



Mounds View schools add a test that's worth the extra bother

By **Beth Hawkins** | Published Mon, Apr 25 2011 8:29 am

Halfway through standardized test season — just as students have tuned out the MCA cheerleading and parents have quit reading notes imploring them to provide hearty breakfasts — comes news of a testing regime worth the bother.

On Wednesday, every Mounds View Public Schools 11th-grader will take the ACT for free. Thanks to a grant received from the Mounds View Schools Education Foundation, all Irondale, Mounds View, Oak Grove and Area Learning Center juniors will take the exam at their home school during the school day.

For those who want to go on to college — something a few will not have considered — the scores will help them figure out whether they are on track to get in. The results will also pinpoint any areas students need to shore up before next year, when most will take the ACT again.

In any case, the exercise also will get each and every one thinking about their post-secondary options.

Mounds View is one of those districts whose students perennially post enviable scores on all tests. Many come from families where going on to college is expected, the ACT an associated rite of passage and its \$30 fee barely a nip from the checkbook register.

But others, particularly those whose parents had limited educations themselves, might not have the wherewithal to sign up and pay for a dry run a year in advance — particularly on a weekend, and at a location they might not be able to get to themselves.

Struggling schools often drill so hard to bring up the number of pupils who score “proficient” on the MCAs that adding even one more test seems like a fool’s errand. But many so-called “beat-the-odds” schools are pretty religious about frequent formative assessments, those on-the-fly quizzes and tests that tell teachers whether individual kids are keeping up with a particular lesson and, if not, what basic skill they need to go back and plug in.

Many odds-beaters start administering college-admissions tests early, in part to make sure kids have real data on where they are but also to drive home the point that higher education is a viable option. If a student is behind, having interim goals and periodic assessments can make closing the gap much less formidable.

I visited one such school earlier this year and talked to kids who lived in abject poverty, knew their current ACTs and had graduation goals and plans for getting there. They knew what schools their projected scores would win them admission to; several identified “stretch schools” they vowed to try for.

College readiness is the brass ring for many, of course. But Mounds View uses the ACT and related assessments to get kids who aren’t university-bound thinking about the future, too.

The district administers tests created by the company that licenses the ACTs in eighth, 10th and 11th grades that provide a baseline assessment for future ACT results, as well as data that can help plan high school coursework. The exams also help identify careers students might be well suited to, as well as the preparation all will need — not just those going on to college.

Two years ago, Mounds View's leadership vowed to increase the number of kids taking the ACT as juniors by 20 percent, to 95 percent of each class. The foundation will also pay for 11th-graders district-wide to take the test next year.

After that? Many hope the initial results are so encouraging that where there's a will, there's a budgetary way. (Mounds View is also one of those districts whose residents can be relied on to cheerfully tax themselves a little more at referendum time.)

By contrast, the MCAs make very handy political cudgels but do precious little for individual students. Because the state-mandated tests are so unhelpful, Mounds View and many other districts already pay to administer a second set of "value-added" tests that do yield information that's useful to teachers and school administrators alike.

Perhaps one of these days Minnesota politicians will agree that's a more rational way to use our assessment dollars.

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