classroom. If teachers need additional training because they do not understand how to teach a particular concept, let's make sure the department offers more training. But, please let's not dumb down the test.
3. I believe the main concern/problem with the GRAD exam is that some students are penalized from system inconsistencies.
4. The main problem with the GRAD exam is that it currently is not aligned to college ready entrance exams used in post-secondary education
5. Concerns about the reliability and validity of the GRAD as the ultimate high stakes test for Minnesota high school students - Unlike ACT and Accuplacer which have decades of data for millions of students, the GRAD tests are relatively new on the scene and many are questioning what they are measuring and how well they are doing it. While the GRAD tests may accurately measure the performance of students on state standards, do they accurately measure college and career readiness. It doesn't help that state standards have been modified several times as well as the testing model (paper pencil versus online). These changes have caused significant swings in rates of MCA student success and the initial GRAD is imbedded in those tests. Further, the MCA tests have been problematic since they have been asked to measure system and school accountability while measuring point in time student achievement and attempting to measure cohort growth.
6. Lack of clarity about the GRAD exam - The design and initial implementation of the GRAD exam failed to clearly identify the following questions; What is the root purpose of the exam? Who are the beneficiaries of the exam results? Why was it enacted into law? Because these questions weren't clearly explained up front, the GRAD test was not received enthusiastically by students and school systems. The exam continues to be misunderstood and undervalued.
7. Unlike MAP or EPAS testing, we currently have no system for measuring progress towards or readiness for successful passage of the GRAD exam. We are left "crossing our fingers" and hoping students do well. If they don't pass, each district is left to its own devices to determine appropriate remediation strategies. The impact is made larger in the case of the Math GRAD because the exam isn't given to students until the end of the junior year. If students are not successful, they and their school districts have essentially one year to address any issues with their math with only limited time and no additional resources to do so.

8. The only useful purpose of this is to grant a high school diploma. It was apparent at our last meeting that higher education holds no credence to the results of this grad exam.
9. The number of students that schools have that are not passing the exam! Perhaps, we are in need of levels of achievement earned and diplomas declaring those levels, because all high school diplomas do not represent the same level of skills demonstrated by all students.
10. On a very practical exam note: So much critical thinking involves metacognition and explaining *why* one thinks *what* one thinks. Literature / Nonfiction study provides opportunities for students to showcase their abilities to articulate and defend their thinking and thus demonstrate their critical thinking skills on paper.
The GRAD -- as it is written -- does not require students to do this very important work. To a simple degree, the writing test assesses students on their thinking. However, a constructive response in the reading assessment would require students to comprehend and logically interpret common material, and, thus, would provide MDE and teachers with a better understanding of students' critical thinking abilities than is possible with just the current multiple choice test in reading.
11. Not enough students are well enough prepared to meet expectations - pass the math GRAD.
12. I believe it has outlived its usefulness. In 1996 when the first BST was given, no other state tests existed, NCLB was not in existence, very little was expected of schools in the form of learning standards, and there was strong concern on the part of educators and the public that too many students were earning a diploma without requisite skills. However, these facts have changed dramatically.
State exams in Reading, Math and Science are in place to help evaluate students and schools; state standards are published and used heavily by schools to shape learning outcomes throughout the system; common course structures are expected for high schools. Even more fundamentally, other external forces have increased the pressure to create higher expectations for students, including the College and Career Ready movement.
All the current GRAD tests do is consume enormous resources at the state and local school for a very small handful of students. Some research shows that they have done little to increase the workplace skills required by employers, but some evidence does exist that they have increased the dropout rate.
13. One issue would be that of timeliness of results. We don't receive results early enough to begin to adjust curriculum for the upcoming year
14. The grad test is not sufficiently linked to what post-secondary education and employers say they want from high school graduates. "Critical Thinking" skills and Interpersonal Skills are very high on this list, but not specifically tested. The number of students who need to take remedial classes is another important item.
15. We try to have this one test do more than it is designed to do. It can't be an accountability test, a program improvement test, a graduation requirement exit exam, a measure of college/career readiness, etc. all at the same time
16. Too many students are failing this test. Why? Is the test a fair reflection of the level of math literacy that we expect of ALL students? Is it close enough to the course content? I hear from many curriculum people that the test is too difficult. Is the cut score too high? Or is the content inappropriate? My main concern is that we don't make students suffer (i.e. fail to

graduate) because of a systemic failure whether that failure lies with the testing tool(s) and/or our school districts' ability/capacity to address the gaps.

17. There are several concerns with the GRAD exam for me, however, the main concerns would be 1] that the test only focuses on certain subjects, it is not well-rounded for those who may excel in other subjects, and 2] that students are expected to remember everything that they have learned when they most likely have not even utilized the knowledge in a year or two (specifically regarding math).
18. It does not seem to be a true indicator of college- and career-readiness. Students who pass the GRAD exam and enroll in post-secondary programs should not require any remedial coursework in that subject area.
19. The inclusion of skills and knowledge which are not widely required for college entrance or entry level jobs. Such skills would include curvilinear relationships in algebra II. We need to really reexamine what are the minimum requirements for a HS diploma. I think we should look at the Work Keys criteria because the ACT has done thorough job studies at arrive at their cut scores, and be very realistic, not idealistic, in this review. We could recommend this review to be done every 5-10 years so the HS requirements matched current college and entry level job skills.
20. There is limited teacher ownership of student success, because the GRAD are exams which accumulate students' skills over time. The kids are basically "on their own" when taking these tests. It is like having a the football team without the coaches on the sidelines. Not all students are equally internally motivated to succeed, and they don't understand the value of a diploma at 17-18 years of age.
21. Single point testing will never work for some students, and for most students is not the best way they can demonstrate their skills. This is a very limited measurement of students' skills and yet the stakes in a student's future are huge. There is a large mismatch between the tool (a one-time test) and the consequences.
22. The data needs to follow the students and not a grade level to look for growth within the set. Since the exams are still changing it is not easy to look at the data for conclusive evidence of growth.
23. My main concern with the GRAD exam would be their inability to measure meaningful learning. Some concerns I have regarding this are student motivation, how well the tests cover what is taught, inconsistency from year to year, and their snapshot nature.
 My thoughts on standardized tests not measuring meaningful learning aren't entirely based on solid evidence (I am not a fan of anecdotal evidence, but here I go...), but I have noticed a decrease in my 9th grade physical science and upper level physics students' ability to use problem solving skills to tackle a multi-step problem, think creatively, or apply what they have learned to new situations. Part of this problem lies in less time teaching science in elementary grades, but part of it has to do with how the nature of teaching has changed in order to accommodate these tests.
 Students can be told that their graduation is on the line if they don't pass the test, however they know that this isn't the case. Word gets around quickly that they only need to take the test three (?) times for math and that will be sufficient to graduate whether they pass it or not. For most students there is no intrinsic motivation for taking these tests. The

only motivation is punitive (you will not graduate) and this could cause anxiety in a large number of students.

Then there are those that don't care about graduation, but that's another problem...I'm not entirely familiar with the content on the GRAD tests, but from my experience with the science MCAs I know that the focus of the test does change from year to year. I know that the answer most people will give me when I bring this up is that it is based on the standards.

From what the biology teachers have told me numerous times is that the amount of what needs to be covered in one year of biology is near impossible. You either have to guess as to what will be on the test that year, or cover all of the standards superficially. The latter goes back to my point about learning being affected by these tests. I won't go into the issues of the test being a one-time only snapshot of students' learning. I'm sure you've heard all of those concerns already.

24. Some parents of students with disabilities have expressed concern about the challenge of balancing a focus on academics with opportunities to participate in other kinds of learning experiences and activities.
25. Because of the close connection to the MCAs, parents, students and the public may be confused about the purpose and relevance of the GRAD.
26. Because the GRAD is based on state academic standards and the school district curriculum does not always correspond to the standards, students may be tested on material for which they have not received instruction.

Question 2: What is the main benefit of the GRAD exam?

1. The main benefit of the GRAD is that it is part of a federally required, peer-reviewed testing regiment. Minnesota will need to be testing in high school in order to meet the requirements of NCLB (and its successor) anyhow. By adding the GRAD on to the federally required test, we are able to see whether students and schools have met state standards.
2. To continue to be competitive in the math standards and benchmarks, students must have test results at the same level of proficiency as those at that particular grade level/ age across the nation and world.
3. I see the main benefit as an attempt to verify a certain level of mastery of standards.
4. The benefit of the exam is it is a measure of how well students met Minnesota standards.
5. The main benefit should be providing an accurate measuring stick of student achievement of state standards while demonstrating student readiness for success in college and career. It should also allow us to compare our performance with other states throughout the nation. The question is are we asking one test to do too much especially if the questions are likely to result in conflicting answers? While there may be close alignment of the GRAD to state standards, performance on the GRAD is not clearly linked to college and career readiness. And because the GRAD test has no connection to assessments being used in other states, it also does not provide any ability to compare success between states.
6. I see no current benefit with the grad exam as it is currently used.
7. Assure a certain level of "achievement" for earning the high school diploma
To provide data to guide instructional planning for specific student interventions
8. Standards-based assessment of student progress – earning a diploma means students met expectations/standards.
9. No important ones from my perspective, I know some teachers believe they increase student motivation to do well on the MCA exams
10. It provides a driving force for school improvement
11. The test may be an objective means to compare how well students in Minnesota schools and school districts remember content knowledge considered to be important.
12. It is designed to be aligned with MN standards, and as such provides a measure of students' attainment of those standards.
13. It's an effort to assess whether our students are achieving the standards we set for them.
14. The benefit of the GRAD exam is that it collects data on how well high school youth retained knowledge and how well they test. It is a way to gather information on whether the students are learning in school.
15. It attempts to provide students, parents, teachers and school districts with a benchmark of students' preparedness for graduation and in doing that what they should focus on to be prepared.

16. The attempt to put a minimum floor on what a MN HS diploma means.
17. The exams are holding the students accountable for the material in a course. Multiple testing in the middle school allowed teachers to look at the standards that were missed and change the curriculum to support the standards. There is a very good alignment of the test to the standards.
18. I guess it gives ONE measure of a student's competence with the standards being tested.
19. The main benefit of the GRAD exam is that it creates high expectations and access to instruction for all students, including students with disabilities.
- 20.

Question 3: What suggestion(s) do you have for changing it?

1. I suggest that we use multiple measures, as recommended by ASCD and others, or allow a student to meet requirements in a number of ways. For example, a student could meet requirements by passing the GRAD test or end-of-course exams or by attaining a specified score on the ACT or SAT test.
2. I see no reason to change except to offer the test online to more students.
3. One option may be to let the student take the test in stages. If the student knows from his/her answers the fact that an answer is wrong and that he/she does not understand the concept of the problem, then stop the test there for the sake of re-teaching and checking understanding. Test the remainder when the student demonstrates he/she has learned that concept.
4. The suggestion I offer is to align the GRAD exam to a measure used for entrance into post secondary education, be that ACT/SAT or Accuplacer/ Compass or create our own state exam, but the graduation test should equate to entering post secondary college ready. This would reduce the number of tests required for a student to take and assure alignment and in the long run be more cost effective for the state of Minnesota.
5. Determine the purpose of the GRAD exam - Is the exam measuring our current students' readiness for college or competition in the global marketplace? Is it to measure students ability to demonstrate 21st century skills such as collaboration, problem solving and communications? Is it measuring students' success in achieving state standards?
6. Determine the most appropriate test instrument to address the determined purpose - the instrument must be valid and reliable. It also must provide benchmark assessments to ensure that students are on track while there is still time to reasonably address deficits in student performance.
7. Determine the benchmarks, starting with early grades that would identify that a student is on track for passing the GRAD exams.
8. Determine remediation plans to address those students not on track for successful GRAD passage. These plans should provide teachers with scientifically based interventions that can be individualized by the teacher to meet student needs.
9. Develop a state-wide marketing plan for the GRAD exams that can be better understood by the public and people it serves. The purpose of GRAD exams must be clearly defined and explained to students, parents and the public. This plan needs to demonstrate the benefits that a student and society will receive by passing the exam and these benefits need to be more compelling than the threat of a student not receiving a diploma if the GRAD is not passed. The marketing plan needs to motivate students to "buy into" the purpose of the GRAD exams.
10. At this point, It seems like using an EPAS strategy where all students take the Explore and PLAN in preparation for the high stakes ACT test may be a better option. The test has strong reliability based on millions of test takers and if the determination is that the purpose is college and career

readiness, the ACT has been the validity standard for predicting college success in the midwest for decades. It provides two measures prior to the ACT that can be used to predict success and offer opportunities for remediation. It has strong credibility and marketing of the accuracy of their assessment tools that could be used to market this approach to parents and students, many of whom already understand the importance of doing your best on the ACT test.

11. A career and college readiness assessment would be far more useful and actually serve a purpose.
12. I found it interesting to see our new fascination with the Finnish educational system. I also found it very interesting that one of the teachers said "a lot" of kids drop out of school and 40% are pushed into the vocational tracks. We currently have around 40% of our high school students that have not passed the grad exam. How would the US fare if we didn't test these kids on international exams like the Fins do?
13. Assess the real purpose of the GRAD exam: Is it to provide "proficiency" for high school diploma only? If so, make this very clear. Does it provide data for student success beyond High School? If not, make this very clear. If the MCA provides data for student success beyond High School, make that information very clear? Can one exam effectively provide all of this and more? It would be wonderful to provide one tool/exam with "multiple" uses of data.
14. In addition to maintaining the GRAD, there are options for retaining intent of the GRAD exams (e.g. objective assessment of student progress on standards – prepared to earn diploma). Some include end-of-course and/or comprehensive exams, aligning high school exit exams with high school standards that meet post-secondary expectations (current situation?) and guaranteeing students who pass exams won't need post-secondary remediation (could Accuplacer do this?) to differentiated diplomas.
15. Have the courage to acknowledge we no longer need them and sunset them.
16. Take the test electronically and turn around results within a month.
17. Three suggestions:
 - a. Integrate Critical Thinking skills, Interpersonal Skills into expectations.
 - b. Evaluate teacher, school and district performance based on % of students requiring college remedial coursework.
 - c. Develop strategy that compares instructional learning with fulfillment of grad expectations. It is not sufficient to establish a goal if the necessary instructional methods and resources are not available to achieve them. What is the evidence that "Best Practices", when applied to similar and appropriate student cohorts, can achieve these established goals? To what extent are these "Best Practices" being applied for instructional learning?
18. I suggest that we scrap the GRAD and adopt many of the suggestions from the 2010 ACCESS system report. Additionally, I suggest that we "measure" high school accountability based on the percentage of students who reach proficiency in math, reading and writing by the time their cohort completes 12th grade. The ACCESS system provides multiple means of a student demonstrating college/career ready proficiency (comprehensive language arts exam, end of course tests, ACT, college course grades, AP tests, IB tests). Each year the state would report out the percentage of the senior (4 year) cohort that reached a college/career ready level by the end of that year. This

would allow students/schools to provide multiple opportunities and means of showing that they reached that level of proficiency.

19. I think that we need to understand more about how stakes testing relates to student achievement. Are there better methods of assessing standards? We should pursue End of Course exams but should remain cautious about simply multiplying high stakes hurdles. We should spend more time with the ACCESS report.
20. I agree that the end of course exams would better accurately assess a student's knowledge compared to a test that may be administered prior to the student taking a course on that subject matter or over one year after taking the course. I believe that a much more creative approach would provide better results from students (i.e., instead of an exam, students must come up with a presentation demonstrating the skills in each subject area)
21. Ensure that the GRAD is a true indicator of college- and career-readiness or replace it with a tool that is. Minnesota needs a system that offers parents, students, teachers and school districts a way of measuring students' college- and career-readiness. That way students, parents, teachers, and school districts have the information they need to focus support on the students' areas of greatest need to guarantee readiness next level of learning, be it in a classroom or workplace.
22. Reexamine what we want in HS graduates, and require only widely used skills and competencies for college entrance and entry level jobs. Use studies and verifiable sources, not what we "want" it to be.
23. Dust off the ACCESS report and replace the GRAD with end of course exams.
24. Allow schools and districts to pilot using student portfolios and rubric scored projects in lieu of the cut scores on the end of course exams to demonstrate mastery of required competencies. Have MDE do correlation studies of these pilots to determine the validity of this approach and then create guidelines for any school to do this should the validity be demonstrated.
25. Three suggestions:
 - a. There is a struggle with having the math MCA the junior year. Exit exams could alleviate some of the difficulties.
 - b. Continue to evaluate the questions making sure they are not obscure.
 - c. Retest on the benchmarks the students have not achieve. d) Have more resources for schools that have higher populations of free and reduce lunch
26. Four Suggestions
 - a. There is a struggle with having the math MCA the junior year. Exit exams could alleviate some of the difficulties.
 - b. Continue to evaluate the questions making sure they are not obscure.
 - c. Retest on the benchmarks the students have not achieve.
 - d. Have more resources for schools that have higher populations of free and reduce lunch
27. I am not a fan of standardized testing in general, and I would like to see assessments that are meaningful. I don't believe that a standardized test can accurately measure learning that will be valuable in a career.

I will use another example from my experiences as a science teacher. Most of my students would have a lot of trouble conducting any sort of scientific investigation or use the design process to create a device or product to fulfill a need. The problem is that to teach this takes time that we don't have any more because we have to teach to these tests. Also, the skills they should have by the time they get to high school aren't there because of the time taken away from science (as well as other non-tested areas that are of equal importance!).

One idea that I could possibly get behind if done properly would be end of course assessments.

28. Assessments measuring individual student's attainment of skills required for graduation must be clearly delineated from assessments for system accountability (MCAs).
29. Exams should have uniform requirements for administration by all school districts. (Number of attempts, computer/adaptive opportunities, etc.)
30. For students with disabilities, the IEP team should use the resulting data to inform instructional goals in the IEP.