



# Arizona State Senate Issue Brief

August 27, 2008

## Note to Reader:

The Senate Research Staff provides nonpartisan, objective legislative research, policy analysis and related assistance to the members of the Arizona State Senate. The *Research Briefs* series, which includes the *Issue Brief*, *Background Brief* and *Issue Paper*, is intended to introduce a reader to various legislatively related issues and provide useful resources to assist the reader in learning more on a given topic. Because of frequent legislative and executive activity, topics may undergo frequent changes. Additionally, nothing in the *Brief* should be used to draw conclusions on the legality of an issue.

## *AIMS Test (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards)*

### STUDENT ASSESSMENTS IN ARIZONA

Norm-referenced tests assess student performance in the subject areas of reading, language and mathematics. The purpose of these tests is to measure student performance compared to students in the same grades in other states. Arizona currently administers TerraNova to students in grades 2 and 9 in reading, language arts and mathematics.

Criterion-referenced tests (CRT) align with a state's academic content standards. The purpose of this assessment is to measure student performance of core subject areas and proficiency in the state's academic content standards written to each grade level. The Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) serves as Arizona's competency test for grades 3 through 8 and as a high school exit exam.

Currently, Arizona administers three forms of the AIMS test: 1) AIMS-DPA; 2) AIMS-HS; and 3) AIMS-A. The AIMS-DPA is a dual purpose assessment (criterion and norm-referenced) test administered to students in grades 3 through 8. The AIMS-DPA combines AIMS assessment questions that are aligned with state academic standards and questions from the TerraNova test. The AIMS-HS is a criterion-referenced test aligned with tenth grade state academic standards administered to high school sophomores and any juniors and seniors who have not yet passed the test. High school students graduating in 2006 and thereafter must pass the AIMS test to receive their high school diploma, with limited exceptions in which scores can be augmented, which is discussed below. The AIMS-DPA and AIMS-HS tests currently cover the content areas of writing, reading, mathematics and science. The science portion is only administered to grades 4, 8 and 10. Passage of the science portion of the AIMS-HS is not required for high school graduation purposes. Finally, the AIMS-A test is administered to students with significant cognitive disabilities.

All non-special education students, including those students classified as English Language Learners (ELL), are required to take the AIMS test.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIMS TEST**

In 1996, the State Board of Education (SBE) began implementation of the AIMS test to measure student achievement of the state's academic content standards. SBE designated grades 3 through 8 and 10 as the grade levels assessed every year, plus any students in grades 11 and 12 who have not passed the high school AIMS test. The first administration of the high school AIMS test occurred statewide in 1999, and statewide testing of AIMS for grades 3, 5 and 8 began in 2000.

The AIMS test was developed through a process involving test contractors (CTB/McGraw-Hill and National Computer Systems), the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), teachers and district test coordinators. All items were selected, written and revised to eliminate bias and ensure alignment with the academic content standards. Short answer and extended-writing responses were further reviewed in a process called "range-finding," where all possible answers were reviewed and a uniform scoring guide was created. The test contractors and the Arizona Technical Advisory Committee, a committee made up of measurement specialists and district assessment coordinators, also scrutinized each item for its technical qualities.

Scale scores for the AIMS test are determined by ADE in each of the content areas. The performance level of a student is categorized into four classifications: 1) Exceeds; 2) Meets; 3) Approaches; and 4) Falls Far Below. For example:

**AIMS-High School Scale Scores**

<b>Performance Level</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Writing</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Science</b>
Falls Far Below	500-626	500-609	500-667	200-474
Approaches	627-673	610-677	668-682	475-499
Meets (Passing)	674-772	678-753	683-749	500-536
Exceeds (Passing)	773-900	754-900	750-900	537-800

### **HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENT**

High school students are required to begin taking the AIMS test for graduation purposes as sophomores with multiple opportunities to pass the test before the end of a student's senior year. As students progress through their high school curriculum and the academic content standards, the test is intended to measure academic achievement and mastery of tenth grade academic standards as a minimum requirement for graduating. Multiple versions of the high school test are required since high school students have multiple opportunities to pass the AIMS high school graduation test.

### **AIMS AUGMENTATION**

In 2005, legislation allowed students graduating in 2006 and 2007 who have not passed an individual section or multiple sections of the test to augment their score up to 25 percent based on their grades in courses that are required for graduation under the state's academic standards. Laws 2008, Chapter 202, permanently allowed pupils to use augmentation to meet the high school graduation requirement; however, the maximum augmentation amount is decreased from 25 percent in school years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, to 15 percent in school year 2009-2010, to five percent in school year 2010-2011 and each year thereafter.

### **EXEMPTED PUPILS**

Other legislation enacted in 2005 allows students with disabilities who have individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plans to graduate from high school without passing the AIMS test if the student's IEP or Section 504 plan does not require the student to pass AIMS. This legislation codified the findings of a 2005 Arizona Attorney General's opinion on the issue.

Private and home-schooled pupils are not required to take the AIMS test. Private schools may administer AIMS tests and home-schooled pupils may test at their local school district.

Pupils with passing scores from other states' tests that are equivalent to the AIMS-HS test can be used in place of the AIMS test.

### **AIMS SCHOLARSHIP**

The Arizona Board of Regents created the merit-based "AIMS" scholarship to reward high school students for outstanding achievement as demonstrated through high school coursework and test scores. The scholarship award is a fixed amount equal to resident tuition in the student's first year. The award amount will remain the same throughout the maximum eight semesters of eligibility. The scholarship may be deferred and is transferable to any of the three public universities at the discretion of each public university.

Beginning in 2005-2006 school year, ADE began awarding the AIMS scholarship to students who graduate from an Arizona public or private high school, have Arizona residency and meet the following criteria: 1) a "B" or better in the 16 core competency courses or acceptable scores on the Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) test; 2) a cumulative GPA of 3.5 (out of 4.0) in 16 core competencies or equivalent GPA if using a 5.0 scale OR class ranking in the top five percent of high school graduating class; and 3) "Exceeds" classification on all 3 AIMS tests or 2 "Exceeds" and 1 "Meets" with minimum scores on the AP or IB test.

### **AIMS GRADUATION LAWSUIT**

In April 2006, the William E. Morris Institute for Justice and the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest filed a lawsuit on behalf of two students, Perla Espinoza and Hannah Gonzales, arguing that the AIMS graduation test was unconstitutional due to the state's failure to adequately fund programs for low income, minority and English Language Learners. In May 2006, the court refused to temporarily suspend the AIMS graduation requirement for students graduating in 2006. In October 2006, the court ruled in favor of the state and declined to overturn the Legislature's requirement that students pass the AIMS test to graduate. However, the court did grant

certification for the case as a class-action lawsuit. The case is still pending.

### **AZ LEARNS**

Proposition 301, approved by voters in November 2000 to increase funding for education through an increase in the state sales tax by six-tenths of one percent, also established a new school accountability program, or AZ LEARNS. AZ LEARNS is also used to meet accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which requires that all schools make adequate yearly progress toward ensuring that all students are able to demonstrate proficiency of state academic standards by 2014.

ADE uses individual and aggregate student AIMS test results as one determinate of a school's annual achievement and adequate yearly progress. Specifically, the measure stipulates that a school has met adequate yearly progress if at least 90 percent of the students who are continuously enrolled in the school pass the AIMS test for their respective grades, or if the percentage of students who pass the AIMS test for their respective grades is higher than the previous school year. Based on this calculation and other measures of academic progress, accounting for pupil mobility and distribution of pupil achievement, ADE provides a school classification, or "label," for a school's overall academic performance as either: 1) excelling; 2) highly performing; 3) performing; 4) underperforming; or 5) failing.

Test scores for ELL students who have been enrolled in ELL programs for three years or less are excluded from the determination of a school classification. However, test scores for all ELL students are included in the determination of adequate yearly progress for compliance with NCLB accountability requirements.

### **TASK FORCE ON THE ARIZONA ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS TEST (TASK FORCE)**

Laws 2002, Chapter 287, created a seven-member Task Force, consisting of SBE appointments, to: 1) examine high stakes tests in other states that incorporate a national college

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admission test; 2) develop an Arizona Assessment of Achievements test; and 3) submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature on the Task Force's recommendations by June 30, 2009. The same legislation limits the duration of any AIMS design, administration and execution contract entered into by the ADE after June 30, 2008, to one year.

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• **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES** •

- Arizona Department of Education  
[www.ade.state.az.us/standards](http://www.ade.state.az.us/standards)
- Arizona State Board of Education  
602-542-5057
- “*AIMS as a High School Graduation Requirement: Analysis of Public Survey Data and Recommendations*,” a report for the Arizona State Board of Education, WestED, March 26, 2001  
[www.ade.state.az.us/standards/aims/publicinput/](http://www.ade.state.az.us/standards/aims/publicinput/)
- “*Overview of Arizona’s Assessment Programs*,” Arizona Department of Education, November 2005  
[www.ade.state.az.us/standards](http://www.ade.state.az.us/standards)
- “*AIMS Spring 2007 Scale Scores and Performance Levels*,” Arizona Department of Education, July 2007  
[http://www.ade.az.gov/researchpolicy/AIMSResults/RS\\_SS2008.pdf](http://www.ade.az.gov/researchpolicy/AIMSResults/RS_SS2008.pdf)