

Department of Education & Early Development
Teaching & Learning Support

*Goldbelt Place
801 West 10th Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894
(907) 465-8691
(907) 465-6760 Fax
mark_leal@eed.state.ak.us*

To: Superintendents

Thru: Ed McLain, Ed.D.
Deputy Commissioner

From: Mark Leal
Director of Assessment

Date: February 1, 2002

Subject: Clarification of Testing Requirements for Schools with Waivers to High School Graduation Requirements

In the past two months I have received requests from several districts for direction and clarification from the Department regarding the participation of students in the Comprehensive System of Student Assessments. For the most part, these requests have come from districts that have received a waiver from 4 AAC 06.075 High School Graduation Requirements. Many of these districts have, in turn, adopted an ungraded standards based approach in all schools. In some cases these districts have asked that all students in the district be exempted from testing at a specific Benchmark level until each student was ready to take the exam, this practice is commonly known as out-of-level testing.

Prior to looking at relevant statute, regulation and the specifics of this type of request, it is important to note that a number of districts throughout the state have applied for and received a waiver from the Alaska State Board of Education from the High School graduation requirements specified in state regulation 4 AAC 06.075. The waivers that have been granted have no impact on the requirement that students in the district participate in statewide assessments in the required subjects at the required age/grade levels. I understand that, in many cases, the waiver that the district received is part of a larger reform effort in the district but I want to be clear from the beginning that the waiver itself has no impact on the participation of district students in the Comprehensive System of Student Assessments.

To address the specific request for out-of-level testing for students in these districts I begin by citing the relevant statute and regulation in this area:

Alaska Statute- Chapter 7 Article 1 Section 14.07.020 (b) (2) (C) directs the department to develop a comprehensive system of student assessments, composed of multiple indicators of proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics. It also indicates that the comprehensive system must include performance standards in reading, writing, and mathematics for students in age groups 5 through 7, 8 through 10, and 11 through 14.

Regulation- 4 AAC 06.737. Standards-Based Test states: The commissioner shall select a standards-based test, to be administered to students in grades three, six, and eight by the districts, to estimate the degree to which the academic performance standards for reading, writing, and mathematics, adopted by reference in 4 AAC 04.150, have been mastered by each district student. Each district shall administer the standards based test annually to every eligible student in grades three, six, and eight.

In light of the statute and regulation cited above and provisions contained in the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), it is incumbent upon the Department to assure that all schools are helping all students to achieve standards. The Department has a clear duty and requirement to determine the achievement levels of students using comparable measures at specific points (benchmarks) in their educational career.

Results from assessments can and should be used for a variety of purposes and functions. Results can be used, at the student level, to inform instruction and target needed intervention for specific students. Results can also be used, at the school, district, and state levels, to assess the effect of a particular initiative, evaluate programs, and to help determine the overall effectiveness of a school or district.

I applaud the standards based approach that districts have adopted for use in their schools. One of the particular strengths of the model that has been implemented is the comprehensive standards based local assessment component that has been developed to inform instruction. In many ways the system of assessments provide an excellent opportunity for students to demonstrate mastery of specific standards and to show growth and progress. Results from these local assessments are excellent tools for targeting the specific instructional needs of students.

During the conversation initiating this request, district representatives often indicate that allowing students to take an out-of-level test would provide better student level information because the student will be assessed on information that he/she is ready to

handle. District representatives indicate that the assessment results from an out-of-level administration would better assist teachers in providing effective instruction to the student. The very fact that the district is able to determine that a child is “not ready” to take a particular exam is an indication that the local assessments already provide the necessary information needed to inform instruction.

The Benchmark tests have been designed to measure student achievement at a given point in time in relation to specific performance expectations for that age grouping. In this manner the Benchmark tests are designed to provide a more comparable status measure of the overall achievement level of your students as compared to the performance expectations that have been established for all Alaska students at a particular grade/age. The accountability function of the Benchmark tests allow schools and districts to compare the achievement of their students against the performance of a proficient student of a similar age, providing a more complete picture of the true effect of the program the district has adopted.

It is clear that the intent of the statute and regulation is that all students in the state would be assessed at specific grade levels. In order to further assist your district in determining the initial placement of students in the Assessment Program, the Department has developed the following guidelines applying specific age groupings to normal grade levels.

**Alaska Comprehensive System of Student Assessments
Guidelines for Administration**

State mandated assessments will be administered to all students according to the following guidelines:

Benchmark 1- administered to all students in grade 3 or all students who are in their third year of required school attendance.

TerraNova CAT/6 Level 14- administered to all students in grade 4 or all students who are in their fourth year of required school attendance.

TerraNova CAT/6 Level 15- administered to all students in grade 5 or all students who are in their fifth year of required school attendance.

Benchmark 2- administered to all students in grade 6 or all students who are in their sixth year of required school attendance.

Superintendents
February 1, 2002
Page 4

TerraNova CAT/6 Level 17- administered to all students in grade 7 or all students who are in their seventh year of required school attendance.

Benchmark 3- administered to all students in grade 8 or all students who are in their eighth year of required school attendance.

TerraNova CAT/6 Level 19- administered to all students in grade 9 or all students who are in their ninth year of required school attendance.

HSGQE- administered to all district students with Sophomore status or all students who are in their tenth year of required school attendance.

I am grateful for this opportunity to clarify the requirements of Alaska's Comprehensive System of Student Assessment. If you or your staff has any questions, comments, or concerns regarding this issue, please feel free to contact Mark Leal at (907) 465-8691.

cc: Shirley J. Holloway, Ph.D., Commissioner
PJ Ford, Director, TLS
Barbara Thompson, TLS