



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on August 10, 2021

Oregon Suspends High School Graduation Requirement of Showing Proficiency in Reading, Writing, and Math

Oregon Governor Kate Brown quietly signed a bill last month that removed the requirement for graduating high-school students to be proficient in so-called essential learning skills such as reading, writing, and math in a bid to achieve “equitable graduation standards.”

The procedure of signing [Senate Bill 744](#) into law was unusually low-profile. While Brown signed the bill on July 14, she did not issue a press release or hold a formal ceremony to mark the occasion. The bill also wasn’t entered into a public legislative database — which usually happens the same day it is signed — until two weeks after its signing, as reported by [the Oregonian](#). The delay was later explained as a glitch in the computer system.



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Though the governor has been avoiding commenting on the legislature, her deputy communications director, Charles Boyle, told the outlet that suspending the reading, writing, and math proficiency requirements would benefit “Oregon’s Black, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, Tribal, and students of color,” while the state comes up with a new set of “equitable” graduation standards. Boyle added the leaders from those communities have advocated for “equitable graduation standards” and for expanded learning opportunities and support for a long time. However, neither lawmakers nor the governor have passed any “major expansion of learning opportunities” to help those groups this year.

When enacting the “essential skills” graduation requirement in 2009, the officials on the Oregon Board of Education [reportedly](#) acted out of hope no student would be denied a diploma for lacking the skills. Rather, the requirement was meant for the schools to step up and help juniors and seniors who hadn’t mastered English or math to do so by implementing workshop-style courses to help students strengthen their skills and create evidence of mastery. Some students did improve their skills. It was [reported](#) that during 2012-13, for example, schools offered more and more targeted lessons in English, history, health, and even physical education. Writing became a core part of the program in many schools, since many students who were not skilled enough “just needed more practice and more feedback,” according to the local teachers. And this was exactly what those courses provided.

Most of those courses, however, have been discontinued since the skills requirement was paused during the pandemic before lawmakers “killed it entirely,” per the [Oregonian report](#).

The “essential skills” graduation requirement was suspended during the pandemic as a way to assist students who went through a year of distance learning, [KATU explained](#). In June 2021, state lawmakers



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voted to approve the bill that suspended the requirements for students for three years.

Foundations for a Better Oregon, which advocated for the legislation, said in a [statement](#) that the bill is intended to “truly reflect what every student needs to thrive in the 21st century.” Supporters of the bill insisted that “testing on essential skills has historically hurt those with poor test-taking skills who would otherwise graduate.” It was not explained how those students would graduate if they failed to demonstrate proficiency in skills that are deemed “essential,” but State Senator Lew Frederick (D-Portland) [noted](#) that the tests have been “very flawed,” and therefore unreliable in evaluating students’ knowledge. Frederick added it wasn’t fair for students who have suffered or fell behind during distance learning imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic to “approach graduation with an already flawed system.”

It is unclear why much criticism was focused on testing, since Oregon [reportedly](#) does not require students to pass a particular standardized test. Students are asked to demonstrate their English language and math skills via five different tests or by completing a classroom project evaluated by their own teachers. The Oregon Department of Education [indicates](#) only that “students will need to successfully complete the credit requirements, demonstrate proficiency in the Essential Skills, and meet the personalized learning requirements.”

While the bill was overwhelmingly supported by the Democrats, it was met with criticism from many — but [not all](#) — Republican lawmakers in both chambers of the legislature.

Oregon House Minority Leader Christine Drahan said:

The approach for Senate Bill 744 is to, in fact, lower our expectations for our kids. This is the wrong time to do that, when we have had this year of social isolation and lost learning. It’s the wrong thing to do at this moment.

Drahan added that the issue was not about the testing system, but with the fact the students are not required to demonstrate through a variety of options that they have mastered certain skills.

Critics also [voice](#) their concerns that the true purpose of the legislation is to enable teachers’ unions to declare a growing number of students proficient without being accountable for preparing them with essential skills needed to succeed in an increasingly complex and challenging world.

In July, the Oregon Department of Education went beyond the suspension of math proficiency testing and [adopted](#) Critical Race Theory (CRT) into mathematics. In June, it introduced a teacher [training document](#) called “The Mo(ve)ment to Prioritize Antiracist Mathematics” that implies that mathematics is not a “culturally and politically neutral subject,” and “all levels of teaching mathematics are imbued with the same racism and violence that permeates all schooling.”



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