

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE OHIO PROFICIENCY TESTING PROGRAM

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Now that we have experienced the State of Ohio proficiency testing program – not once, but twice – it is time that we, as teachers, turn our attention and energies to devising ways which will help our students pass the tests.

Communication Considerations

First and foremost in this endeavor, we must improve our means and lines of communication. More than ever before, it is extremely important that we communicate effectively with our students and their parents, with other teachers, with members of the State legislature, and with members of the media.

We need to impress upon students that unless they pass these tests, they will not receive a diploma upon graduation from high school. It is equally important that we communicate this same message to the parents of our students.

As professionals, we must care about each other, instead of only about what goes on in our own isolated classrooms. By communicating with each other, we will be able to ensure that each of the learning outcomes to be tested on the proficiency tests will indeed be covered somewhere in the curriculum before the administration of the tests. Additionally, we may be able to eliminate some of the needless and boring repetition which all too often seems to happen in mathematics.

We must communicate to our State legislators in Columbus that these tests should not be overemphasized, that they should be used as merely one means of assessment, not as *the* means of assessment. Further, we must inform the media of the dangers of making public comparisons of different school districts. A responsible media should make clear that the *only* constant on these tests is that all schools take the same tests, but not all schools test their total population, that different test conditions exist at different schools, and that very few students fail all four tests, to name just a few of the variables.

How I would love to administer these tests to members of the State legislature and the media – and then publish their scores!

Now that it has been established with whom communication is important, what are some means by which that communication may take place? There are a number of ways:

- 1) Send the message home with students.
- 2) Send a letter explaining the details and implications of the proficiency tests directly to the parents.
- 3) Hold special evening meetings at school for the purpose of disseminating pertinent information.
- 4) Have informal discussions at school sporting events, drama productions, concerts, etc.
- 5) Devote department meetings to these tests.
- 6) Include testing when considering curriculum in faculty meetings.
- 7) Send letters to members of the Ohio House and Senate.
- 8) Write "letters to the editor".

Suggestions For Helping Students

As a high school mathematics teacher, I am very concerned about what I can do to increase my students' chances of passing the mathematics proficiency test, or in the very least, of being successful on subsequent trials. There are several things which I, and my school, can do in this regard. Some of these include:

1) I have prepared a number of worksheets for use throughout the school year. These worksheets cover learning outcomes which the math proficiency test is to measure. Students pick up these worksheets on Monday, one or two a week, and return them on Thursday. After the papers are graded, any problem areas can be reviewed in class on Friday. This takes no more than 10 or 15 minutes of classroom time a week. While I do not like giving up any time at all, giving up this short period of time may be more beneficial to my students than covering the usual material.

2) I have used Dr. Johnny Hill's ideas of zip strips to prepare students for the test. Zip strips are narrow strips of paper on which students write the answers to questions given orally by the teacher. Questions are not repeated, and students have a limited amount of time to answer (usually 4 to 10 seconds). This will force much mental exercise and quick recall on the part of students, and depending on the number of questions asked and the time limit set, this activity should take no more

than a few minutes of class time each time it is used. Zip strips will not be much help with the problem-solving aspects of the test, but just as it has been emphasized that 50% of the test is problem-solving, we must not forget 50% of the test is on something other than problem-solving, and in those areas, zip strips may be helpful.

3) My school has made arrangements for students to be tutored during the regular school day. This is especially helpful to those students who fail the test in November, as it provides a definite time and place to provide remediation.

4) We have assigned several mathematics teachers to freshman study halls with the idea that they can provide some proficiency tutoring during study halls.

5) Special Saturday morning tutoring sessions are available to students.

There are several other things that we can do to help our students pass the proficiency test. High on this list is making sure that we as teachers know everything about the tests that we can possibly know. This includes getting a copy of the practice test and sharing it with our students. Get a copy of the 16 learning outcomes which the test measures. Study these outcomes thoroughly; they tell you exactly what is on the test, as well as much of what is not on the test. Know that the test covers five different strands – arithmetic, measurement, geometry, data analysis, and algebra – and that the test consists of 40 multiple choice questions, none of which are of the "none correct" "all correct" variety. Know that raw scores are not going to be revealed, only whether a student passed each strand or not. Different forms of the test are being developed, but every student in the state will take the same form each time the test is administered. Calculators are not permitted; no problem takes more than three steps; distractors are among the choices for answers; and while every student must be provided the time necessary for him/her to finish the test, most students finish the mathematics test in an hour.

To help our students, we must make ourselves aware of all the aspects and implications of the proficiency test. We must make full use of our own talents, resources, intelligence, and creativity. We must impress upon our students the importance of these tests, and the impact the tests will have upon them regarding graduation. Inside the classroom, we, as professional educators, must hold in check our frustrations with the inequities, the politics, and the biases of these tests. Instead, we must do all that we can to help our students pass the proficiency tests – we hope on their first attempt!
