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The testing wars: What can prepare our students best?

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It used to be said that college is not for everyone. Now, however, college is practically a requirement for most professions. So it matters more than ever that our students be prepared for college.

The state's education officials are noticing they are not prepared, leading to costly remedial coursework in college relating to work that should have been mastered in high school. So competency tests that are a requirement for high school graduation have been proposed in math, English, science and social studies.

Naturally, this was criticized by a state Senate panel last week. We're getting test-happy and, besides, it will cost \$160 million to develop and administer the tests over five years. We could accept the argument if today's setup – passing state-mandated testing in the 11th grade or a local assessment test that is supposed to be equally rigorous – was working.

But state officials have determined tens of thousands of failing students have been allowed to graduate each year, in part because the state does not review the alternative local tests to verify they are the equivalent of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests. In 2006, graduation rates rose 20 percent on the 11th-grade PSSA and there's evidence in more recent data that the trend continued in 2007. And yet many Pennsylvania high school graduates are struggling in college.

It doesn't add up. The combination of spiked testing results and more struggling collegians suggests a lack of legitimate testing and unprepared students.

Challenging 10 final examinations covering math, science, English and social studies was predictable. But if we're going to thumb our nose at this accountability, then the local assessment and the PSSAs have to be checked to make sure they are a more adequate indicator of college preparedness. Or something better than what is being proposed has to be suggested.

It does no good to send our kids to college – often at a cost of six figures for four years – if they are not ready to be successful there.