

North Carolina

Test Name: North Carolina High School Competency Tests and the North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance

Subjects Tested: Reading comprehension, mathematics, and computer skills

Initial Grades Tested: 8 and 9

Test Type: Standards-based

Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official state position on the purpose of the exit exam is laid out in the law authorizing the exam. The law states that the state board of education must adopt tests or other measurement devices to assure that graduates of the state's public high schools and nonpublic schools supervised by the state board possess the skills and knowledge necessary to function independently and successfully in assuming the responsibilities of citizenship.

Historical and Policy Background

North Carolina began administering the North Carolina High School Competency Tests in 1978-79 and the North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance in 1996-97. The state did not administer another exit exam before these exams. Diplomas were first withheld based on performance in the reading and math tests in 1982 for students who entered ninth grade for the first time in 1978. Diplomas were first withheld in 2001 for performance on the computer skills test for students who entered eighth grade in the 1996-97 school year.

The oldest version of the competency test (used from 1978-79 through 1993-94) assessed reading, mathematics, and writing. The state board of education implemented a new requirement in 1994-95 that represented a more rigorous standard than the old minimum competency requirement. When the new requirement was implemented, the writing portion of the test was eliminated.

In 2003, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation calling on the state board of education to study the adoption or development of alternate means and standards for demonstrating minimum competency, beginning in grade 9, for students who have failed the competency test at least two times. This legislation has led to the adoption of additional options for students to pass competency tests, explained below. The state also plans to institute a new Web-based computer skills test to replace the current computer skills proficiency graduation requirement. The state plans to make this test available in 2005-06 for entering eighth graders.

In May 2005, the state board of education voted to adopt additional, new high school exit standards for students who are following the college/technical preparation, college/university preparation, and career preparation courses of study. Students who will enter ninth grade for the first time in 2006-07 will be the first group of students held to the new standards, which include passing end-of-course tests in algebra I, English I, U.S. history, civics and economics, and biology and also successfully completing a senior project.

Test Characteristics

For the reading and math competency tests, school districts can schedule administration dates during each testing cycle (summer, fall, and spring). School districts must offer at least one testing opportunity annually beginning with ninth grade. Students may not take the competency tests earlier than the summer after they complete eighth grade. A student may take each competency test only once during the summer (if school is in session), fall, and spring. Seniors who have not met the competency standard must be given an additional opportunity to take the tests during the last month of school.

All students following the college/technical preparation, college/university preparation, and career preparation courses of study must pass the competency tests to receive a diploma, including private school and home-schooled students. Students with disabilities following the occupational course of study have to meet other rigorous requirements for graduation.

The state sets testing windows for the computer skills tests. The window is approximately six weeks in length during each testing cycle of summer, fall, and spring. If a student has not passed the test when it is initially given in eighth grade, school systems must offer at least one opportunity to students annually beginning in ninth grade. A student may take the multiple-choice test only once during the summer (if school is in session), fall, and spring. Only seniors may take the computer skills performance as a retest during the summer. Seniors who have not met the computer skills standard must be given an additional opportunity to take the tests during the last month of school.

The state considers the competency tests to be standards-based exams aligned to eighth grade standards. The exam was developed by the state. The state reports that the exit exams have undergone review internally to determine whether they are aligned to state standards and the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exam.

The North Carolina Competency Tests assess reading comprehension and mathematics. The North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance assess computer proficiency. The tests in all three subjects include multiple-choice items, but only the computer skills test includes performance tasks. The reading test is approximately 100 minutes, and the math test is about 97 minutes, but all students must be given sufficient time to complete the tests. All students are allowed to use calculators on part of the math test. On the computer skills test, testing times for students who entered ninth grade for the first time from 2000–01 and beyond are 90 minutes for the multiple-choice section and 100 minutes for the performance section.

For the new high school exit standards that involve passing five end-of-course tests, students will be given a maximum of two retest opportunities if they do not achieve a passing score on a particular end-of-course test.

NCLB

The results for the current exit exams will not be used to determine adequate yearly progress for high schools under the No Child Left Behind Act, since the exams are aligned to eighth grade standards.

Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the state computer skills performance test. The performance levels for the math and reading competency exams are achievement levels I, II, III, and IV. Students must meet the level III standard to pass the reading and math competency tests.

The state has recently changed from the first edition to the second edition of the test, which has generated a new series of cut scores that are equivalent to the earlier ones. The first number of the cut score refers to the edition of the test and thus the numerical changes in cut scores in recent years do not reflect any change in the standard for passing. The cut score for reading is currently 254, while the required score for math is 261.

The results are reported to school districts immediately after test administration and to schools, students, and parents 30 days after the district generates scores. Results are reported to the public once a year. Reports include information on whether the student passes or fails and the scores and subscores of skills and content for each major subject area. Test questions are not released each year.

If students fail an exit exam, the district must provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, including information about remediation requirements and future test dates.

The state does not have a system of student-level identifiers for tracking achievement results and other student data.

Student Options

If students have not met the exit exam requirements but have met other graduation requirements, they are permitted to retake the exit exams after the twelfth grade and still receive a diploma. A student may return to school for remedial instruction and for additional retesting until the maximum school age of 21, or beyond if the school district is willing to accept the student. The state does not collect data on pass rates after twelfth grade. The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet the graduation requirements in North Carolina.

If a student has scores from the North Carolina grade 8 end-of-grade tests (EOG), then these scores may be used to determine whether the student has met the competency test requirements. However, if the student lacks these scores or does not meet targets, additional screening may occur. Screening refers to the process of using certain nationally normed assessments instead of a score on the North Carolina Competency Tests in reading and mathematics. If a student passes certain nationally normed tests, they do not have to take the North Carolina reading and math competency tests. Students may also use a combination of measures to meet competency requirements, but they still must take the computer skills test of multiple choice and performance.

Beginning in 2004-05, all students have the following alternate options:

In cases where scores on nationally normed tests are not available, the following can be used:

- Seventh-grade EOG scores in reading/verbal and/or mathematics may be used to meet the competency requirement. Acceptable scores are the same as those for grade 8.
- The North Carolina algebra I end-of-grade test may be used to meet the mathematics competency requirement. Students must achieve a cutoff score equivalent to achievement level III or above.
- The North Carolina English I end-of-course test may be used to meet the reading/verbal competency requirement. Students must achieve a cutoff score equivalent to achievement level III or above.

In addition, PSAT or SAT scores may be used to meet the competency requirements. Scores from the ACT and College Board tests including the ACT PLAN, the ACT COMPASS and the College Board's ACCUPLACER may be used to meet the competency requirements.

Scores from the following four standardized, nationally normed tests, normed on a sample representative of the public school population in 1995 or later, may be used to meet the competency requirements. Scores from the eighth grade or higher editions of the test may be used.

- The California Achievement Test, fifth edition (CAT5)
- Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)
- Terra Nova
- Stanford Achievement Test 9 (SAT9)

Scores at the 50th percentile from other nationally standardized tests may be considered as an alternate means for demonstrating minimum competence upon official written request from the school district superintendent to the director of the state Division of Accountability Services.

Students who use nationally standardized tests to meet the competency requirements can use a combination of measures. For instance, a student may use the EOG at grade 8 for reading and the CAT5 to meet the mathematics competency requirement.

Students are required to make use of existing scores, or school districts may elect to incur the cost to administer the nationally standardized tests. The state will not cover the costs associated with the administration of nationally standardized tests for the purpose of meeting the competency requirements.

The state does not have a process for students to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam requirements. Students who do not receive a regular diploma can be awarded a certificate of achievement.

For the new high school exit standards, a review process will be used on a course-by-course basis if the student does not meet the passing criteria for the EOC assessment but passes the course. Principals will have the final authority to decide whether a student has met the exit standard for a particular course.

Special Populations

Students with Disabilities

The state allows accommodations for students with disabilities, including Braille test editions, large print editions, and test booklets with one item per page, among others. Additional accommodations provided by the state can be found at www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/testing/highschoolexitexam/accommodations.pdf. The same accommodations are considered for all state tests.

Students with disabilities who pass the exit exams using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Special education students who are following the occupational course of study (OCS) are not required to pass the competency test to graduate and receive a diploma. The OCS is one of four courses of study meeting the requirements for a North Carolina high school diploma. The OCS is designed to meet the needs of some students with disabilities who require a more functional curriculum. A student would not participate in the OCS unless the student's IEP team decides that the other three courses of study are inappropriate even with adaptations, modifications, and supplemental aids and services.

If the IEP team or section 504 committee determines that a student with disabilities who is following the career preparation, college technical preparation, or college/university course of study will not participate in the administration of the North Carolina Competency Tests of reading and mathematics, the decision must be documented in the current IEP or section 504 plan. If the decision is made not to participate in competency testing, students will not receive a high school diploma.

Students with disabilities must meet the computer skills standard by participating in one of the following:

1. The standard test administration
2. The standard test administration with accommodations, as stated in the student's current IEP, section 504 plan, or limited English proficiency documentation

3. The Computer Skills Portfolio Assessment Accommodation, as stated in the student's current IEP or section 504 plan. Students following the occupational course of study must meet the standard stated in the student's current IEP, as declared in state board of education policy HSP-N-004.

There are no special diplomas or certificates for students with disabilities who cannot pass the high school exit exam.

English Language Learners

The state allows English language learners to use accommodations on the exit exams, including word-to-phrase dictionaries and having the math and computer skills portions of the test read aloud in English. English language learners who pass the exit exams using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, substitute tests, or diplomas for English language learners who do not pass the exit exam. ELL students are not exempted from taking the exams based on how long they have been in U.S. schools.

Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the competency tests. North Carolina state board of education policy HSP-N-000 states the following about student remediation:

Beginning with the graduating class of 1998, students who did not achieve grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics at the end of the eighth grade will receive focused extended instructional opportunities which are different from and supplemental to regular high school course work and which are specifically designed to improve these students' performance to at least eighth-grade level proficiency.

In school year 2003-04, approximately \$45 million was allocated for the Improving Student Accountability program, and \$178 million was allocated for At-Risk Funds for grades 3-12. School systems may use part of these funds for student remediation. The Improving Student Accountability funds are allocated based on student and district performance. Fifty percent of the At-Risk Funds are allocated on a per pupil basis and the other 50% are allocated based on poverty.

The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the competency tests, including training in how to teach test-taking skills and training to familiarize teachers with the content of the competency test. The state has developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exams for students, including curriculum guides based on the exams, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests.

In addition, the state provides instructional notebooks in reading and mathematics to assist teachers in providing focused remediation for students who need to meet the competency requirement to receive a high school diploma. The state has also developed an instructional notebook to assist teachers in providing focused remediation for students who need to meet the computer skills requirement to receive a high school diploma.

Monitoring

The computer skills performance test in grade 8 is also part of the performance composite score of the state's ABC accountability program. Changes in the passing rates on the competency tests between grades 8 and 10 are part of the growth composite score of the ABC accountability program. The ABC of Public Education is North Carolina's school improvement program, which is designed to focus on accountability, the basics, and high educational standards, and on maximum local control. This is to ensure that the state's accountability measures are as fair and accurate as possible. It became law in 1995 prior to NCLB, which provides an additional measure of school accountability. NCLB accountability measures are included in the state's ABC accountability report.

Student Outcomes

Pass Rates for First-time Test-takers in 2004

Subgroups	Combined test data*
All students	77.8%
Male	no data
Female	no data
White	87.4%
Black	64.8%
Hispanic	52.7%
Asian	79.3%
Native American	69.0%
Multi-racial	81.3%
English language learners/LEP	67.9%
Free or reduced-price lunch	NA
Students with disabilities	54.0%

*Disaggregated data by subject are not available

Cumulative Pass Rates

The data on cumulative pass rates are for students during school year 2003-04.

All students	93.9%
Male	NA
Female	NA
White	95.0%
Black	89.4%
Hispanic	88.4%
Asian	92.9%
Native American	93.1%
Multi-racial	93.1%
English language learners/LEP	53.4%
Free or reduced-price lunch	NA
Students with disabilities	54.8%

Graduation Rates

The graduation rate is calculated using the percentage of students graduating in four years or less out of all students who graduated. These statistics are for school year 2003-04.

All students	95.7%
Male	94.1%
Female	97.1%
White	97.1%
Black	92.2%
Hispanic	90.7%
Asian	95.9%
Native American	93.8%
Multiracial	96.4%
English language learners/LEP	87.9%
Free or reduced-price lunch	92.7%
Students with disabilities	88.7%

Higher Education

North Carolina colleges and universities do not use the North Carolina High School Competency Test for admission decisions or scholarships. Information was not available as to whether these exams are used for college course placements. Students can enroll in public community colleges if they do not have a diploma. However, the public universities require students to have a diploma by the time they enroll.

State K-12 education officials and higher education officials have had discussions about linking the content of the competency tests to standards for what students need to know to enter college. The state board of education has discussed the development of a higher standard for a competency test or exit exam that would be more connected to a student's future plans, but no decision has been made at the time of the initial survey.

Other High School Assessments

North Carolina does not currently use any other statewide end-of-course or college readiness exams.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from and verified by state assessment personnel and the state department of education Web site, July 2005.