Many state laws require that high school students pass a standardized test to graduate. These laws are passed to make sure high schools challenge their students. Businesses often complain that high school graduates cannot read and do math needed on the job. Colleges worry that not all high school graduates can do college work. The tests are used to see who has the skills expected by employers and colleges.

Standardized tests assess students’ ability to write, read critically, and do challenging math. The tests are geared to the skills people need in jobs and in college. Supporters say standardized testing is fair because all students are graded using the same criteria. For example, writing might be graded by how many examples the students give.

Some people think graduation tests are unfair to students who are learning English. These students might know the information but have trouble understanding the test questions. Other students might have trouble focusing their attention. Their test scores might not show what they really know.

Students in different schools learn different things. The standardized test might not correspond to what some students were taught in a particular school. Students in another school, however, might find the test matched what they learned in class, which some people argue isn’t fair. Some people also worry that standardized tests make teachers just cover what is on the test. Teachers might not formulate lessons that will be interesting to their students.

Other people think that standardized testing is valuable, but that there should be different ways for students to show that they are ready to graduate.

Do standardized tests hold all students to high standards? Or do they unfairly keep some students from graduating?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:
- What standardized tests have you taken?
- What criteria do your teachers use to assess writing in class?
- When you have taken standardized tests, did the questions correspond to what you had learned in class?
- What groups of students might be hurt if standardized tests are required for graduation?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

**standardized (adjective)** the same for everyone

Sample Sentence: In many states, high school students must pass a standardized test to graduate.

Turn and Talk: Should there be a standardized curriculum for all students in the U.S.?

**assess (verb)** to judge the quality of; to evaluate

Sample Sentence: Many tests assess students’ ability to write, read critically, and do challenging math.

Turn and Talk: How do you assess whether a friend is still upset with you after you’ve had an argument?

**criteria (noun)** standards or rules used to make a decision

Sample Sentence: Keisha met all the criteria in her math class and earned an “A” for the semester.

Turn and Talk: What are your criteria for deciding that a movie or book was excellent?

**correspond (verb)** to match

Sample Sentence: Standardized tests might not correspond to what some students were taught in a particular school.

Turn and Talk: Do you think your grades correspond with the amount of effort you put into your classes?

**formulate (verb)** to invent by thinking about

Sample Sentence: Each year testing companies formulate new exams.

Turn and Talk: Do you formulate better ideas in a group or by yourself? Explain.
DO THE MATH

We want high school graduates to meet important criteria. They should read well. They should formulate ideas logically and express them clearly. They should understand basic ideas about math, science, and social studies. What is the best way to assess whether students meet these criteria? Is a standardized graduation test too harsh? In Massachusetts in 2010, several thousand students failed to graduate because they failed one or more of the state tests.

Option 1: Of the 69,008 Massachusetts 2010 high school seniors, 2,556 failed the MCAS math exam. Which answer corresponds to the percentage of the class that failed the exam?

A. about 2.4%
B. about 3.7%
C. about 4.1%
D. about 6.7%

Option 2: Under a Massachusetts state rule, students must pass all three MCAS exams to graduate: the Science exam, the English exam, and the Math exam.

Of the 69,008 Massachusetts high school seniors in 2010:

- 1,958 failed the English MCAS
- 2,556 failed the Math MCAS
- 2,933 failed the Science MCAS

a. Based on these numbers, what is the smallest possible number of students who could not graduate because of the tests? (Hint: Remember that students could have failed all three exams, so the amounts could overlap.)

Smallest possible number: 2,933. This assumes that the students who failed the Science exam also failed the English and Math exams and thus are already counted.

b. Based on these numbers, what is the largest possible number of students who could not graduate because of the test? (Hint: Remember that each student could have failed only one exam, so the amounts could not overlap at all.)

Largest possible number: 7,447. This assumes that each student failed only one exam, so the number of students prevented from graduating is the sum of the three categories.

Discussion Question: Standardized tests must change each year to prevent cheating. Each year testing companies formulate new exams. Teachers and experts review each question. A good exam question meets these criteria: it corresponds to what students should be learning in class, and it fairly assesses what students know. These carefully prepared exams are expensive. For example, the state of Massachusetts spends $35 million each year on making its standardized test. Is this a good use of state money? Why or why not?
The students in Mr. Seemy’s class are going to high school next year, and some of them are concerned about taking the new high school exit exam. The class is debating whether passing a **standardized** test should be required for students to get a high school diploma.

Camila and Josef think an exit exam is a great idea and are happy about the new test. “We need strict **criteria** to figure out who should get to graduate,” says Josef. Camila agrees with Josef and adds, “How can we be sure that students deserve a high school diploma unless we **assess** what they know?”

Malik isn’t so sure. He says, “I don’t think a **standardized** test is the right way to go. What about kids who take all the right classes and get good grades but still don’t pass the test? And what about teachers who feel they should teach only the skills that **correspond** to the test?”

“You’re raising the issue of high-stakes testing. It sounds like you are beginning to **formulate** a hypothesis about the effect exit exams will have.”

Malik thinks for a moment. “I bet a lot of kids would drop out of school if they had to take a test. My hypothesis is that more kids will drop out of high school in states that have exit exams like ours.”

Malik, Camila and Josef were very interested and found information on the internet about high school dropout rates in the U.S. They selected three states that recently started to require exit exams and studied the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: Do <strong>standardized</strong> high school exit exams affect dropout rates?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malik’s Hypothesis:</strong> States that have exit exam requirements will have higher dropout rates after requiring students to pass an exit exam.</td>
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| **Data Source:** National Center for Education Statistics - “Event dropout rates for public school students in grades 9-12, by state: School years 1993-94 through 2007-08.” |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of high school dropouts, by year:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
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<td><strong>2006</strong></td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>2008</td>
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In 2006, the states in this data set began withholding diplomas from students who didn’t pass exit exams. Did dropout rates increase starting in 2006 or thereafter? Cite specific information from the data table.

When the rule was implemented in 2006, dropout rates increased in Arizona and California and slightly decreased in Idaho. The next year, dropout rates increased again in California, decreased again in Idaho, and remained the same in Arizona. Dropout rates fell in all three states in 2008, although the dropout rates in Arizona and California were still higher than they had been before 2006.

Was Malik’s hypothesis supported by the data or not? Cite specific evidence that supports your conclusion.

No, the data are inconsistent.
DEBATE THE ISSUE

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A  □ Students should be required to pass a standardized test to graduate from high school.

OR

B  □ Passing a standardized test should not be a high school graduation requirement.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN  □______________________
□______________________
□______________________
□______________________
□______________________

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

“Can you show me evidence in the text that...”

“You make a good point, but have you considered...”

“I believe that...”

“I agree with you, but...”
TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

standardized | assess | criteria | correspond | formulate
