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An Examination of the Theory of Alternate Routes to High School Graduation and its Implication on Mississippi's Educational System

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE THEORY OF ALTERNATE ROUTES TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND ITS IMPLICATION ON MISSISSIPPI’S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

BY
KIMBERLY L. HARDGES

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford
May 2015

Approved by

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Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Winburn

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Reader: Dr. Conor Dowling

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Reader: Dr. Marvin King
Dedication Page

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother Helen Hardges and to my younger sister Kiara Hardges. Mom, you have been my biggest inspiration. I am who I am today because of your sacrifices. Sissy, from the moment you were born, I knew that what I did mattered because I wanted to be a great role model to you. You two have been my support system, and I love you both very much. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do for me. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to all of the high school teachers that work hard year after year to encourage students to develop a true passion for learning. You are my true heroes.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Dr. Jonathan Winburn, for his continuous guidance during my journey to complete this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Marvin King and Dr. Conor Dowling for their support throughout this process. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the staff of the Performance Audit Division of the Office of the State Auditor for sparking my interest into the field of education.
Abstract:

KIMBERLY L. HARDGES: An Examination of the Theory of Alternate Routes to High School Graduation and its Implication on Mississippi’s Educational System

During Mississippi’s 2014 Regular Legislative Session, Representative John L. Moore, Chair of the Education Committee, introduced House Bill 767 (HB 767). The goal of HB 767 was to create a pilot program that would “remove the requirement for passage of Subject Area Tests as a mandatory requirement for graduation… and to establish the minimum composite score to be attained on the ACT assessment to qualify a student for graduation and for college and career readiness”\(^1\) in the state of Mississippi.

By a vote of 118-1 HB 767 passed the House. The bill was then transmitted to the Mississippi State Senate where it died in the Education Committee. The senators then amended a senate bill to include a provision that would enact the ACT pilot program. The senate bill failed to receive enough votes to be passed. I believe that the state of Mississippi will continue to try to implement the ACT as an alternate route to high school graduation, so this thesis will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What effects would HB 767 have on Mississippi’s educational system?
2. Is the ACT a good alternate route to graduation?
3. How should the state handle alternate routes?

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HB  House Bill

ACT  American College Testing

SAT  Scholastic Aptitude Test

ESEA  Elementary and Secondary Education ACT

NCLB  No Child Left Behind

RTTT  Race to the Top

PSAE  Prairie State Achievement Exam

ASVAB  Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery

iCAP  Individual Career and Academic Plan
Chapter I:

“The fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed -- it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.”- Ken Robinson

The problem with Mississippi’s educational system is systemic, and if we truly wish to improve the state’s system then our approach must be systemic as well. Before discussing what needs to be done to improve the state’s system, it is important to explain what the ideal educational system should look like today. The ideal educational system is one that will inspire students to learn. It should consist of teachers who are both well qualified and enthusiastic about the subjects they are teaching. In this system, instruction would be less lecture-based and more hands-on; it would be filled with real world experiments. If possible, students would be required to submit an original work for the class. For example, in an English class, students would have to submit an original story that would demonstrate their understanding of grammar and the elements of a story while promoting creativity. Tests would still be administered, and whenever possible those tests would consist of opened-ended questions or questions that require a student to show that he/she has a clear understanding of the subject as opposed to multiple choice questions. The ideal school system is one that is student-centric.

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Dr. Robert Sternberg, a respected psychologist and psychometrician, and author of *The Triarchic Mind: A New Theory of Intelligence*, defined human intelligence as a “mental activity directed toward purposive adaptation to, selection and shaping of, real-world environments relevant to one’s life.”\(^3\) That means that intelligence is how well an individual uses his/her knowledge to deal with environmental changes throughout his/her lifetime. Sternberg’s theory is composed of three parts: analytical, creative, and practical (see Figure 1: Triarchic Intelligence).\(^4\) If the goal of the school system is to produce students who are intelligent, then the state’s educational system should incorporate the three parts of Sternberg’s theory. For that reason, school systems should focus on depth of knowledge over breadth of knowledge.

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\(^4\) Ibid.
Now more than ever “our society needs citizens and leaders who are creative, practical, and especially wise,” so our testing should be designed to encourage those qualities, but instead there has been a steady trend in the American school system that has led to the standardization of tests and teaching styles. As tests became more standardized, the measurements of success became less stringent, which means that students have been required to achieve less to attain a high school diploma.

Achievement tests like the ACT, SAT, and Subject Area Tests do not test creativity, and they are all multiple choice. Dr. Diana Senechal, author of *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*, conducted a test experiment which showed that students can “pass” a multiple choice test without reading the questions by guessing at each answer.

If today’s students can pass a multiple choice test by guessing, then why are these tests still administered? The answer is quite simple; multiple choice tests are still administered because they are much easier to grade. In 1914, Frederick J. Kelly invented the multiple choice test as the answer to a national crisis. The number of students attending high school had increased from 200,000 in 1890 to more than 1.5 million in 1914, because a new law made it compulsory for everyone to attend two

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years of high school, and World War I created a teacher shortage. When Kelly invented the multiple choice test, he did so with the goal of streamlining schooling.\textsuperscript{7} These tests were never designed to measure a student’s true intelligence and ingenuity, but rather to graduate students quickly. One hundred years later these antiquated standardized tests are still being used. Kelly indicated that his test “was intended to measure “lower-order thinking” among the masses.”\textsuperscript{8} “In lower-order thinking information does not need to be applied to any real life examples, it only needs to be recalled and slightly understood. If a person only obtains lower-order thinking skills they will not be prepared for real life situations such as the labour market.”\textsuperscript{9} “Higher order thinking is a learning process that is more difficult to learn or teach. It requires more cognitive process in the creation of new knowledge with in depth analysis, evaluation, and synthesis (see Figure 2).”\textsuperscript{10} Standardized tests should only act as an indicator of what lower-level skills students need help to improve.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
In the ideal school system, students would be taught and tested on both lower order and higher order thinking skills, but within the current system only lower order skills are being taught. Because of that, the students who are graduating with a standard high school diploma are not prepared for the real world. Now that students throughout the United States are failing to succeed on the standardized test that are required to graduate high school, states are beginning to offer alternate routes to high school graduation. This thesis explores the role of alternate routes to graduation with an emphasis on the potential for use in Mississippi.

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11 Ibid.

What is a Standard High School Diploma?

According to the United States Department of Education, a standard high school diploma “is the basic U.S. qualification awarded to students who graduate from secondary school after 12 years of formal instruction.”¹³ These standard diplomas can be issued to public school graduates, private school graduates, and, in some states, homeschooled students. Recipients of a standard high school diploma usually follow one of three types of programs or tracks:

1. **General** high school diploma tracks meet the state minimum requirements for graduations.

2. **Vocational** diploma tracks exceed the state minimum requirement and add instruction in career subjects plus applicable mathematics and science requirements.

3. **Academic** preparatory diploma tracks also exceed the state minimum requirements by adding additional mathematics, English, foreign language, and science instruction.¹⁴

In the state of Mississippi, a standard high school diploma requires a minimum of 24 credits: 4 credits of English, math, science, and social studies; 0.5 credit of health

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¹⁴ Ibid.
and physical education; 1 credit of technology and art, and 5 credits of electives. A standard high school diploma should indicate that a student has acquired all of the necessary skills to successfully navigate a career or college environment. A student who receives a standard high school diploma should be able to attend a college or university without the need to enroll in remedial classes. A standard high school diploma should signify to a potential employer that a student has attained the proper reading, writing, and math skills to complete tasks.

**Literature Review**

In 2010, Dr. Diane Ravitch, former United States Assistant Secretary of Education, published her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. The positions that Ravitch discussed on the current issues in the school system throughout this book came as a shock to many Americans because they greatly departed from her previous stance on the issues. “For nearly a decade Ravitch has sung the praises of accountability and standards, while assuring Americans that market driven management and incentives would effectively reform our deteriorating education system,” so it was surprising when she admitted that the quick fixes put forward by

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the conservative leadership were not working. She wrote, “I too had fallen for the latest panics and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas.”

Ravitch states that the standardized tests that NCLB forces schools to administer should be discontinued, and that she hopes President Obama decides to create a new plan to improve the school system instead of trying to fix the problems with the NCLB law. In 2009, it was announced that the Race to the Top (RTTT) “a competitive grant program intended to encourage and reward states that are creating conditions for innovation and reform.” The role of the standardized tests that NCLB enforced was to ensure that graduates had an understanding of subjects that are considered essential to success. Ravitch wrote of her high school English teacher Mrs. Ratliff, and how she refused to administer multiple choice tests or force students to read the standard English textbooks. Mrs. Ratliff inspired her students to learn through the reading of poetry and by pulling them towards a goal of appreciating the


art of literature instead of forcing her students to learn random facts that would not increase their understanding of literature. That example speaks to the undeniable fact that learning in a classroom should be an aesthetic, emotional experience, instead of a technical, non-emotional experience. Ravitch believes that tests should follow curriculum rather than determine it, and I am inclined to agree with her.

When Nikhil Goyal was seventeen, he wrote *Once Size Does Not Fit All: A Student’s Assessment of School*. His perspective throughout the book was unique because a current high school student had never written an assessment of the school system. While Goyal did not explicitly mention alternate routes to graduation in his book, he did take time to discuss his opinions on the effects of standardized tests. Throughout his book, Goyal argues that standardized tests should be revamped or entirely done away with because those tests make it more likely for teachers and administrators to see students as numbers on a spreadsheet or test scores as opposed to actual human beings. He believes that our school system lacks rigor and that the lack of challenge can be remedied if administrators agree to have students “[do] work that matters and has relevance to the world and [focus] on depth over breadth.” Like Sternberg, Goyal believes that in order for students to reach their full potential, their creativity must be cultivated, not eliminated, by teachers. Goyal makes it clear that in order for the nation’s educational system to be improved we must first do away with the notion that an adequate educational system is the end goal. When it comes to the

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education of the future leaders of America we do not need adequate, we need excellent.

Throughout the research process, I found there was not much literature on the subject of alternate graduation routes because it is a relativity new development, but both of these sources seem to agree that the improvement of America’s educational system hinges on the introduction of a more creative, student-centric curricula and a departure from the use of standardized tests.
Chapter II:

Theories of Alternate Routes to High School Diplomas

While “[t]he need for an alternative route to a standard diploma comes up most often when talking about students with disabilities,”\textsuperscript{21} most recently it has come up in discussions about students who are unable to pass state tests or exit exams that are a requirement for high school graduation. Alternate routes are also seen as an easy and effective way to increase graduation rates. Earning a standard high school diploma has become important to students because it expands opportunities after high school. Increasing the number of students who earn a standard diploma has become a major part of every state school system within the United States because the Elementary and Secondary Education ACT (ESEA) accountability system only counts the number of students who earn a standard high school diploma or higher when calculating a school’s graduation rate.\textsuperscript{22} Concerned about the consistently high drop out rates, education leaders are “trying a new approach to increasing the graduation rate—multiple pathways to graduation.”\textsuperscript{23} School districts are creating different options that

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\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{22} Thurlow, Martha L., Miong Vang, and Damien Cormier. Earning a High School Diploma through Alternative Routes. NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES. U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, June 2010. Web. 25 Sept. 2014.
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are designed to remedy the problems that lead many students to dropout of high school.24

According to the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, there are three different approaches to providing multiple pathways to graduation:25

1. The **Targeted Population** approach, in which districts identify students who are at the greatest risk of dropping out. The districts then develop new schools or special programs within an existing school for these students.

2. The **District-Wide** approach, in which districts change all of its high schools, housing different specialized programs in different schools, to ensure that every student can find one that meets his needs.

3. The **Linked Learning** approach, under which a district re-works its high schools so that all are smaller than before and all integrate Career and Technical Education with an academically rigorous college preparatory curriculum. This approach emphasizes work opportunities, student involvement with career professionals, and realistic real-world projects.

Based on my view of what makes an ideal school system, the linked learning approach is the best because it reworks the school system so that students are learning both lower order and higher order skills which is vital to the creation of an ideal

24 Ibid.
school system. While the linked learning option may take more work to implement, it should produce graduates that will excel in the work environment and in college. Using the targeted population approach would only benefit a small number of students, but schools should offer every student the same opportunities. The district-wide approach could work well, but it would be more complicated than the linked learning approach because every school in the district would have a different set of programs and students would be allowed to choose which school to attend that could result in some schools having an extremely large student population while others have a small population.

The alternate route initiatives are relatively new, so it has not been proven that students who graduate via an alternate route are as well prepared as graduates who achieve a diploma through the standard route, but those who support the initiatives say that it is a way to provide targeted remedies to students’ individual problems that would have previously caused them to dropout of high school. 26 Alternate routes also give school districts a chance to experiment with different approaches to instruction.

In 2010, the National Center on Education Outcomes studied all of the alternate routes used to graduate students. The study found that districts with more then one alternate route to a diploma did not have the routes clearly defined, that the districts had multiple routes for the same group of students, and that information about the

26 Ibid.
routes were not easily accessible. The study concluded each alternate route that is created should adhere to the following standards:27

1. States with an alternative route to their standard diploma must provide clear, easy-to-find information about the alternative route.
2. The alternative route must be based on the same beliefs and premises as the standard route to the diploma.
3. The same route or routes should be available to all students.
4. The alternative route should truly be an alternative to the graduation exam, not just another test.
5. The alternative route should reflect a reasoned and reasonable process.
6. Procedures should be implemented to evaluate the technical adequacy of the alternative route and to track its consequences.

If an alternate route can adhere to the standards created by the National Center on Education outcomes, then I believe that it will ultimately be successful in achieving the goal of increasing graduation rates, but I do not believe that adhering to those standards will improve the overall education system because these standards only address one part of the problem.

What are other states doing?

In an attempt to increase graduation rates across the country, allowing students to use alternate routes to graduation has become a popular practice within the country. According to the National Center on Educational Outcomes, a center that provides “national leadership in designing and building educational assessments and accountability systems that appropriately monitor educational results for all students,” nineteen states “were identified as having exit exams that have designated [alternate] routes, to the standard diploma.”

“An increasing number of states are recognizing the importance of statewide testing to measure the educational progress of their students. The ACT test and WorkKeys assessments are recognized as the leading educational assessments for use in statewide testing.” Only six states- Alaska, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, North Dakota, and Wyoming- are using the ACT for statewide testing, but 18 states use at least one component of the ACT with their state testing. None of the six states who use the ACT for statewide testing use it as an alternate route to graduation. All of those states use the ACT as a supplement to other required assessments.

Alaska administers the ACT WorkKeys assessment to high school juniors in an attempt to provide students with a free resource to help them prepare for the workforce. The ACT is the only state test required for juniors in Colorado. Colorado


30 Ibid.
uses the ACT as a way to get more students to apply to college. Illinois administers a series of tests which includes the ACT to high school juniors that are called the Prairie State Achievement Exams (PSAE). Students must take the PSAE to achieve a high school diploma, but Illinois does not require a specific score on the ACT or the ACT WorkKeys assessment for graduation.

High school juniors in Michigan take the Michigan Merit Exams, which consists of the ACT Plus Writing, the WorkKeys assessment, tests created by the state, the Reading for Information Assessment, and the Locating Information Assessment. In both North Dakota and Wyoming juniors are required to “take either the four multiple-choice ACT tests or the WorkKeys Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information, and Locating Information Assessments. Students are eligible to earn the National Career Readiness Certificate.”

In their paper “The Implementation of an Alternate Route to a Diploma in One State,” Emily C. Bouck and Leah Washburn-Moses studied the implementation of Indiana’s alternate routes to graduation. They found that 25 states had implemented exit exams for high school students, and that “these so-called ‘high-stakes’ exams hold many consequences, intentional and unintentional, for the students who take

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.
them.”\textsuperscript{35} In addition, they found that although it is widely assumed all students who attain a high school diploma must pass the exit exams, the majority of the 25 states with exit exams allowed “at least some students to bypass the exam requirement” through the use of alternate routes.\textsuperscript{36} Bouck and Washburn-Moses mentioned a report from the Center on Education Policy which cautioned that some states (now) allow options that may end up diluting the value of the exam requirement…. Some states have introduced a hodgepodge of alternative paths that lack consistency and may be at odds with the basic philosophy and rationale for an exit exam.\textsuperscript{37}

The need for information on the implementation of alternate routes to diplomas is what prompted Bouck and Washburn-Moses to focus on the efficiency of Indiana’s alternate route program. Indiana offers three alternates to the exit exams: the Core 40 Waiver, the Evidence-Based Waiver, and the Work Readiness Waiver. During the 2004-2005 school year, more than 3,000 high school students across the state received their diploma because of these waivers.\textsuperscript{38} They found that schools participating in their study had an average graduation rate of 81%. The study also showed that students without disabilities were just as likely to receive a waiver as a

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\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
student with a disability, and that across the two populations 86.5% of the students who applied for a waiver were granted a waiver.

Their study showed “schools are quite reliable in applying the state’s requirements” for waivers, but it did find that some districts added requirements such as a special test or factoring in a student’s attitude. Districts have this ability because one of the main principles of NCLB is greater local control. That means that even if a state has a strict set of standards for allowing students to graduate via alternate routes, each school district within that state can change the standards to fit its specific community; therefore, from one set of standards school districts can derive many different alternate routes. Thus, the state will have a harder time monitoring the alternate routes program to determine their success. One interesting finding from the study of Indiana’s alternate routes was the number of students who actually apply for one of the waivers is significantly lower than the number of students who did not pass the state exams, which could mean that students either did not wish to apply for a waiver or that they were not aware of their options.

Throughout Emily C. Bouck and Leah Washburn-Moses’s study, one main benefit as well as two potential drawbacks of a statewide alternate route system were repetitively mentioned. The benefit of the alternate route system is that it could increase graduation rates. The first potential drawback is that there is no way to insure that students who graduate via alternate routes have actually mastered the same skills

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39 Ibid.
as students who graduate with a standard high school diploma. The second drawback is that it would be difficult to monitor all of the alternate routes that could be created.
Chapter III:

Mississippi’s Educational System at a glance

According to Education Week’s annual Quality Count’s Report, the state of Mississippi has the worst educational system in the country.\(^{40}\) Education Week’s report is a highly trusted source on the state of education throughout the country. The Quality Count’s Report, tracks “key education indicators and grades the states on their performance and outcomes.”\(^{41}\) The report grades the states in six different categories. Table 1 shows Mississippi’s grades compared to the national average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mississippi’s Grade</th>
<th>Mississippi’s National Rank</th>
<th>How did the average state score?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chance for success (2014)</td>
<td>D+</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 achievement (2014)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>C-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School finance analysis (2014)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions and alignment (2013)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards, assessments, and accountability (2012)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teaching profession (2012)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{41}\) Ibid.
In Table 1, Mississippi earned an A in the standards, assessments, and accountability category because it only takes into account the state’s policy on academic standards, assessments, and school accountability. This rating does not take into account whether or not the policy is effective or if that policy is actually being used in the state. For example, one of the accountability measures that helped Mississippi receive an A was the fact the state has a grading system for its schools, but this grading system is not always accurate because there are no set standards.

At the start of the 2014-2015 school year, Mississippi offered three distinct pathways to high school graduation: the Career Pathway, the Traditional Pathway, and the District option (see Table 2: Mississippi High School Graduation Pathways42). The pathway program provides students with a more flexible schedule that allows them to focus on vocational training within a personalized learning environment. In addition to completing one of the three pathways, “since the 2001-2002 school year, students have been required to pass the subject area test for graduation and are not allowed to participate in commencement exercises unless all tests have been passed.”43


## Table 2: Mississippi High School Graduation Pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Pathway Option* 21 Credits***</th>
<th>Traditional Pathway Option* 24 Credits Minimum</th>
<th>District Option*** 21 Credits Minimum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Requirements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Required Subjects</strong></td>
<td><strong>Graduation Requirements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Credits of English</td>
<td>English I, English II</td>
<td>4 Credits of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Credits of Math</td>
<td>Algebra I</td>
<td>4 Credits of Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Credits of Science</td>
<td>Biology I</td>
<td>4 Credits of Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Credits of Social Studies</td>
<td>1 U.S. History</td>
<td>4 Credits of Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5 U.S. Government</td>
<td>0.5 Mississippi Studies</td>
<td>0.5 U.S. Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5 Mississippi Studies</td>
<td>0.5 Mississippi Studies</td>
<td>0.5 Mississippi Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Credits of Career and Technical Education Electives</td>
<td>From Student’s Program of Study</td>
<td>1 Credit of Business &amp; Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Credit of Integrated Technology</td>
<td>Computer Discovery, ICT II, 9th STEM, or Computer Applications and Keyboarding</td>
<td>1 Credit of Business &amp; Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Credits of Electives</td>
<td>1 Credit of Art</td>
<td>1 Credit of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Career and Academic Plan (iCAP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 Credits of Electives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each student in Mississippi schools must have an iCAP that is personalized to meet his or her educational and career goals. Students who choose the Career Pathway Option must complete 4 career and technical education units and 2.5 elective units specified in the student’s iCAP.

### Subject Area Tests

The Subject Area Testing Program (SATP) consists of four academic, end-of-course tests (Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History from 1877). A passing score in each of the four subject-area tests are required.

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* Career & Traditional Pathway options are State Board required.
** District Pathway Option is a local decision.
*** The Career Pathway Option is available for all students beginning in 2011-12.
According to the National Center for Education Statistics in the 2010-2011 school year Mississippi had a four year adjusted cohort graduation rate of 75%, and the national average was 79%. The four year adjusted cohort rate “is defined as the number of students who graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for that graduating class.” For that year, the highest state graduation rate in the country was 88%. For the 2011-2012 school year, Mississippi’s graduation rate remained the same while the national average increased to 80%. The highest state graduation rate in the country for the 2011-2012 school year was 89%.

An Analysis of House Bill 767

HB 767’s main goal was to create a pilot program that would use the ACT as an alternate route of graduation by removing the requirement of passing Subject Area Tests. While that goal may seem like an excellent attempt to improve the state’s educational system, HB 767, as written, would not have produced acceptable results in the educational system. There are five main problems with HB 767: the selection of the districts for the pilot program, the lower than average composite score required, the absence of a history section in the ACT, the bill allows for an infinite number of

alternate routes to be created, and the ACT does not access all of the skills needed to succeed in life and college.

The bill states that ten school districts will be selected to take part in the pilot program, and that those districts will be chosen based upon the percentage of students enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The problem with choosing districts based on the number of students enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program is that free and reduced lunch counts are unreliable because the state has not verified that every student who is enrolled in the program actually meets the programs qualifications. In addition to that, the ACT measures educational benchmarks, so using free and reduced lunch counts to choose which districts to include in the pilot program will result in an inadequate, unrepresentative sample. If a study of the ACT is to be conducted, then the districts should be selected based on something that the ACT would actually measure like district scores on the English II, Algebra I, and Biology I Subject Area Tests. If that is not possible, then the districts should be selected at random because implementing the ACT should result in an increase of students eligible for graduation in all districts, not just districts with a high number of at risk students. The graduation standards of Mississippi need to be clear, consistent, and rigorous. This bill, as written, does not provide for any of those.

Mississippi’s average ACT composite score, 18.9, is already two points lower than the national average of 20.9, and Mississippi’s score is the second lowest of all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Imagine, for a moment, that the required composite score to graduate is set at 16. More students will be able to achieve that
goal, but they will not be considered college ready by ACT’s standards. The ACT has benchmark scores in each of the four subject areas tested: English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. The ACT college readiness benchmarks are: 18 in English, 22 in Mathematics, 22 in Reading, and 23 in science. That means that the minimum composite score indicates college readiness is 21. If Mississippi requires a composite score that is lower than 21, then Mississippi will be graduating more students who are not college ready. Mississippi will be producing graduates who are not competitive on a national level.

HB 767 does not address that issue. When used as a tool to determine areas in which individual students lack proficiency, the ACT can prove to be helpful in revising a student’s Individual Career and Academic Plan (iCAP), which is a requirement in the state of Mississippi, because it will show teachers and administrators the areas in which a student needs to improve to be considered college ready. Mississippi currently administers a subject area test in United States History, but the ACT does not include a history component. History is a vital part of education, and if high school students are not tested on their knowledge, then they will not have an incentive to learn.

In addition to the traditional pathway to graduation that requires a student to attain 24 credits to be eligible for graduation, The state of Mississippi currently offers two other pathways the Career Pathway Option and the District Option (see Table 2: Mississippi High School Graduation Pathways). The Career and District Options

both require students to attain only 21 credits. One of the goals of those two options is to decrease remediations at the Post-Secondary level.

If this bill would have become law, and if the minimum ACT composite score required for graduation was below a 21, then it is likely that the state would see an increase in remediation at the Post-secondary level because students would not have been college ready. There is also a portion of the bill that would allow school districts to create an infinite number of alternate routes to graduation which would definitely increase Mississippi’s graduation rate, but it would also damage our educational system because it is possible that there would be no set of standards that every graduate would need to reach. It would devalue the standard high school diploma.

According to ACT’s State Standards Match Report, which studies the alignment between the ACT and Mississippi’s Curriculum Framework, the ACT covers many of Mississippi’s competencies and objectives in language, mathematics, and science.\textsuperscript{46} The Match Report also mentions the areas of Mississippi curriculum that the ACT does not test like the ability to speak coherently and effectively and the knowledge of history. While the ACT may test technical components of a student’s education, it cannot test all of the skills needed to successfully navigate a career or college setting. Because of that, the ACT should be used as a supplement to Mississippi’s graduation requirements, not as a replacement.

\textsuperscript{46} “ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.” op.cit.
What is the ACT?

The American College Test or the ACT was created by University of Iowa education Professor E.F. Lindquist. In 1959, Lindquist launched the predecessor to the ACT which was called the ACT college readiness assessment. The ACT was the first test to define college and career readiness standards. The ACT is composed of four Subject Area Tests: English Reading, Mathematics, and Science. Those benchmark scores “represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.” The ACT college readiness benchmarks are: 18 in English, 22 in Mathematics, 22 in Reading, and 23 in Science.

While the ACT thinks that using its exams is a great way to gauge a students career and college readiness, it has never stated that its exams should be used as a stand alone graduation requirement. Instead, the ACT prides itself on being a tool to help universities determine who to accept and on being a tool that helps states improve its educational system by determining areas in which their students are struggling and need extra attention.


49 Ibid.
Chapter IV:  

Effects on Graduation Rates

For this portion of my research, I attempted to track graduation rates in states that currently offer their students one or more alternate routes to high school graduation. I emailed the nineteen states that were mentioned as having some form of an alternate route to high school graduation by Martha Thurlow, Miong Vang, and Damien Cormier in their Synthesis Report 76 for the National Center on Education Outcomes in 2010, the following two questions:

1. Does your state actually allow students to use the ACT, SAT or other alternatives to graduate high school, or is it just a part of policy that has never been put into action?

2. What year did your state officially start using the ACT, SAT or other alternatives?

Of the 19 states, only ten responded to the email. Of the states that responded to the email, only three said that their state actually allows students to use some form of an alternate route to high school graduation, two said their state did not offer any form of alternate routes, and five referred me to someone else who did not answer the questions. Overall it appears that the state departments of education are unsure of their own policies.

From the three states that responded saying they do have alternate routes, I was able to determine that these routes have been in place for a relatively short period of
time, which makes it difficult for me to judge what effect alternate routes have on graduation over time. With any research that has a data set that takes place over a short period of time, it is difficult to ensure that there is a true causal relationship between the graduation rates and the addition of alternate routes.

In the five year period since Synthesis Report 76 was published, the majority of the states listed in the report removed their alternate routes to high school graduation, which could indicate that those states thought alternate routes were no longer beneficial to their students. That led me to wonder why these states decided to use alternate routes in the beginning.

Table 3 shows the average graduation rates in states with exit exams, in states without exit exams, in states with alternate routes, and in states without alternate routes during the 2005-2006 school year and during the 2012-2013 school year.\textsuperscript{50} States with exit exams had a larger growth in the average graduation rate than did states without exit exams. That could be because states without exit exams had a higher average during the 2005-2006 school year. States without exit exams also received a higher average graduation rate than the national average in both of those school years.\textsuperscript{51} In states with and without alternate routes, the graduation rates followed a pattern similar of that described in states with and without alternate routes.


States with alternate routes saw their average increase between the two years more than states without alternate routes. During both years, states without exit exams or states without alternate routes had higher averages than did states with exit exams or states with alternate routes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States with Exit Exams</th>
<th>Average Graduation Rate 2005-2006 (Percent)</th>
<th>Average Graduation Rate 2012-2013 (Percent)</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States without Exit Exams</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States with Alternate Routes</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States without Alternate Routes</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All States</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I found that with the advent of exit exams in the early 2000s, 10 of the 26 states listed in Table 4 saw a decrease in graduation rates a year after they implemented exit exams. One stayed the same, twelve increased by only a small amount, and three did not have available graduation rates. This leads me to believe that these states sought to increase their graduation rates by utilizing alternate routes. Table 4 will also show that from the time states implemented exit exams to the 2012-2013 school year there was an increase in graduation rates, but I am not sure that it is due to alternate routes because the increase in graduation rates can be attributed to the natural growth that comes with an increase of technology in classrooms.
Table 4: Graduation Rates in States with Exit Exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year of First Graduating Class</th>
<th>Beginning Graduation Rate (Percent)</th>
<th>Graduation Rates After One Year of Implementation (Percent)</th>
<th>2012-2013 Graduation Rate (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska*</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California*</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida*</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia*</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho*</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana*</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana*</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland*</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts *</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota*</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi*</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey*</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico*</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York*</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina*</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio*</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas*</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia*</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington*</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*States with alternate routes — data not available
Conclusion:

In the time since I began my research, Mississippi’s State Board of Education has made two significant changes to graduation policy. First, the State Board of Education has added a fourth pathway to graduation (see Table 5). This additional pathway is called the Early Exit Exam Option. While the other three options— the Career, the District, and the Traditional— require students to earn either 21 or 24 credits, the Early Exit Exam Option requires only 17.5 credits. The Early Exit Policy also requires the student seeking this pathway to graduation pass all “End of Course Exams and/or meet all benchmarks on the ACT.” 

The second change removed the requirement set by NCLB that made it mandatory for all students to pass Subject Area Tests. “Starting in the 2016-2017 school year, [subject area test] scores will constitute 25 percent of a student’s final grade.” According to the Chair of the State Board of Education Dr. John R. Kelly, “this option gives students another way to demonstrate that they have mastered their coursework without making the requirements for graduation contingent upon the outcome of any one particular test.” By implementing those two changes, the State Board of


54 Ibid.
# Mississippi High School Graduation Pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Pathway Option*</th>
<th>Traditional Pathway Option*</th>
<th>District Option**</th>
<th>MS Early Exit Exam Option****</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 Credits***</td>
<td>24 Credits Minimum</td>
<td>21 Credits Minimum</td>
<td>17.5 Credits Minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Requirements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Required Courses</strong></td>
<td><strong>Graduation Requirements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Required Course</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Credits of English</td>
<td>English I, English II</td>
<td>English I, English II</td>
<td>English I, English II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Credits of Math</td>
<td>Algebra I</td>
<td>Biology I</td>
<td>Biology I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Credits of Science</td>
<td>Biology I</td>
<td>1 U.S. History</td>
<td>1 U.S. History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.5 Credit of Health/ Physical Education</td>
<td>0.5 Comprehensive Health</td>
<td>0.5 U.S Government</td>
<td>0.5 U.S Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Credit of Integrated Technology</td>
<td>Technology Foundations, ICT, 9th STEM, or Computer Applications and Keyboarding</td>
<td>0.5 Comprehensive Health</td>
<td>Technology Foundations, ICT, 9th STEM, or Computer Applications and Keyboarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Credits of Career and Technical Education Electives</td>
<td>From Student's Program of Study</td>
<td>1 Credit of Business &amp; Technology</td>
<td>1 Credit of Business &amp; Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Credits of Electives</td>
<td>1 Credit of Art</td>
<td>Technology Foundations, ICT, 9th STEM, or Computer Applications and Keyboarding</td>
<td>1 Credit of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Credits of Electives</td>
<td>1 Credit of Business &amp; Technology</td>
<td>4.5 Credits of Electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 Credits of Electives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Individual Career and Academic Plan (iCAP)

Each student in Mississippi schools must have an iCAP that is personalized to meet his or her educational and career goals. Students who choose the Career Pathway Option must complete 4 career and technical education units and 2.5 elective units specified in the student's iCAP.

## Subject Area Tests

The Subject Area Testing Program (SATP) consists of four academic, end-of-course tests (Algebra I, Biology I, English II, and U.S. History from 1877). A passing score in each of the four subject-area tests is required.

* Career and Traditional Pathway Options are State Board required.
** District Pathway is a local decision.
*** The Career Pathway Option is available for all students beginning in 2011-2012
**** The Mississippi Early Exit Diploma indicates that students are ready to do college level work without remediation and opens up a variety of educational and career pathways within and beyond high school. In order to qualify for a Mississippi Early Exit Diploma, in addition to earning the Carnegie Units listed, students must meet college and career qualification scores in all core content areas on a series of End of Course (EOC) exams and/or the required benchmarks for college readiness on the ACT or Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) approved college entrance exam.

August 2013
Education essentially bypassed the pilot program that HB 767 would have created.

Earning a standard high school diploma has become important to students and states alike. For students, a standard high school diploma increases opportunities after high school; it expands employment opportunities as well as opens the door for post-secondary education. For states, increasing the number of student who receive a standard high school diploma increases graduation rates, which helps states comply with ESEA’s accountability standards. With the implementation of NCLB in 2001, high school students were required to pass end of course Subject Area Tests in English, Mathematics, History, and Science. For students in a number of states, Mississippi included, that task proved difficult, so graduation rates decreased. In an attempt to increase graduation rates, some states began to allow students to graduate high school through alternate routes.

While alternate routes may seem like a quick fix to the problem of declining graduation rates, my research has shown that is not always the case. In fact, I found that many states that “allow” students to use alternate routes to graduate do not have clearly defined alternate routes. When I contacted the states that were listed as having alternate routes, many of them did not know that these routes were in their education polices, and some of those states had discontinued their use of alternate routes. In addition, alternate routes are a relatively new development, so it has not been proven that students who graduate through alternate routes are as well prepared as graduates who achieve a diploma through the standard route.
During Mississippi’s 2014 Regular Legislative Session, Representative John L. Moore introduced HB 767 with the goal of creating an ACT pilot program and removing the requirement for passage of Subject Area Tests as a mandatory requirement for graduation. As written, I am convinced that HB 767 would have been successful at increasing graduation rates, but I do not think that it would have produced graduates who were truly college and career ready which should be the goal. Taking the ACT and meeting all of the college readiness benchmarks, does not mean that a student has acquired all of the skills necessary to be college ready. I think too many states make the mistake of assuming that because students are required to take the ACT to graduate, those students will be college ready. I do not think that implementing HB 767 or similar bills/policies will have a longterm positive effect on the state. Mississippi needs a rigorous and consistent set of education standards that cannot be achieved by creating alternate routes to graduation.

The ideal school system is one that inspires students to learn by promoting creativity and using techniques that are more hands on. The ideal school system gives teachers more freedom to teach students how to think critically as opposed to teaching students how to take a test. This system would replace many of the standardized, multiple choice tests that students have to take with tests that would consist of more open-ended or short answer questions, which would require students to have an understanding of the subject being tested. The ideal school system is one that would help to increase a student’s analytical, creative, and practical skills, and the ideal school system would have a clear set of standards.
I do not think that Mississippi needs to create any extreme new policies to improve its educational system. Instead, I think that re-prioritizing and revamping what it means to receive a high school education and diploma would be enough to get the state on the right path. With that in mind, I think a standard high school diploma should indicate three things about the recipient:

1. that he/she is college and/or career ready,
2. that he/she has an excellent, not adequate, mastery of high school level reading, writing, and mathematics,
3. and that he/she has mastered higher order thinking skills.

Yes, that would make achieving a standard high school diploma more difficult and require more resources, but I am convinced that it would also increase the value of a standard high school diploma and result in the development of graduates that are well rounded and who have an increased chance for success.

Next, I would suggest that the state gives its teachers more personal autonomy. Most teachers have an inherent passion and personal teaching philosophy, so teachers should be encouraged to pursue those passions and philosophies instead of being forced to “teach to a test.” Teachers with more autonomy tend to be more charismatic about their subjects, which makes students want to learn more. In addition to that, I recommend that every high school employs quality guidance counselors that periodically meet with students. Guidance counselors should not be administrative
assistants; they should work hand and hand with teachers to help students discover their true passions.

Finally, I recommend that high schools choose a different core subject (English, science, mathematics, or history) to focus on each year. For example, the 2015-2016 school year should focus on English. The schools could then find ways to spark a student’s interest in English. This can be done by hosting “poetry slams,” creative writing seminars, and book signings and lectures similar to the TED Talks series. This method could prove to be very successful if schools stick to it.

Ken Robinson, an international education advisor, once stated, “[t]he fact is that given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed -- it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.” I tend to agree with him. Making the learning process one that is individualized instead of standardized is one way to insure that every student receives the resources that he/she needs to become the best version of himself/herself. Education today seems to focus on conformity, but if Mississippi is to improve its system, then it needs to separate itself from other states while maintaining high standards that will make its graduates competitive on a national level. The state should not create alternate routes because they only depreciate the existing system.
Bibliography


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