THE ACCESS SYSTEM

ACHIEVING COLLEGE AND CAREER-READINESS FOR EVERY STUDENT'S SUCCESS

A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM FOR MINNESOTA

COLLEGE AND CAREER-READY POLICY INSTITUTE ASSESSMENT WORKING GROUP

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** Final vote not received prior to deadline for submission of the task force report to Commissioner of Education

Individual statement included in the report

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I. Proposal Summary

The Critical Components of ACCESS

The Achieving College and Career-readiness for Every Student's Success (ACCESS) assessment and accountability system proposed in this report utilizes multiple measures of learning to determine a student's eligibility to earn a high school diploma. In adopting this approach, the proposal reflects national and international best practices in the design of accountability systems in education, business, law enforcement, health care and other fields (Rothstein, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Under this proposal, students would take a comprehensive language arts ACCESS exam in 10th grade that measures reading, writing and other literacy skills that are learned over multiple years in school and that are often taught in multiple classes and subject areas. A cut score on the ACCESS language arts exam would be established below which it is possible to say that there is a high likelihood that a student does not possess the literacy skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education or the workplace. Students who achieve at levels below this score would be required to participate in locally-determined remediation programs and retake the exam until they are able to perform at or above the required score.

In high school algebra and biology, students would take ACCESS end-of-course exams that assess understanding of the most important material that is taught in those courses. A student's score on the ACCESS end-of-course exams in high school algebra and biology would count as 25% of his or her final grades in those courses. Because state law requires all students to earn credit in high school algebra and biology, students who do not pass those courses would need to repeat them or master the necessary content through a locally-managed credit recovery process.

To help support consistency of expectations and prevent any risk of grade inflation that might result from attaching stakes for graduation to students' final course grades, the ACCESS system

also includes a mechanism through which the Minnesota Department of Education would annually calculate the degree of alignment between each high school's final course grades in high school algebra and biology and scores on the end-of-course ACCESS exams in those subjects. Based upon those calculations, each high school would be placed into one of the four following categories on both a high school algebra Alignment Index and a biology Alignment Index: Closely Aligned, Moderate Aligned, Somewhat Misaligned and Highly Misaligned.

The ACCESS system also includes a number of alternative routes through which students would be able to meet graduation requirements. In language arts, a small number of students who have mastered the required content but are unable to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on a standardized test would be able to do so through a carefully structured state-level appeals process that considers additional measures of student learning. In high school algebra and biology, a student would be able to meet graduation requirements by obtaining a score that correlates with college and career readiness on an Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) or ACT exam in the relevant subject. The student could also meet graduation requirements in those subjects by earning a C- or better in a credit-bearing course in college algebra or college biology at a college or university.

Minnesota's current policies for awarding diplomas to students with disabilities, English Language Learners who have been in the United States for fewer than four years and students who move to Minnesota after meeting another state's graduation requirements would continue.

Under the ACCESS system, schools would receive new types and levels of guidance and support in preparing all students for success in college and careers. For example, schools would be provided with access to optional benchmark tests that are aligned with the ACCESS graduation exams and that could be used to measure student progress over time. To support high-quality teaching and learning in high school algebra and biology, schools would be provided with optional course objectives, syllabi, instructional units and other supports. In addition, the State would sponsor professional development academies to promote best practices in curriculum, instruction and data-driven decision making in the high school algebra and biology courses in which the ACCESS end-of-course exams would be embedded.

The proposal would also create an ACCESS Implementation Group to monitor and advise the Commissioner of Education and the legislature on the design and rollout of the ACCESS System.

Numerous other components of the proposed ACCESS system are outlined later in this report.

Advantages of the ACCESS System

- In high school algebra and biology, the ACCESS system combines student performance on a state assessment with performance on classroom-based tests, assignments, projects and other indicators to determine a student's eligibility to graduate. This use of multiple measures to make high-stakes decisions reflects best practices in the design of accountability systems in education and other fields.

- In language arts, a comprehensive exam that students take for the first time in 10th grade would help to ensure that students have the reading, writing and literacy skills to succeed in upper-level high school and college courses in many different subjects. Students who are unable to achieve the required performance level on the language arts exam the first time they take it would have two years to receive additional support and retake the test.
- The ACCESS system utilizes end-of-course exams, which experience in other states suggests may be better measures of college and career readiness and more effective tools for improving curriculum, instruction and student motivation.
- The ACCESS system would promote coherence and clarity in grading practices by annually comparing final course grades in high school algebra and biology with scores on state end-of-course assessments in those subjects.
- The ACCESS system would promote choice and personalization by providing students with multiple ways to meet graduation requirements.
- Adding biology to Minnesota's graduation requirements for students and accountability system for high schools responds to recent calls for increased emphasis on and improved performance in science.
- The ACCESS system would increase and enhance state support for schools and districts by making available optional benchmark assessments, instructional support and professional development.

II. Background and Context

According to a 2009 study by the Center on Education Policy, Minnesota is one of 26 U.S. states that now require or are planning to require students to participate in mandatory exit exams to earn a high school diploma (Zhang and Jennings, 2009). In Minnesota, the decision to adopt a high school exit examination requirement was made in 1992, when the legislature created the Minnesota Basic Skills Tests (later rechristened the Basic Standards Tests) in reading, mathematics and writing. Starting in the year 2000, students had to achieve at or above a cut score on each exam to earn a diploma. The exams were designed to assess student mastery of content they should have learned by 8th grade, which was the first year they took the exam. Those who did not pass on the first attempt could retake the test twice a year through the spring of 12th grade.

Pass rates during the first years the BST tests were administered increased from 70% in 1998 to 74% in 2002 in mathematics, and in reading they grew from 68% to 80% over the same time period (Cornell, Krosnick and Chang, 2006).

Shortly after Governor Tim Pawlenty was elected in 2002, the state decided to transition to a more challenging high school test, which came to be known as the Graduation Required Assessments for Diploma (or GRAD). The test is administered as part of the state MCA tests in three subject areas (thus adding stakes for students to the tests that are also used to hold schools accountable under No Child Left Behind). Students take the GRAD writing test for the first time in 9th grade, the GRAD reading test in 10th grade and the GRAD math test in grade 11.

In 2009, 89% of the state's 9th graders passed the writing test on their first attempt, while 78% of Minnesota's 10th graders passed the GRAD reading test the same year. In mathematics, 57% of the state's 11th graders passed the test, which meant that 43% of the 11th grade cohort had one year to do so in order to graduate from high school on time. And while 63 percent of the state's white students got over the required academic bar, only 52 percent of Minnesota's Asian students did so, followed by 31 percent of Latino students, 30 percent of American Indian students and 21 percent of African American students.

Faced with the prospect of denying diplomas to so many students, the legislature and the governor passed a five-year reprieve that enables students to earn a high school diploma even if they fail the 11th grade graduation test in math. No such reprieve was put in place for the reading and writing tests, so scoring at or above the passing levels on those assessments remains a requirement for all students who are not exempted based on their status as students with disabilities or English Language Learners.

The Assessment and Accountability Working Group

When the legislature passed and the governor signed the math test reprieve, they also created a task force charged with developing a recommendation for a new high school assessment and accountability system for Minnesota. The Commissioner of Education subsequently charged a working group that had already been created as part of the state's participation in a national initiative known as the College and Career-Ready Policy Institute with this task. The group was co-chaired by Dr. Dirk Mattson, Minnesota Department of Education's Director of Research and Assessment, and Kent Pekel, the Executive Director of the University of Minnesota's College Readiness Consortium. Members included K-12 teachers and administrators, higher education faculty and staff, a representative of the business community, two legislators and staff from the Minnesota Department of Education. The full membership of the task force is listed at the outset of this report. The group was charged with recommending a new system to the Commissioner of Education before the end of 2009, after which the commissioner would make her own recommendation for a new system to the legislature during the 2010 legislative session.

The task force met twelve times for three or four hour sessions in between June of 2009 and February of 2010. At the outset of its process, the working group solicited feedback over the Web and received more than 250 responses, many of them lengthy and carefully developed. Summaries of that feedback, notes from each of the task force meetings, agendas and other

supporting materials can be found on the task force's page at http://www.mnp16.org/working_groups/ccrpi.html.

Based on its review of the public feedback received over the Web, analysis of data on the educational performance of Minnesota students and reviews of research, the task force first undertook the development of a set of guiding principles that it agreed should shape its work and, beyond that, the development of Minnesota's new assessment and accountability system.

Over the course of the eight months that task force members worked together, their discussions were both practical and idealistic. They were rooted in the need to recommend a system that can be implemented using current best practices in assessment and accountability and with currently available resources. At the same time, the task force's discussions also frequently looked beyond present practices to envision a very different approach to assessment and accountability. A summary of the task force's ideas for the next generation of Minnesota's system is also included in this report. As advances in assessment, technology and other fields make this vision possible in the coming years, the task force urges state policy makers to move Minnesota in this bold and very different direction.

Economic and Demographic Trends

While the task force was created to address the desire of many stakeholders in Minnesota's educational system to develop an alternative to the GRAD tests, in a broader sense its work was part of an ongoing effort to reposition Minnesota's educational and economic systems for success in the global Information Age. In that context, during the task force meetings members often discussed two related trends that are reshaping life in Minnesota today and that will have a dramatic affect on the future of the state and its citizens.

The first trend is the growing connection between education and economic success. With few exceptions, today the only path to a middle class income and quality of life leads through the completion of a postsecondary credential or degree. According to the Minnesota Department of Economic Development, 61% of all new job openings in Minnesota between 2006 and 2016 will require education beyond high school. A recent comprehensive review of scholarly research on college preparation and access concluded that "The majority of an age cohort — perhaps more than 80 percent — needs some form of postsecondary education to live and work productively in a rapidly changing, information-based economy."[1] At present, however, only forty percent of all Minnesotans between the ages of 18 and 64 have an associate's (two-year) degree or higher.[2]

The second trend that is remaking Minnesota is rapid demographic change. The percentages of students of color and low-income students are rising rapidly in Minnesota's elementary and

[1] George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges, John C. Hayek, "What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature," Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success, National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, July 2006, p. 105

[2] Minnesota Office of Higher Education, Data Downloaded January, 2010, http://www.ohe.state.mn.us

secondary schools, while the proportions of white and middle and upper-income students is declining. Since 1989-90, the number of students of color enrolled in Minnesota schools has doubled, totaling over 195,000 students. The numbers of low-income students and students whose first language is not English are rising rapidly as well.[3]

This accelerating demographic change is both educationally and economically important because the student populations that are growing fastest in Minnesota's schools are the ones that have historically had the least academic success there, and that are underrepresented in postsecondary education. In 2009, for example, 35% of white high school students in Minnesota scored at or above the college-ready benchmark on the ACT exam in all four core subjects: English, social science, algebra and biology. Only 15% of American Indian students, 20% of Asian students, 7% of Black students and 18% of Hispanic students scored at the college-ready level.

Taken together, these twin forces of change – the emergence of a hypercompetitive knowledge-based economy coupled with the demographic transformation of Minnesota's schools and communities – set the context for the work of the High School Assessment and Accountability Task Force. Many on the task force and among the policy makers who authorized its creation are aware that Minnesota today faces what may be the perfect societal storm: at the very moment when our state needs its citizenry and its workforce to master higher levels of knowledge and skill than ever before, that workforce will be comprised of growing numbers of students who are unlikely to possess the necessary skills if past trends in student achievement continue without change.

And so the challenge is clear: over the next decade Minnesota must find ways to dramatically improve the educational performance of its students who are on the wrong side of the achievement gaps that exist at every level of our educational system. To realize that goal, we must identify effective strategies for accelerating the achievement of struggling students – especially at the high school level.

The members of the High School Assessment and Accountability Task Force brought a shared sense of urgency for achieving that objective to the work they began together in June of 2009. They did not, however, bring to the task force a shared sense of the role that a high school assessment and accountability system can and should play in attempting to realize that goal. Some members saw holding individual students accountable for their performance on standardized tests as unfair and counterproductive, while others saw it as an indispensible component of a serious strategy for raising student achievement. Some saw the tests themselves as the only objective and reliable measure of student learning, while others saw standardized tests as flawed and incomplete measures of student performance.

[3] Minnesota Minority Education Partnership, *The State of Students of Color*, 2006, p. 9, and *2009 State of Students of Color Executive Summary*, p.4.

III. Some Conclusions from Research

In order to help the task force begin to develop a common understanding and a common vision, early in its process the group reviewed a number of studies of high school graduation assessment and accountability systems around the country. A list of the studies that the group read or received summaries of is included in at the end of this report.

In short, the relatively small body of research that has been conducted to date raises important questions about the consequences of high-stakes graduation policies, but there is not consensus among the research community about the effects that such policies have on student achievement, graduation rates or other educational outcomes. For example, in a 2005 study of state high school exit examinations in Florida and Texas that assessed student mastery of basic skills, researchers John Robert Warren and Krista N. Jenkins did not find evidence that the graduation requirement increased dropout rates overall or disparities in dropout rates among student groups (Warren and Jenkins, 2005). In a later study of exit examinations across the country, however, the same researchers concluded with Rachel Kulick that exit examinations that go beyond minimum levels of competency are associated with lower high school graduation rates and increased participation in testing for the General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Warren, Jenkins & Kulick, 2006).

More recently, Sean Reardon, Allison Atteberry, Nicole Arshan and Michal Kurlaender conducted a study of three cohorts of students in California, the first of which was not subject to the exit exam requirement and the second and third of which were affected by the requirement. The researchers found that California's exit exam mandate had no positive effect on student achievement and decreased the state's graduation rates by 3.6 to 4.5 percentage points. They found that the greatest negative effects were concentrated on low-achieving students, students of color and female students (Reardon, Atteberry, Arshan and Kurlaender, 2009).

While most studies of the impact of high-stakes graduation policies have focused on graduation and dropout rates, a number of studies have evaluated the impact of the policies on other educational outcomes. For example, a 2005 study by Gregory Marchant and Sharon Paulson found that exit exams decreased both high school graduation rates and SAT scores (Marchant and Paulson, 2005).

To date, research has not found that one type of high-stakes exit exam, such as an end-of-course assessment, has a greater or lesser impact on student outcomes than another type of exit exam, such as an integrated exam that measures knowledge and skills learned over several years in more than one course (Supovitz, 2009).

But while consensus does not exist on the impact that high-stakes exit exams have on student outcomes, there is broad agreement that such exams and other forms of high-stakes accountability have a significant effect on classroom instruction and school programming. High-stakes exams have been shown to promote teacher-centered rather than student-

centered instruction (Vogler, 2006), and to change the content being covered and the amount of time devoted to test preparation activities (Supovitz, 2009). A recent study by Laura Perna and Scott Thomas found that when high schools with low-performing populations are faced with a high-stakes exit examination, they divert resources and attention away from preparing students in the "academic middle" for college (Perna & Thomas, 2009). As researcher Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburg has stated, "The higher the stakes, the more educators will teach to the tests (Resnick & Zurawsky, 2005)."

Several professional measurement organizations also stress caution in using a single measure to make major educational decisions. Many of these organizations have made specific recommendations about the use of a single test in these important determinations.

The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* is a set of governing expectations jointly developed by the American Psychological Association (APA), the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), and the American Educational Research Association (AERA). These standards are the seminal body of work used by measurement experts in designing, administering, and reporting scores from assessments. Standard 13.7 states that "[i]n educational settings, a decision or characterization that will have major impact on a student should not be made on the basis of a single cut score."[4] AERA has also established its own position statement on these issues, which concludes that, "Decisions that affect individual students' life chances or educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores alone. Other relevant information should be taken into account to enhance the overall validity of such decisions."[5]

Along with these questions raised by research, the task force also discussed the experience of high-achieving states such as Massachusetts, where state leaders have identified graduation exit requirements as a core component of a successful strategy for raising student achievement.[6]

[4] American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education, American Educational Research Association. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, 2009.
[5] American Educational Research Association, *Position Statement on High-Stakes Testing in Pre-K – 12 Education*, adopted July 2000. Found at http://www.aera.net/?id=378
[6] See, for example, *Taking Root: Strategies for Sustaining the College and Career-Ready Agenda*, Achieve, Inc. 2009, and "Yes They Can! The Massachusetts Story of Reform, Expectations, Achievement and Challenges," PowerPoint presentation by David P. Driscoll, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, November 4, 2006. Available by request from the University of Minnesota College Readiness Consortium at 612-625-3695.

IV. The Proposal

THE ACCESS SYSTEM

ACHIEVING COLLEGE AND CAREER-READINESS FOR EVERY STUDENT'S SUCCESS

THE KEY COMPONENTS OF THE ACCESS SYSTEM

	Language Arts
Type of Assessment	The ACCESS system should include a comprehensive language arts exam that students take for the first time at the end of 10th grade. The exam should measure reading, writing and other literacy skills that are learned over multiple years in school and that are taught in multiple classes and often in multiple subject areas.
Types of Test Items	The ACCESS exam in language arts should include both multiple-choice and open-ended (constructed response) items plus an extended essay that assesses composition skills.
Mode of Administration	The ACCESS exam in language arts should be computer-based.
Speed of Results Return	Results on the ACCESS language arts exam should be returned within 72 hours.
Frequency of Retests	Students who do not perform at or above the required cut score on the ACCESS language arts exam should be able to retake a computer-based version of the test at regular intervals, such as once every 2-3 months.

	Language Arts
Performance Levels for Reporting Results	Results on the ACCESS language arts exam should be reported for individual students, schools and districts using performance levels that indicate progress toward college and career readiness, such as: • Advanced Readiness for College and Careers • College and Career Ready • On Track for Readiness • Off Track for Readiness Procedures for reporting individual student test results to parents and guardians and for releasing school and district results over the Web and to the media should be similar to those currently used for reporting results on the MCA-II and GRAD assessments.
Stakes for Students	After the ACCESS language arts exam is administered for at least two consecutive years, data on student results should be used to empirically identify a passing score below which it is possible to say that there is a high likelihood that a student does not possess the language arts knowledge and skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education or the workplace. Students who achieve at levels below this score should be required to participate in appropriate locally-determined remediation programs and retake the exam until they are able to perform at or above the required score in order to earn a high school diploma.
Appeals Process	Students who do not perform at or above the required cut score on the ACCESS language arts exam should have the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skills needed to meet or exceed the passing standard through a carefully structured state-level appeals process that considers additional measures of student learning. The Commissioner of Education should convene a committee of stakeholders with relevant experience and expertise to develop a recommendation for this appeals process. The committee's recommendation should be reviewed by the ACCESS Implementation Group prior to its submission to the Commissioner of Education for consideration and approval. The ACCESS Implementation Group should advise the Commissioner on the degree to which the proposed appeals process advances the objectives of the ACCESS system and is aligned with the system's other components.

	Language Arts
Remediation Strategies	Strategies and programs for remediating and accelerating the learning of students who do not perform at the required level on the 10th grade ACCESS exam in language arts should be determined and managed at the local level and should begin as soon as possible after the student's first unsuccessful attempt to achieve a passing score on the exam.
Alternative Ways to Meet Graduation Requirement	Students who meet the following criteria should be considered to have met Minnesota's graduation requirements under the ACCESS system: 1. The student moved to Minnesota and enrolled in a Minnesota school after meeting another state's graduation requirements in English Language Arts 2. The student has disabilities that meet current state requirements for achieving a passing status at the individual level 3. The student is an English Language Learner who has been in the United States for fewer than 4 years 4. The student has scored above the college readiness benchmark in language arts on the ACT exam
Stakes for Schools	Consideration of any new strategies for holding schools and districts accountable for helping all students succeed on the ACCESS exam in language arts should follow the upcoming reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind). If such additional state-level accountability measures are added to the ACCESS system, they should be carefully and clearly aligned with the reauthorized federal law to ensure that schools do not face contradictory or competing accountability requirements.
Interim Assessment	The State should provide schools with interim benchmark assessments that are aligned with the ACCESS language arts exam and can be used to assess student learning earlier in the student's high school career. The State should also provide districts with an item bank that teachers can use to create classroom-based formative assessments that help students prepare for the summative ACCESS language arts exam.
Instructional Supports	Schools should be provided with learning supports that help students succeed on the ACCESS language arts exam, such as study guides and curricular materials that are aligned with the exam and that teachers can use to diagnose and close gaps in students' knowledge and skills.

	Language Arts
Process for Determining Test Content	To develop the ACCESS language arts exam, the Commissioner of Education should bring together K-12 and postsecondary educators, businesspeople, community leaders and others with relevant expertise to review the full breadth of Minnesota's academic standards and benchmarks in English/Language Arts and to determine the key knowledge and skills that should be measured on the exam. The recommendations developed by this committee should be reviewed by the ACCESS Implementation Group prior to their submission to the Commissioner of Education for consideration and approval. The ACCESS Implementation Group should advise the Commissioner on the degree to which the recommendation advances the objectives of the ACCESS system and is aligned with the system's other components.
Process for Determining Performance Levels and Requirements	The score ranges for each performance level and the minimum score needed to meet graduation requirements should be set by the Commissioner of Education based upon the following three factors: (1) the professional judgment of a group of K-12 and postsecondary educators who have relevant expertise in language arts (2) input from employers and community leaders who have a current understanding of the knowledge and skills needed for work and citizenship and (3) statistical relationships of student results on the exam after it is administered for at least two consecutive years with other indicators of college and career readiness, such as performance in the same content area of the ACT exam or of AP or IB assessments. The Commissioner of Education should review the proposed performance levels and minimum score with the ACCESS Implementation Group before they are set in order to receive feedback on the degree to which the proposed performance levels and minimum score will advance the objectives of the ACCESS system and are aligned with the system's other components.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Type of Assessment	The ACCESS system should include end-of-course exams taken in high school algebra and biology, two subjects in which all students are currently required to earn credit according to Minnesota statute. The specific courses in which students take the ACCESS exams in both subjects should be determined at the local level and based upon the courses in which students complete the academic standards that are assigned to each subject through the process for determining test content described below. At least once each year, districts should be required to notify the State of the courses in each high school in which students earn required credit in those subjects. That notification should take place through the Minnesota Common Course Catalog reporting system, which is currently being developed.
Types of Test Items	The ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology should include both multiple-choice and open-ended (constructed response) items.
Mode of Administration	The ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology should be computer-based.
Speed of Results Return	Results on the ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology should be returned within 72 hours.
Frequency of Test Administrations	Students should be able to take the ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology at appropriate points in the common high school calendar, such as the ends of semesters 1 and 2 and the end of summer school. The State should establish testing windows that are flexible enough to accommodate the most common local school calendars and scheduling configurations.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Performance Levels for Reporting Results	Results on the ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology should be reported for individual students, schools and districts using performance levels that indicate progress toward college and career readiness, such as: • Advanced Readiness for College and Careers • College and Career Ready • On Track for Readiness • Off Track for Readiness Procedures for reporting individual student test results to parents and guardians and for releasing school and district results over the Web and to the media should be similar to those currently used for reporting results on the MCA-II and GRAD assessments.
Stakes for Students	As currently required in Minnesota statue, students must earn credit equivalent to a year of study in both high school algebra and biology to earn a high school diploma. A student's score on the ACCESS end-of-course examination in either subject should count for 25% of his or her final grade in the course in which he or she earns the required credit. If a course includes more than one grading period (such as two semesters of study), the student's score on the ACCESS exam should count as 25% of his or her grade for the final grading period in the course.
Appeals Process	The ACCESS system should not include a state-level appeals process in high school algebra and biology because schools and districts already have processes and practices in place to review disputed final course grades. Those local processes should continue under the ACCESS system, though schools and districts should not have the authority to change student scores on the ACCESS end-of-course exams or to count the exams for less than 25% of the final course grades in high school algebra and biology.
Remediation Strategies	Per current law, students who do not pass a course at the appropriate level of high school algebra and/or biology must do so before they can receive a high school diploma. Districts currently enable students to meet this requirement by retaking the course and/or completing an authorized credit recovery class. Under the ACCESS system, districts should be able to continue to utilize both strategies as long as 25% of the student's final grade in the course is still determined by his or her performance on the ACCESS end-of-course exam. Districts should have the option of requiring students to retake the ACCESS exam at the conclusion of the repeated course or the credit recovery process within a regularly-scheduled administration window, or to use their original exam score.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Alternative Ways to Meet Graduation Requirement	Students who meet the following criteria should be considered to have met Minnesota's graduation requirements under the ACCESS system: 1. The student moved to Minnesota and enrolled in a Minnesota school after meeting another state's graduation requirements in high school algebra or biology or in a broader subject area (such as math or science) that encompasses high school algebra and biology content 2. The student has disabilities that meet current state requirements for achieving a passing status at an individual level 3. The student is an English Language Learner who has been in the United States for fewer than 4 years 4. If a student does not take the course in which his or her school has embedded the high school algebra or biology ACCESS end-of-course exams (because, for example, he or she earns the required credit by taking a college course through PSEO), the student should be required to meet state graduation test requirements in those subjects by performing at the designated levels on one of the following assessments: o Performing at the College and Career-Ready level or above on the ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology o Obtaining a score that would earn credit at a four-year college or university in Minnesota on an Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exam in an equivalent AP or IB course o Scoring above the college readiness benchmark in the corresponding subject on the ACT exam o Passing a credit-bearing course in college algebra or college biology or a more advanced course in either subject with a grade of 'C-' or better Because a student who meets the graduation examination requirement in high school algebra or biology through one of these routes will not have taken the course in which the relevant ACCESS exam is embedded, that student should not be included in Alignment Index calculation described below.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Stakes for Schools	To help control for any grade inflation that might result from counting the ACCESS exams in high school algebra and biology as 25% of students' final grades in those subjects, the State should establish a procedure through which it annually calculates the degree of alignment between each high school's final course grades in high school algebra and biology and scores on the end-of-course ACCESS exams in those subjects. Based upon the results of those calculations, each high school should be placed into one of the four following categories on both a high school algebra Alignment Index and a biology Alignment Index: • Closely Aligned • Moderately Aligned • Somewhat Misaligned • Highly Misaligned The Alignment Indexes in both subjects should be published annually and made continually available on the Web site of the Minnesota Department of Education. High schools that are placed in the Highly Misaligned category for three consecutive years should be required to submit a plan to the Commissioner of Education that analyzes the school's achievement and grading patterns and identifies steps that the school will take to more closely align grading practices with scores on the ACCESS exams. When Phase 2 of the ACCESS system is developed and implemented, the State should consider taking additional steps to sanction and support schools that remain in the Highly Misaligned category for five years or more despite the design and implementation of plans to correct the misalignment.
Interim Assessment	Under the ACCESS system, the State should provide schools with interim benchmark assessments that are aligned with the end-of-course ACCESS exams and can be used to assess student learning during high school algebra and biology courses. The State should also provide districts with access to an item bank that teachers can use to create classroom-based formative assessments that help students prepare for the ACCESS end-of-course exams.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Instructional Supports	In order to address the possibility that schools may overemphasize the content of high school algebra and biology given the role that both courses would play in determining eligibility to graduate under the ACCESS system, the State should explicitly identify and widely disseminate the key academic standards that students must master in earlier math and science courses in order to do well in high school algebra and biology courses and on the ACCESS end-of-course exams. In addition to this effort to avoid narrowing the curriculum, the State should also provide schools with access to optional course objectives, syllabi, instructional units and other resources in both subjects. K-12 educators should work closely with postsecondary faculty to create and/or select these supports. The State should also sponsor ACCESS Course Academies to promote best practices in curriculum, instruction and formative assessment in high school algebra and biology. Finally, the State should sponsor ACCESS Data Academies to help educators analyze results on the ACCESS end-of-course exams.
Process for Determining Test Content	To develop the ACCESS end-of-course exams in high school algebra and biology, the Minnesota Department of Education should bring together committees of secondary and postsecondary educators and business representatives who have expertise and experience in fields that require the application of math and science knowledge and skills to review the algebra and biology strands in the Minnesota academic standards to determine which of those standards and benchmarks must be covered by the end of the high school algebra and biology courses that will be the focus of the ACCESS end-of-course exams. The recommendations developed by these committees should be reviewed by the ACCESS Implementation Group prior to their submission to the Commissioner of Education for consideration and approval. The ACCESS Implementation Group should advise the Commissioner on the degree to which the recommendations advance the objectives of the ACCESS system and are aligned with the system's other components.

	High School Algebra and Biology
Process for Determining Performance Levels and Requirements	The score ranges for each performance level on the ACCESS end-of-course exams in high school algebra and biology should be set by the Commissioner of Education based upon at least the following three factors: (1) the professional judgment of a group of secondary and postsecondary educators who have relevant expertise in mathematics and biology (2) input from employers and community leaders who have a current understanding of the knowledge and skills needed for work and citizenship and (3) statistical relationships of student results on the exam after it is administered for at least two consecutive years with other indicators of college and career readiness, such as performance in the same content area of the ACT exam or of AP or IB assessments. The Commissioner of Education should review the proposed performance levels with the ACCESS Implementation Group before they are set in order to receive feedback on the degree to which the proposed performance levels will advance the objectives of the ACCESS system and are aligned with the system's other components.

	IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACCESS SYSTEM
Phases of Implementation	The ACCESS system should be implemented in two phases. Implementation of Phase I should begin in 2012 and should include the components outlined in this document in language arts, high school algebra and biology. Implementation of Phase II should begin in 2014 and its design should be heavily influenced by the lessons learned during and outcomes of Phase I. New system components that could be considered for inclusion in Phase II include: • The creation of additional end-of-course assessments in the other subjects currently required for high school graduation in Minnesota: 1) geometry in mathematics and 2) chemistry or physics in science. If assessments in those subjects are added to the ACCESS system, the State should carefully consider the pros and cons of attaching stakes for graduation to those assessments • Putting in place additional sanctions and supports for high schools that are identified as Highly Misaligned for five years or more despite the development, submission and implementation of a plan to strengthen alignment between grades and test scores • Introduction of additional incentives for students to work hard to succeed on the ACCESS exams in language arts, high school algebra and biology, such as using scores for postsecondary admission and/or placement into credit-bearing courses. • Allowing a student to meet the graduation requirement in English Language Arts by passing an appropriate credit-bearing course in English Language Arts at an accredited institution of higher education
Monitoring the Implementation of the ACCESS System	An ACCESS Implementation Group comprised of assessment experts, practitioners and other appropriate stakeholders should be convened for the sole purpose of monitoring the implementation of the new system and reporting annually to the Commissioner of Education and the legislature on the quality of the State's implementation of the new system. The group should highlight any components of the system design that are not being implemented or being implemented poorly. The ACCESS Implementation Group should exist from the date of initial enactment of the system through the conclusion of Phase I of the system's implementation.

	IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACCESS SYSTEM
Ongoing Studies	During the first years of the implementation of the ACCESS system, the State should fund and convene an Implementation and Impact Study to evaluate feasibility, workload and scheduling under the new system. During later years of the system's implementation, the State should continue the Implementation and Impact Study and should also conduct a Consequential Validity Study to evaluate adaptations schools and teachers make in response to the new system.

Transition Plan

The following chart identifies one strategy for transitioning from Minnesota's current high school assessment and accountability system based on the GRAD tests to the ACCESS system proposed by the working group. Additional analysis and stakeholder input would be required to finalize this plan. All of the transitions envisioned in the chart meet the timeline for aligning Minnesota's assessments to state standards required in MN Statute 120B.30 with the exception of mathematics. In math, statutory language would need to be changed to authorize the alignment of tests with the most recent version of academic standards in 2014-2015 rather than 2013-2014.

Year in Grade 8	Class of	Math		Science	English Language Arts	
2005-2006	2010	MCA-II/ GRAD		MCA-II Biology	MCA-II/ GRAD	
2006-2007	2011	MCA-II/ GRAD	Test Development	MCA-II Biology	MCA-II/ GRAD	
2007-2008	2012	MCA-II/ GRAD	Field Test	Biology EOC REQ'D (2015)	MCA-II/ GRAD	
2008-2009	2013	MCA-II Rqd GRAD Option	High School Algebra Option	Biology EOC REQ'D (2015)	GRAD Option	ELA Comprehensive Option
2009-2010	2014	MCA-II Rqd GRAD Option	High School Algebra Option	Biology EOC REQ'D (2015)	GRAD Option	ELA Comprehensive Option
2010-2011	2015[1,2]	GRAD Retest Sunset	High School Algebra Grad REQ'D	Biology Grad REQ'D	GRAD Retest Sunset	ELA Comprehensive Grad REQ'D
2011-2012	2016	GRAD Retest Sunset	High School Algebra Grad REQ'D	Biology Grad REQ'D	GRAD Retest Sunset	ELA Comprehensive Grad REQ'D
2012-2013	2017[3]	GRAD Retest Sunset	High School Algebra Grad REQ'D	Biology Grad REQ'D	GRAD Retest Sunset	ELA Comprehensive Grad REQ'D
2013-2014	2018	GRAD Retest Sunset	High School Algebra Grad REQ'D	Biology Grad REQ'D	GRAD Retest Sunset	ELA Comprehensive Grad REQ'D
2014-2015	2019	GRAD Retest Sunset	High School Algebra Grad REQ'D	Biology Grad REQ'D	GRAD Retest Sunset	ELA Comprehensive Grad REQ'D

1 – Class of 2015 is first required to graduate under 2007 math standards
2 – Class of 2015 is first required to graduate under 2009 science standards.
3 – Class of 2017 is first required to graduate under 2010 English language arts standards.

V. Citizen's League Feedback Summary

As the Working Group developed its tentative recommendations in December, there was interest in finding out whether the recommendations would have the impact on schools and create the motivation for students that Working Group members anticipated. Too often policy recommendations have unintended outcomes which might have been foreseen by people who would be directly involved in implementing the policy. As an independent organization with experience in assessing the impact of policy recommendations on the people and communities to be involved in the implementation, the Citizens League was selected to conduct this inquiry.

During early 2010, the Citizens League met with principals, teachers, counselors and students in six Minnesota high schools: one urban, one suburban, one rural, and three small alternative and charter schools. The students represented the full range of academic achievement, particularly in math, in each school. While neither the students nor educators were a random sample, nor are fully representative of their peers across the state, their insights into the impact of the ACCESS proposal are worthy of consideration.

As a result of their work, the Citizens League made the following findings:

1. Accountability systems are seen as a legitimate state function by administrators, teachers and students.
2. There was general agreement that the state's current course requirements are appropriate, including Algebra II. However, the adequacy of opportunities for meeting those standards for students who lag far behind was routinely questioned.
3. Most educators and students were not opposed to using standardized tests as a criterion for a diploma, although the general sentiment was that the standardized tests are not particularly relevant in this regard. ACCESS is widely regarded as a significant improvement.
4. The current accountability system is bringing about intensive efforts to improve instructional practices in all schools. There were mixed reviews about whether ACCESS's proposed "on track/off track" rating would be helpful and some concern about combining the reading and writing exam, whereas the 72 hour turnaround time was universally applauded.
5. Standardized tests are generally regarded as a reasonable means of holding schools accountable. However, testing can only produce the desired results if the interests of students, educators and schools are aligned. They currently are not well-aligned, and ACCESS is seen as a big step toward improving alignment.
6. There is general resistance to the notion that standardized tests are the best way to measure students' knowledge and skills.

7. Standardized tests are a poor source of motivation for students. ACCESS (through end of course exams) represents an improvement by increasing the relevance of the tests.
8. Standardized testing currently imposes considerable educational "opportunity costs" for certain students as they prepare for the tests.
9. Educators expressed a great deal of uncertainty and confusion about what the state standards actually mean for instructional purposes, and agreed that ACCESS would be a great improvement in helping teachers and students understand exactly what is expected of them.[7]

VI. Beyond This Proposal

Because the High School Assessment and Accountability working group was charged with developing a proposal that can be implemented in the near future in Minnesota, the group had to restrict its recommendations to the use of assessment tools and accountability practices that are available and affordable today. Over the course of its deliberations, however, the group also frequently discussed the ongoing advances in assessment, technology and other fields that will make new approaches possible in the future. To help Minnesota educators and policy makers begin to think about and plan for that future, the working group also developed these ideas for the Next Generation Assessment and Accountability system that should succeed the ACCESS system proposed in this report:

A. In addition to measuring mastery of core content knowledge, Minnesota's Next Generation assessments should investigate advancing methodologies to evaluate students' capacity to reason, evaluate claims and demonstrate other higher-order thinking skills.
B. Minnesota's Next Generation assessments should also investigate advancing methodologies to evaluate students' ability to apply academic knowledge to solve problems in real world scenarios and situations.
C. Minnesota's Next Generation assessments should go beyond short constructed response items to include extended, complex performance tasks.
D. As Minnesota's academic standards are revised, both the standards and the accompanying assessments should focus more on depth of student understanding and mastery than on breadth of content knowledge.
E. When assessing mastery of content in subjects such as science and mathematics, Minnesota's Next Generation assessments should also measure students' reading and writing capacity.

[7] Citizens League. Becker, S. and Farris-Berg, K. Minnesota Educators and Students Insights on Accountability, February 15, 2010. Found on Working Group website at http://www.mnp16.org/working_groups/ccrpi.html

F. Minnesota's Next Generation Assessments should provide students and educators with immediate feedback on performance.

G. The assessments should be computer adaptive and utilize other psychometric and technological strategies to identify the student's level of learning with great specificity.

H. Minnesota's Next Generation accountability system should replicate the approach used by many of the world's educational leaders in which standardized end-of-course exams are combined with school-based assessments that include performance tasks, presentations and projects taken under supervised conditions that are either created by an external entity and scored by teachers or created by teachers and scored by an external entity. In Singapore and other countries, group work is a strong feature of such school-based assessments.

I. Minnesota teachers and postsecondary faculty should be intimately involved in the development and scoring of Minnesota's Next Generation assessments.

J. When statistically appropriate, Minnesota's Next Generation system should provide educators, students and parents with valid and reliable measures of the growth that individual students make over time.

K. Technology-based systems and high-quality professional development should proactively point educators -- and increasingly the students themselves -- toward practices and resources that address the weaknesses and build on the strengths that are identified on the assessments. In other words, the systems should greatly narrow if not bridge the gap between assessment and instruction that is often very large today.

L. Minnesota's Next Generation system should promote horizontal as well as vertical accountability for student learning. That is, in addition to helping inform and enforce district, state and perhaps federal requirements, the system's tests, rewards, supports and sanctions should encourage and help educators to create their own communities of practice.

M. Minnesota's Next Generation assessments should be one component of a larger system based upon multiple measures that accurately identifies highly effective teachers so that their practices can be studied and potentially replicated.

N. Minnesota's Next Generation system should be able to correlate performance on K-12 assessments with the knowledge, skills and habits for success in a range of postsecondary institutions and careers. To the extent that such correlations are made today, they are often focused only on performance at four-year colleges and universities. Minnesota's Next Generation system should also provide information on students' readiness for technical and community colleges and other types of postsecondary institution and for high-skill jobs that do not require postsecondary credentials or degrees.

O. The Next Generation assessments should be designed so that students are interested in and care about their performance.

P. In the Next Generation system, all summative assessments should be accompanied by aligned formative and benchmark tests that teachers can use to identify and correct gaps before summative tests are administered.

Q. Results on Minnesota's Next Generation high school tests should be increasingly used for postsecondary course placement and potentially admissions purposes. Whenever possible, the last high school test should be the first college test.

R. Minnesota's Next Generation system should evaluate students' capacity to use academic knowledge and skill to solve problems both individually and in teams.

S. It should be possible to compare results on Minnesota's Next Generation assessments with performance in other states and nations.

VII. Statements From Individual Working Group Members

Individual members were offered the opportunity to submit statements that indicated the reasons for their decision to endorse or not endorse this proposal, or to raise issues that policymakers should be aware of as they consider this recommendation. The written statements that were submitted are presented verbatim below, in alphabetical order:

1. Jim Bartholomew, Director, Education Policy, Minnesota Business Partnership

We appreciate the opportunity to participate as a member of the CCRPI Assessment and Accountability Working Group. We'd also like to recognize the leadership and members of the Working Group for their time and dedication. Unfortunately, we **cannot** support the Group's final recommendations.

To be clear, the Partnership, which represents chief executives of the state's largest employers, opposed the 2009 legislation that placed a moratorium on the 11th grade graduation test in math. Failing to expect high school students to achieve at or above grade-level to earn a diploma sends a troubling message. However, we're committed to exploring opportunities to improve current practices and we approached the Working Group's task accordingly.

Consistent with the following principles, we have been active participants in Minnesota's long journey to developing, implementing and refining Minnesota's statewide standards and accountability system:

- Set rigorous, world-class, academic standards for all students.
- Measure and report student progress – individually and by school – on a uniform and comparable basis.
- Give educators flexibility to offer programs they consider most effective.

- Provide families with information and the ability to choose the programs that best meet their children's academic needs.

As the background section of the report points out, the Legislature first adopted a high school exit exam requirement in 1992. We have had two versions since then. The Basic Skills Tests (BSTs), first effective for the Class of 2000, followed by the Graduation Required Assessment for Diploma (GRAD), first effective for the Class of 2010.

The primary reason for adopting the above state exit exams is to ensure all high school graduates are able to meet certain academic expectations. The need for objective state high school exams has been highlighted for nearly twenty-five years, in recognition of disparate instruction and expectations for student achievement.

One of the more recent examples of instructional disparities was found in the analysis of Minnesota's participation in the 2007 Trends in International Math and Science Studies (TIMSS). In short, researchers found substantial differences in the math and science content students were taught, depending on whether their schools served predominately high or low-income students.

Other reasons for concern about whether students are being prepared for, and graduating from high school having met state expectations include the fact that only 47% of non-white students graduate within four years (52% within five years), the large number of students requiring remedial coursework in public post-secondary institutions and low employer satisfaction levels.

These concerns are not limited to the preparation of students in our core urban districts. The report on post-secondary remediation prepared by the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota State Colleges and University (MnSCU) system, *Getting Prepared*, highlights large numbers of graduates from districts across the state needing remedial coursework in reading and math.

These statements are not intended to disparage the many dedicated and effective educators Minnesota is fortunate to have serving our children. Rather, they are an observation that we must continue to focus on ensuring all students have the academic preparation needed to succeed in our increasingly global environment.

Finally, it should be noted the percentage of non-white students performing at grade-level and above on the reading MCA-II jumped by 14% from 2007 to 2009, the reading GRAD first became effective in 2008. While the corresponding growth in the percentage of non-white students performing at and above grade-level on the math MCA-II was 4%, there was also a 22% increase in the number of non-white students taking the test.

MBP Position.

While the Partnership's preference would be to restore the math GRAD requirement, we find merit in some of the recommendations put forward by the working group. Specifically:

- End-of-course testing in algebra 2 and biology – creating a stronger link between standards, instruction and assessment;
- Comprehensive reading and writing test, with the expectation students must pass to earn a diploma;
- Creation of an alignment index to monitor discrepancies between end-of-course test results and corresponding course grades;
- Providing educators with necessary supports such as curriculum frameworks, expansion of the math and science academies and test item banks; and
- The attempt to highlight the need for high school students to be college and career ready.

Unfortunately, other components of the working group's recommendations substantially reduce the role of objective statewide measures of student achievement. For example, having state end-of-course exams count for only 25% of a course grade invites continued achievement gaps and grade inflation. While the alignment index might address concerns about grade inflation, there aren't sufficient consequences to make it effective.

In short, in the critical areas of math and science, Minnesota would revert to a policy that allows disparities in expectations and instruction to grow.

Potential Remedies.

The fundamental flaw with the task force's recommendations is the loss of a connection between student performance on state standards-based assessments and the granting of a diploma. Without this connection, common expectations for student achievement will be diminished.

Options for reinforcing statewide standards and expectations include:

- Create an Advanced diploma for students who score at or above grade-level on each of the three tests (e.g. English, algebra and biology) and meet all other requirements. Students who don't score at or above grade-level on the tests, but only meet the task force requirements would earn a Basic diploma.
- Set scores on each of the three tests that indicate student performance at grade-level, and require students to pass each test to earn a diploma. Students who don't pass each test, but meet all other requirements would receive a certificate of attendance.
- Increase the amount of the end-of-course test result that counts toward the respective course grade from 25% to 50%, and set a minimum score that students must meet to pass.

Options for making the alignment index more effective include:

- Allow students enrolled in schools with three years of high misalignment to enroll in any other school of their choice (public or non-public).

- Schools with high misalignment after two years would send written notification to all parents in grades 7 – 12, and be required to use discretionary professional development funds to mitigate misalignment.

  If no improvement after four years, schools lose ability to grant diplomas based on course grades.

  If no improvement after five years, the district loses ability to grant diplomas based on course grades.

Options for strengthening the overall proposal include:

- Students who score at or above the College and Career Ready level on any of the three tests will be exempt from required enrollment in any corresponding post-secondary remedial course if they enroll within two years of high school graduation.

  Students who score at or above the College and Career level on all three tests will get a 10 percent increase in the amount of state post-secondary financial aid they're eligible to receive.

- The passing score on the reading test must be set at least at grade-level performance, without a two year implementation delay.
- Commit to phasing-in end-of-course tests in geometry, chemistry and physics.

Strengthening the connections between state academic standards, classroom instruction and assessment of student achievement is critical to raising Minnesota's overall student preparation, and closing our unacceptable achievement gaps.

The options listed above offer a range of opportunities to not only benefit from the working group's efforts, but also reinforce Minnesota's approach to standards-based education.

We look forward to working with the public, policy-makers and educators to not only develop effective criteria for high school graduation, but also to ensure students have had appropriate instruction prior to high school.

Thank you.

2. Paul Carney, English Instructor, Program Coordinator Ready or Not Writing, Center for College Readiness, Minnesota State Community and Technical College – Fergus Falls

While I had initially supported an end-of-course writing assessment in the 11th grade, I have reviewed the ACCESS System and have reconsidered the educational as well as logistical merits of a administering a writing test during the 10th grade. I would support an ***end-of-grade*** 10th grade writing test, providing there are opportunities for formative assessments leading up to the test.

The 10th grade makes sound sense as the appropriate juncture for assessing students' readiness for post-secondary writing tasks and for providing remediation when necessary. An end-of-grade high stakes writing assessment in the 10th grade will serve students by clarifying and emphasizing graduation writing proficiency expectations while reducing the urgency and "scramble" for accelerated remediation. Because writing is a skill that is developed over time with guided, deliberate practice, we should, whenever possible, avoid crash courses and "pit stop tutoring" for achieving skill proficiency. Interventions and remedial support should be provided to students through sustained, frequent, and accessible mechanisms.

I think the expectation that writing will be formally woven throughout the curriculum is a noble but perhaps naïve idea. Courses in the content areas that merely generate verbal volume but do not genuinely value the purpose and structure of writing may end up doing more harm than good. More writing does not always result in better writing, especially when students perceive writing as a perfunctory exercise. A writer's motivation to write well hinges largely on the authenticity of context and purpose. I wonder if our colleagues in the content-area disciplines are willing and ready (***I know they are capable***) to integrate this kind of authenticity into their curricula. I guess we can hope and help.

The mission of the Ready or Not Writing Program has been to alert students of their college-ready writing tendencies three or four years prior to their enrollment in college. Most of our users are 9th and 10th graders. We believe diagnosis should occur before the 11th grade so that immediate intervention and sustained remediation can occur. Based on this premise and on the aforementioned observations and caveats, I support the ACCESS System's 10th grade writing assessment. Oh, I fully support the Alignment Index!

3. Chuck Wiger, Senator, Minnesota Senate

I accept the recommendations of the report except as follows:

- For language arts I don't support the appeals process as currently written. Students need to demonstrate proficiency in the test and attempt remediation if necessary.
- Additionally, for the biology end of course test I recommend that this test replace the current science exam that is required by statute and NCLB.

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