

WELL INTENTIONED FOLLY

How “high standards” will leave some students behind

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In the movie *Dumb and Dumber*, Lloyd, played by Jim Carey, asks the lovely and sophisticated Mary Swanson, played by Lauren Holly, what the chances are of him becoming her boyfriend? She honestly responds, “One out of a million.” After a moment of contemplation, Lloyd sports a broad smile and exclaims, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance!”

Reckless optimism is funny in the movies. But it is a sad commentary when the Michigan Department of Education adopts this stance in relation to our children’s high school education. Such is the case with the new high school graduation requirements in the state, known as the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC). The MMC requires that *every* high school student, beginning with this year’s ninth grade class, successfully complete the following *minimum requirements*:

- Four years of English
- Four years of Math including Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2.
- Three years of Science including Biology and Chemistry or Physics
- Three years of Social Studies including Civics, Economics, US History & Geography, and World History & Geography
- One year of Health and Physical Education
- One year of Visual, Performing, Applied Arts

And for those students who cannot complete the MMC, public schools are forbidden from offering them any diploma. They may be given the consolation prize of a *Certificate of Completion*, but not a high school diploma. There is now only one road to a high school diploma, and it is the MMC. No longer will *some* students be taking “college prep” classes, instead, *every* student will be taking college prep classes.

Indeed, high expectations are an important part of encouraging students to do their best. High expectations often promote better performance. And no one would suggest that we should lower expectations for any group of our students. Students from all socio-economic levels and from all ethnic backgrounds, even those with limited English language experience, should be expected and encouraged to perform at their highest level. And it is critically important for public high schools to promote education as one of the keys to personal success and social equality.

But even high expectations must be tempered by the reality of ability limitations. Although it may be sacrosanct to point this out, the maxim that *anyone can do anything* is simply not true. And while it may be the stuff of inspirational pep talks, the myth that any student can master any educational challenge can quickly be disproved. Curiously, we readily grasp the notion of ability limitations when it comes to physical skills or special talents. Let us imagine that the MMC included the standard that *every student must run the mile under six minutes*. Perhaps we could add that they must be able to *create a realistic and accurate self portrait using acrylic paints*. If

those were graduation requirements, it would seem silly and unfair, because we easily understand that the individual differences in physical ability and artistic talent would not allow us to set a unitary high standard.

We all understand that in spite of effort and opportunity, not everyone has the inherent ability to become a professional basketball player or concert pianist. It is also the case that not everyone can become a high school mathematics teacher or a cardiac surgeon. And not all high school students are destined to get a four year college education. Like it or not, nature puts broad limits on all of our abilities, and the obvious differences in our physical skills are also true of our cognitive skills

Most of us already know that a four year college education is not required in order to be successful. The Bureau of Labor Statistics employment projections forecast only a one percent increase in jobs requiring a four year college degree in the next eight years. There is in fact, no prediction of a shortage of skilled workers in the near future. And here are some sobering statistics. While about two thirds of high school graduates enroll in college, only about one third graduate with a four year degree. And while nearly 85% of adults have a high school diploma, only about 25% have a bachelor's degree. A little known fact is that Michigan colleges and universities graduate less than 30 percent of students in four years and only 52 percent after five years. Most of us in America do not have and will not obtain a four year college degree.

There is no doubt that the purpose of high school is no longer to prepare students to immediately enter the job market. Employers are not waiting in line for highly trained high school graduates to fill their well paying positions. Any employer who hires mere high school graduates expects that they will need to be trained for any skilled positions. Clearly, post high school education is the key to most jobs. But it is important to realize that this can take many forms, and for most students, that will be something other than a four year degree.

The MMC naively sets minimum graduation standards based on four year college entry. In fact, the MMC goes beyond most four year college entry requirements and dwarfs the requirements of any Community College or Technical School. Students do not need the MMC in order to enroll and be successful in college or technical school.

To understand how the MMC will affect students, imagine these scenarios.

Susie wants to enlist in the Navy, but if she is unable to pass Chemistry, she won't get a diploma and will not be able to pursue her plan.

Tommy's dad owns an auto repair garage and he plans to work in his dad's business. But, since he failed Geometry, he will not get a diploma and won't be able to attend an automotive technical school to become a certified mechanic.

Julie has always been a slow learner, but she's gifted in working with young children. Unfortunately, she cannot pursue post-high school education in early childhood care without passing Algebra 2.

And do we really believe that all students who aspire to become fire fighters, custodians, cosmetologists, or computer technicians need to master higher level math and science? The MMC will not only keep some of these students from getting a high school diploma, it will deprive them of their dreams.

In short, students who previously would have left high school and gone on to colleges or technical schools may no longer have that option. It is reasonable to predict that the MMC is going to increase dropouts by discouraging students who struggle to pass required classes. Imagine what happens to a student's motivation when they struggle to pass Geometry, only to look ahead and realize that there are two more years of mathematics to pass in order to graduate. Perhaps we can learn from other states, such as New York, who have set tough high school graduation requirements. The statewide high school graduation rate in New York is 58 percent. It is logical to predict that making it much more difficult to get a diploma will decrease the graduation rate in Michigan.

The MMC may have noble intentions, but it is based on faulty assumptions about the base level of academic preparation needed to succeed in today's world. And it fails to grasp the basic concept of individual differences in ability. It is a grand, but ill-fated experiment using the high school students of Michigan as guinea pigs, and it will needlessly sacrifice struggling students on the altar of high expectations.

Psychologists like to point out that on any measure, half of the population will be below average. The MMC seems to be based on the illogical belief that we can somehow push everyone into the "above average" category. As designed, the MMC will selectively punish lower performing students, and those students will often be the ones who have the least parent support, fewest home resources, and poorest educational experiences. The state has not taken a clear stand on the fate of special education students, but it seems clear that the MMC will make graduation impossible for many of those students.

The solution to this problem seems simple. High schools should offer a two tiered diploma. The MMC can be preserved and used for the large number of students who can obtain a *state endorsed MMC diploma*. But for those who are unable to meet those standards, they should have the opportunity of obtaining a *district sanctioned high school diploma*.

At a time when we have begun to accept and understand the benefits of cultural diversity, we must also embrace ability diversity. Michigan public schools welcome every student who comes through their doors. Let us make sure that we also give them the chance to walk across the graduation stage and toward productive citizenship.