



25 years of Mastery Tests helped shape state's public education

Robert A. Frahm

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The release of Connecticut Mastery Test results today marks the 25th anniversary of a multimillion dollar testing program that critics and supporters alike agree has sharply altered the course of public education across the state.

The annual exam shaped curriculum, spurred classroom drills, provided evidence in lawsuits, and grabbed the attention of politicians, parents and even real estate agents.

And it shed light on the academic problems afflicting racial minorities and low-income students long before the federal No Child Left Behind Act raised the issue nearly two decades later. "It is maybe the most significant development in Connecticut public education post World War II all the way to No Child Left Behind," said former state Education Commissioner Theodore S. Sergi.

Since its introduction in 1985, the test of reading, writing and mathematics has been a rite of passage for an estimated 1.2 million elementary and middle school students. It is given annually to children in grades three through eight. Along with the 10th-grade Connecticut Academic Performance Test, it is part of an \$18 million-a-year state testing system. The Mastery Test was developed shortly after publication of the Reagan administration's landmark report "A Nation at Risk," a harsh review of the state of education in America's public schools. The national report "represented a wonderful opportunity. It clearly pointed out our kids weren't doing as well as they could," said Gerald N. Tirozzi, who was then the state's education commissioner. "We went for it. We decided to develop a statewide test that would truly assess our students."

The testing program soon became a model for other states. "Connecticut was light years ahead of the nation at the time," said Tirozzi, now the executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. 25 years of Mastery Tests helped shape state's public education. As test results were published in local newspapers, the exam led to comparisons among the state's 166 school districts, causing angst in some towns and celebrations in others. Real estate agents began using the results as part of their sales pitch to young families. Tirozzi recalls that parents in some affluent communities were skeptical. "Why would we want to test their children? But when the scores came out, they were not doing as well as they thought," he said.

In results released this morning, state officials reported upward trends in scores since the test was last revised in 2006. The gains were especially encouraging in grades six and seven. In mathematics, for example, 71 percent of sixth-graders met the state goal, up from 59 percent in 2006. In reading, 78 percent of seventh-graders met the goal, up from 67 percent four years earlier.

Each year, educators pore over the results, tweaking curriculum or sometimes making wholesale changes in an effort to improve test scores. "It definitely has led to changes in curriculum. It measures what students should have learned. . . . It's an accountability tool, and it's very public," said Marian Hourigan, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Rocky Hill public schools. "If we see specific [skills] where students are weak at a particular grade level, we'll go back and look at how we're teaching," she said. Some superintendents have made the Mastery Test the focal point of their administration. When former Hartford Superintendent of Schools Anthony Amato took over the struggling school system in 1999, he vowed that the district would "never be last

again" in rankings of districts on the test. After imposing a rigid, scripted curriculum, adding "power hours" of extra tutoring, and focusing on students who were just below the state mastery goals, Amato was able to nudge scores up a few notches before leaving Hartford in 2002.

The intense focus on the test has attracted critics. "The bad part, I feel, is that a lot of time is spent just doing that - teaching strictly to the test," said Andrea Johnson, president of the Hartford Federation of Teachers. "The whole, well-rounded education has been watered down. The biggest problem I have is that our science and social studies in the lower grades . . . have just almost been eliminated."

Officials added a science exam to the Mastery Test two years ago, but there is still too little emphasis on science and other subjects, Johnson said. That opinion is shared by former state historian Christopher Collier, who said the effect of the Mastery Test "has been to drive both curriculum and pedagogy, in my view, in the wrong direction." He said some testing of basic skills may be appropriate, but "in other areas, vastly too much testing goes on. It not only takes time from instruction but leads to unsound pedagogy. It drives out attention to those things that are not tested, like the arts and humanities." He added, "If you're teaching people to pass multiple choice tests, you're not educating them."

Although the exam includes multiple choice questions, it has evolved over the years to add more open-ended and essay questions. Those questions, however, have twice resulted in errors that required the test to be re-scored, first in 1992 and again in 2004. The problems in 2004 caused a five-month delay in reporting the scores and prompted the state to cancel a multi-year \$48 million contract with a testing company. The pressure to improve scores has led to a handful of reports of cheating. In one of the most publicized cases, an elementary school principal in Fairfield was forced to retire in 1997 after being accused of doctoring students' test scores. Nevertheless, such instances have been rare, and the test remains a fixture in public schools - the chief benchmark by which schools measure their success. "By and large, it's been very positive for Connecticut. The test is among the best constructed out there, even to this day," said Joseph Cirusuolo, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents.

Many believe the test's most significant impact has been to spotlight the achievement gap that finds many minority and low-income students lagging far behind their white and more affluent classmates. There were signs in the scores reported today that the gap has narrowed slightly in most grades over the past four years, with black, Hispanic and low-income students generally posting larger gains than other students. Nevertheless the gaps remain daunting. About 38 percent of black eighth-graders, for instance, met the state goal in mathematics - an impressive 13 percentage point gain over four years - but that was still far behind the 79 percent of white students who met the goal.

Plaintiffs in the landmark Sheff vs. O'Neill lawsuit highlighted the gap as they fought to desegregate Hartford's mostly black and Hispanic public school system. "I would say the [test] scores virtually became the linchpin of proof . . . that Connecticut was maintaining two [separate and unequal] school systems," said John Brittain, a former lawyer for the plaintiffs and a central figure in the 1989 lawsuit. The state Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in 1996, ordering the state to reduce racial isolation in Hartford's schools.

Martha Stone, a member of the legal team that represents the plaintiffs, said the test results "began to expose what people knew . . . that there would be sharp disparities between what kids in Hartford were learning compared to what kids in the suburbs were learning." Those disparities also have been cited in a pending lawsuit by a coalition of municipal and education officials seeking to revamp the state's school finance system. Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel for the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, said that identifying gaps in performance has become a key function of the annual exam. "The hard part is we've done testing, and done it for 25 years," she said. "To the extent we know what makes a difference, we have not been able to put resources into things like early childhood education to make a difference."