

Minnesota: Many students fail math grad exam -- but still graduate
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Thousands of freshly minted Minnesota high school graduates wouldn't have gotten a diploma this year without a waiver from the state because they repeatedly failed Minnesota's math requirement.

In some districts, as many as one-third of seniors wouldn't have graduated because they didn't pass the mathematics graduation test.

The waivers, which the state implemented in 2009, only require these students to attempt the test two more times and then receive remedial help.

"You're falsely giving someone the impression they are ready for the next step," said Jim Bartholomew, education policy director for the Minnesota Business Partnership. "It's almost a lie."

And the Minnesota Department of Education doesn't track how many waivers are issued each year, making it difficult to tell how many students didn't meet the math standard. Department officials said they'd like to collect more information but have to carefully balance data-reporting requirements with the resources districts and the department have available.

About 57 percent of students pass the test on the first try, but no one knows how many of those who fail are successful when they retake it.

Losing the waivers would devastate graduation rates across the state. Minnesota education officials are scrambling to come up with an alternative before the provision allowing the waivers sunsets during the 2014-15 school year.

State Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius has convened a task force to assess the graduation test and has indicated that she favors scrapping it.

"When you have about half the kids not passing, you know you have to do something," Cassellius said. "You cannot just deny diplomas. There needs to be a Plan B solution."

That leaves the state at a crossroads between wanting rigorous academic standards and needing benchmarks most students can reach. As the state uses graduation rates to measure a school's success as part of its "multiple measures rating," accurate skills assessments are even more important, experts say.

The current math graduation exam is significantly more difficult than what most states have, but if a student doesn't pass the test, Minnesota doesn't require students to meet any alternative benchmarks other than retesting and tutoring.

About half the states require graduation tests, and most keep detailed records of students who

graduate through alternative means, said Jennifer Dounay Zinth, policy analyst with the Education Commission of the States, a national education advocate.

"Simply giving students a pass is pretty unusual," Zinth said. "For them not knowing where the bar is set, without that data, you can't tell if it is too high or too low."

The number of students who get a waiver varies wildly from district to district. In Anoka-Hennepin, the state's largest district, 17 percent of students needed the waiver to graduate. In Minneapolis, more than 600 students -- 36 percent of graduates -- wouldn't have earned diplomas if not for the waivers.

St. Paul probably has numbers similar to Minneapolis, but the district doesn't track the number of waiver-dependent diplomas it issues.

The district does compile the number of students who qualify for the waiver, and this year half of the district's seniors were eligible. It is unclear how many of those students graduated and how many could not because they were deficient in other areas.

"We have not set up a system to cull the data and see how many students are graduating solely because the waiver exists," said Matthew Mohs, executive director of St. Paul's federally funded programs. "We know the numbers are large."

Yet Mohs says using a single measure to decide whether thousands of students graduate is misguided.

"We are at a point that a single test score should not deny a significant number of students a rite of passage," Mohs said. "You have to start to question the acceptable cost of this policy. How many students are we not going to allow to graduate? Are we willing to let certain groups bear more of that burden?"

The waiver isn't just a problem for urban and large school districts.

Suburban school districts across the east metro had about 10 percent to 20 percent of their students using waivers to earn diplomas because they couldn't pass the math graduation test.

District officials like Mohs and state leaders like Cassellius keep returning to "end of course" assessments as part of the possible answer to Minnesota's graduation requirement quandary. Given at the end of a variety of courses from algebra to precalculus, these tests would allow districts to measure mastery of different types of math skills.

"Students are graduating with different skills -- that is a reality and is going to be a reality if this test wasn't in place," said Mohs. "No one is getting a diploma because they just show up. Ultimately, we believe students should be measured on the body of their work, not on a single point, a day in their life. I don't think anyone wants to be judged on a single day in their life."

Still, Bartholomew believes assessments hold an important place in the state's education system. They ensure every student leaves a particular grade with the same skills.

"Experience tells us we need to measure kids to make sure they are where they need to be," Bartholomew said. "That has been our concern, that we are giving diplomas to kids even though they are not adequately prepared. The hope was with exit exams, there is a tighter relationship between the standard and the students' skills."

Cassellius promises to address these problems in coming months as her department works on a proposal for overhauling high school skills assessments like the math graduation test. The effort is in concert with a partnership with higher-education officials to better align high school standards with college-readiness skills.

"We need to be sure we have the right tests," Cassellius said. "There is too much reliance all together on standardized testing. I don't think exit exams are necessary. I think the (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) gives us the information we need. The (graduation) exam is just one more barrier for students to graduate."

Policymakers could get recommendations from the department this fall, but what will become of the waiver remains unclear.

"We are trying to be bold but not reckless," Cassellius said. "We want a comprehensive system that connects the dots."

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Students in Minnesota's four largest school districts using a waiver for the math graduation test to earn a diploma:

District	Number of students	Percentage of senior class
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan	190	9 percent

* St. Paul does not track students who receive a diploma using the waiver, but the district does record every student who qualifies for the waiver, possibly making the district's numbers higher because some of those students will not graduate.