

# **Report and Recommendations of the AIMS Task Force**

May 6, 2009

Presented to

Honorable Jan Brewer, Governor, State of Arizona

Robert Burns, President, Arizona State Senate

Kirk Adams, Speaker, Arizona House of Representatives

Jacob Moore, President, Arizona State Board of Education

The AIMS Task Force established per 2008 Arizona Session Laws, Chapter 287, §63.

## **Executive Summary**

The AIMS Task Force was charged with the following duties:

- Examine whether the Arizona assessment of achievements test should be a high-stakes test that students must pass in order to graduate from high school.
- Examine the experiences and outcomes in other states that (a) have adopted tests that are required for the graduation of pupils from high school, and (b) incorporate a national college admission and placement examination.
- Develop methodologies, models, and other recommendations for the initial Arizona assessment of achievements test.

The AIMS Task Force recommends the following:

1. The AIMS reading, mathematics and writing tests are maintained as graduation requirements. Future state test development should focus on college and career readiness and no other subject areas added to the current battery of AIMS high school graduation tests (ARS §15-701.01 and §15-741).
2. All 11th grade students must take a college and career readiness test with a provision to opt-out of the test with a written request from a parent or legal guardian. The college and career readiness test would be paid for by the state.
3. Replace the state norm-referenced test (NRT) (currently the TerraNova) administered in 9th grade with a college and career potential test.
4. A future committee composed should consider a high school graduation endorsement that signifies student readiness for college and career.

The proposed recommendations are intended to encourage all students to become college and career ready by providing feedback loops to help students meet their academic objectives.

## Enactment

The AIMS Task Force was enacted per 2008 Arizona Session Laws, Chapter 287, §63.

The Task Force was charged with the following duties:

- Examine the experiences and outcomes of other states that (a) have adopted tests that are required for the graduation of pupils from high school, and (b) incorporate a national college admission and placement examination.
- Develop methodologies, models, and other recommendations for the initial Arizona assessment of achievements test.
- Examine whether the Arizona assessment of achievements test should be a high-stakes test that students must pass in order to graduate from high school.
- Submit a written report that contains the Task Force's findings and recommendations by June 30, 2009 to the state board of education, the governor, the speaker of the state house of representatives and the president of the state senate. The task force shall provide a copy of this report to the secretary of state and the director of the Arizona state library, archives, and public records.

The following Task Force members were selected by the state board of education:

Member	Sector Represented	Organizational Affiliation
Dr. Jim Zaharis, Chair	Business/Industry Representative	Greater Phoenix Leadership
Dr. Deborah Gonzalez	Standards/Curriculum Representative	Phoenix Union High School District
Dr. Chuck Essigs	School Finance Representative	Arizona Association of School Business Officials
Dr. Charles Santa Cruz	High School Principal	Gilbert Unified School District
Melinda Jensen	High School Technology Representative	Vail Unified School District
Dr. Joe O'Reilly	Assessment Representative	Mesa Unified School District
Dr. Alan Storm	High School Systems Representative	Pima County JTED

In addition, the state board of education selected David R. Garcia, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Arizona State University (ASU) Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, to facilitate the AIMS Task Force. Dr. Garcia was supported by a cohort of graduate students from the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) Division of the ASU Mary Lou Fulton College of Education. The Task Force would like to recognize graduate students Emily Ackman, Victor Diaz, Kim Eversman, Stacey Long-Genovese, Paul Ruiz, Kathy Wiebke, and Eman Yarrow for their support.

The Task Force met in a series of 12 meetings from October 2008 to May 2009. Through the course of its deliberations, the Task Force members considered an extensive body of research on issues relevant to their charge, such as the effects of high-stakes testing, alternative graduation requirements, and the role of college placement tests in other state assessment systems (the research materials are available online at <http://www.ade.az.gov/AIMSTaskforce/>).

## Introduction

As a committee, our evaluation is that the current AIMS high school tests are essential, initial but limited, and not a measure of college and career readiness.

Essential – AIMS measures critical and basic academic standards. Arizona expects its students to achieve these standards and for schools to instruct students to proficiency according to the state-defined performance levels. It is important to the postsecondary success of Arizona students to demonstrate proficiency on the AIMS test, which measures 10<sup>th</sup> grade level skills and knowledge.

In addition, AIMS is an essential component of school accountability. For the first time, Arizona has a functioning school accountability system that should be maintained. Schools and districts are held accountable for student mastery of these core state standards, and a consistent system is necessary for schools to focus their efforts and measure their own improvement.

Initial – As stated earlier, AIMS measures skills and knowledge appropriate to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level. Many Arizona students will pass AIMS in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade or shortly thereafter. Approximately 10 percent of the 2008 graduating class, however, did not pass AIMS by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and graduated with assistance from the state augmentation policy. The percentage of students who are able to graduate with the assistance of the state augmentation policy is expected to decline as the degree of allowable augmentation decreases over time. We find that it is part of having a rigorous system that some students may take up to five administrations, or until the end of their senior year, to pass AIMS.

We are concerned about the high school experience of students who require multiple administrations to pass AIMS. Per state statutes and federal regulations, schools and districts have the responsibility to ensure that those students who require multiple administrations to pass

AIMS receive remediation, so they reach proficiency in reading, mathematics and writing. At the same time, schools must ensure that students receive an enriched educational experience while working toward proficiency of the academic standards. For students who do not pass AIMS in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, resources must be redirected to their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years in order to guide them on a path to success.

Limited – AIMS is a measure of 10<sup>th</sup> grade high school achievement, but it does not measure the skills and knowledge necessary to demonstrate college and career readiness. Furthermore, AIMS cannot feasibly become a quality measure of college and career readiness. Certainly, we believe that AIMS measures some skills that are transferrable to college and career settings. But we need a credible, robust test of college and career readiness.

Finally, we are aware of the current realities of the state’s fiscal situation. To meet our objectives, we must seek solutions that reallocate existing resources. We have not limited ourselves, however, by the current fiscal situation. Rather, we have created a series of recommendations for a comprehensive assessment system that can guide educational policy for years to come and be implemented in stages.

### Guiding Principles

As a set of guiding principles, we seek to develop an assessment system that allows for differentiation, promotes equity and high standards, and provides opportunities for all students.

Differentiation – No matter what their direction or how skills are learned, all students must develop college and career core competencies. Yet, we acknowledge that all students are different, there are many paths to success, and all academic work is valued as different rather than better. We encourage different interests, different abilities, and different opportunities for

students. There should be a common core of outcomes for all students as well as an education system that allows students to make constructive choices.

Equity/Equality – We are conscious of the potential discriminatory practices associated with a single test. We find that AIMS, as an accountability instrument, and its associated policies are focused more on equality (treating all students the same) rather than equity (differentiating outcomes based on student interests and abilities). We aspire to create an assessment system that allows for multiple pathways for learning and maintains quality for all student outcomes.

Provide opportunities – Our goal is to provide opportunities for students that open rather than close doors. For example, tests that provide information to students and parents as they choose their college or career pathway are an incentive that opens doors for future success.

As we raise the rigor and expectations for high school outcomes, it is important that the state board of education examine the assessment system at earlier grades to ensure alignment with these higher expectations. We encourage early warning and intervention in the elementary grades as a resource to prepare students for success at the high school level. The early warnings should yield diagnostic and prescriptive information in the elementary grades that aid student progress.

As a final overarching principle, any proposed recommendations should be evaluated to consider the practicality of implementation at the local level and to determine appropriate alignment with state institutions of higher education.

Our recommendations are additive, expansive and credible.

Additive – With AIMS as an initial test of basic high school skills, we believe it is necessary to implement an advanced test to measure the skills and knowledge that all students

should have by the end of high school. This advanced test should emphasize the required core skills that prepare graduates for, and focus them on, college and career readiness. In keeping with our guiding principles, we believe the advanced test should not have high stakes for students.

Expansive – To provide more complete information to the educators and the public about student academic achievement, we suggest expanding our consideration beyond tests to include other high school indicators. These indicators could include the percentage of students completing Advanced Placement (AP) requirements, honors courses, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) requirements, and the percentage of students exiting English language programs.

Credible - Any proposed solutions should remain mindful that our students, and the state as a whole, compete in a national and international environment. We should benchmark our state tests to national and international standards and assessments, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Cambridge Assessment. The results should be used to make continual improvements to our state education and assessment systems. Arizona needs comparable data that measure our schools against the quality of education in other contexts. An assessment system that is aligned with national and international benchmarks will provide these data and maintain credibility over time.

### Recommendations

The AIMS Task Force recommends the following (see Figure 1 for a representation of the recommended state test schedule by grade).

1. We recommend that the AIMS reading, mathematics and writing tests be maintained as graduation requirements. We believe that expanding the number of AIMS high school tests to include other content areas does not further student efforts to be college and career ready. Therefore, future state test development should focus on college and career readiness and no other subject areas added to the current battery of AIMS high school graduation tests (15-701.01 and 15-741).
2. All 11th grade students must take a college and career readiness test with a provision to opt-out through a written request by a parent or legal guardian. The college and career readiness test would be paid for by the state. The purpose of the college and career readiness test is to provide feedback to the student, family, and educators on the extent to which students are college and career ready. College readiness means students possess the knowledge and skills in English and mathematics necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses without the need for remedial coursework. Career readiness means a high school graduate has the English and mathematics knowledge and skills needed to qualify for and succeed in the postsecondary job training and/or education necessary for their chosen career.
  - a. The college and career readiness test objectives must be consistent with the college and career potential test given in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in order for students to receive appropriate feedback.
  - b. The state board of education, the Arizona Board of Regents and the community college systems should agree on how the college and career readiness test will be used. For example, the college and career readiness test could be used to identify areas of needed remediation while students are still in high school as well as

qualify a student for admission and college course placement. We recommend that, similar to the California Early Assessment Program (EAP), if a student reaches a common threshold score accepted by all state postsecondary institutions, they are exempt from any additional placement tests and can enter postsecondary courses at the college level without remediation.

- c. The college and career readiness test must include a writing component.
  - d. Participation rate of the college and career readiness test should be reported on the school report cards per ARS §15-746, but excluded from the achievement profiles required by ARS §15-241.
3. Replace the state 9<sup>th</sup> grade norm-referenced test (NRT) (currently the TerraNova) with a college and career potential test. This replacement can fulfill the state statutory testing requirements per ARS §15-755 for a “standardized, nationally-normed written assessment of academic subject matter given in English.” The 9th grade TerraNova is not required to meet any federal assessment or accountability requirements, and is not included in the state accountability system. The state board of education can enact this recommendation without legislative action.
  4. A future committee composed of representatives from K-12, higher education, and the business community should consider a high school graduation endorsement that signifies student readiness for college and career. The endorsements would be awarded to students who meet the high school graduation requirements and complete additional accomplishments. The endorsements would not be required for high school graduation (see Appendix A for an outline of the potential high school endorsement requirements).

Key feedback and course correction opportunities for students

The proposed recommendations are intended to encourage all students to become college and career ready by providing feedback loops that inform student course-taking decisions, and by allowing multiple opportunities for students to make “course corrections” to meet their academic objectives (see Figure 2).

These recommendations provide multiple feedback loops for students, as they enter into and move through high school, to assess their progress toward graduation and toward meeting their postsecondary goals. The earliest feedback loop is provided to students as they enter high school. The Task Force endorses the implementation of state board-approved Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP). Beginning with the class of 2013 (freshman in fall 2009), all Arizona public and charter high school students in grades 9-12 must complete an ECAP. The ECAP is intended to “evaluate what they (students) are currently doing to connect the relevancy of a student’s academic planning to his/her career awareness, skills and interests, educational and career aspirations.”

The 10<sup>th</sup> grade AIMS test remains as a key feedback loop to students about their progress toward meeting the Arizona high school graduation requirements. The Task Force recommends two new feedback loops for students as they progress through high school. First, the introduction of a college and career potential test in 9th grade allows students to learn (1) about their potential to succeed in college and (2) what they need to do in the subsequent grades to become college and career ready. Second, students will be provided a college and career readiness test in 11<sup>th</sup> grade to begin a successful transition to postsecondary education.

Armed with the information provided by the scheduled feedback loops, students are able to make “course corrections” as they progress through high school. After the initial ECAP, students begin high school with a clear understanding of their path to graduation and beyond.

Students can begin making course decisions based on their interests and ambitions. After the college and career potential test in 9th grade, students can re-assess their course decisions and make the necessary corrections to either stay on their current path or change their goals.

The 10<sup>th</sup> grade AIMS test remains an important decision point for all students to meet graduation requirements. Students are encouraged to pass AIMS on the first administration in order to be provided maximum flexibility to become college and career ready. For those students who do not pass AIMS in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, their course sequence is narrowed toward reaching proficiency on the state standards for graduation. As students progress through high school without passing AIMS, they have fewer opportunities to make course corrections to become college and career ready. Students who neither pass AIMS nor meet the other state graduation requirements before the end of high school will not receive a diploma.

#### Cost Analysis

The Task Force considered several options to reduce test costs to implement the aforementioned recommendations. To begin, our recommendation to replace the 9th grade NRT with a college and career potential test is greatly offset given that the current cost of the former test can be used to administer the latter.

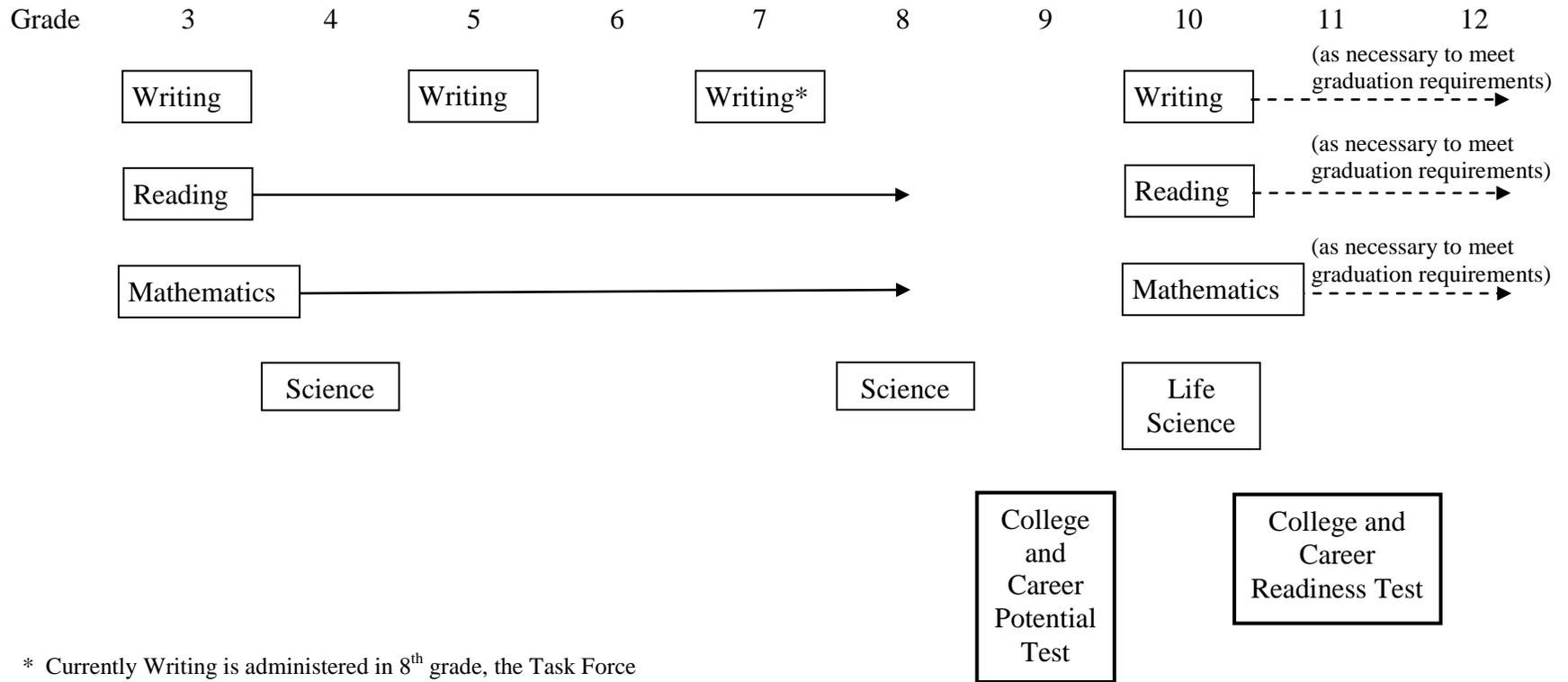
We also recommend a reduction in the number of AIMS Writing administrations in the elementary grades as a cost-savings measure. The number of AIMS Writing administrations in grades three through eight can be reduced from six (6) to three (3) while remaining compliant with state and federal laws.

Finally, as high school graduates become better prepared to enter postsecondary education for college and career, the state will realize a cost savings as the number of remedial classes needed at the college level decreases.

## Closing

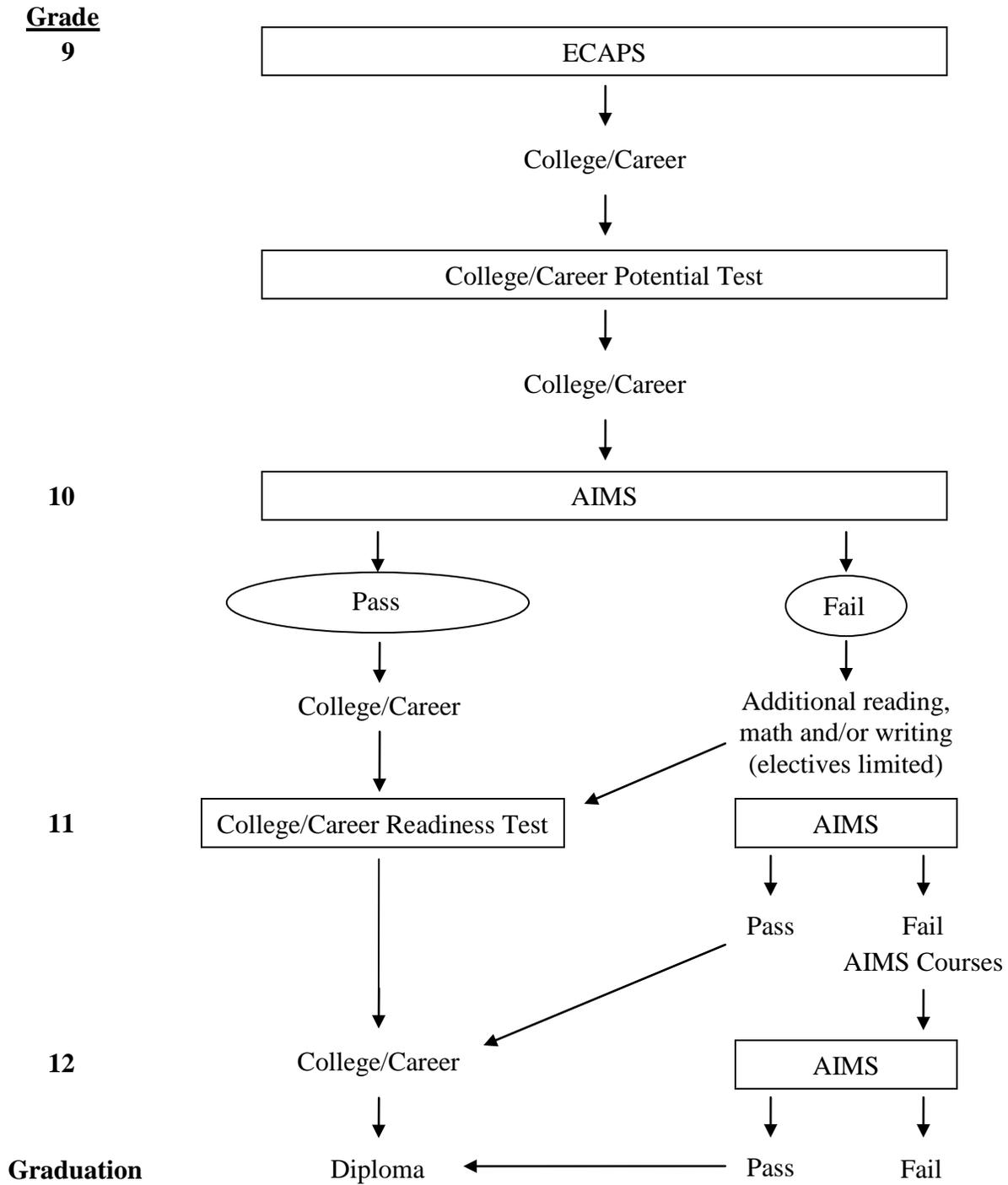
The Task Force respectfully submits this report and recommendations in the spirit of encouraging the postsecondary success of all Arizona students.

Figure 1: Recommended State Test Administration Schedule



\* Currently Writing is administered in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the Task Force recommends that the Writing test be administered in 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

Figure 2: Student Feedback and Course Correction Opportunities



## Appendix A

### Outline of Potential College-Career Endorsement Requirements

The requirements for the College/Career-Ready Endorsement could include:

- a. Earn a High School Diploma
- b. Course-Taking reflects:
  - a. College-entry requirements per the Arizona Board of Regents requirements and/or
  - b. Completion of a Career & Technical Education program
- c. Test-taking reflects:
  - a. ACT 22 or higher and/or
  - b. SAT Reasoning 1040 and/or
  - c. Exceeds AIMS Reading, Math, and Writing
  - d. Adequate performance on the college and career readiness test (see recommendation number 1).