

Survey reveals graduating seniors lack basic knowledge

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More than 20 percent of graduating high school seniors can't compute some basic math problems or answer simple science and government questions, according to the informal Daily Press Grad Quiz.

The Daily Press issued the annual 13-question quiz to 74 high-school seniors from Apple Valley, Victorville, Lucerne Valley and Phelan schools.

This year's results improved from last year's scores - but the results still alarmed some local educators.

"Sometimes we're not working enough with facts and common sense and thinking things through," said Lance Arnt, a teacher from Granite Hills High School. "It's obvious that the students are not comprehending the education they have been taught over the years."

About 42 percent couldn't calculate 8 percent sales tax on a \$10 purchase, but that figure is better than last year, when nearly 50 percent could not make that computation. In 2007, nearly 75 percent of those surveyed couldn't compute it.

"It doesn't surprise me too much because dealing with percentages is difficult for a lot of kids," said Serrano High School Principal Sharon Schlegel.

Nearly a quarter of graduating seniors surveyed couldn't name one right guaranteed by the First Amendment.

"The First Amendment one is shocking and disturbing," Arnt said. "That's unacceptable."

Among other survey results:

- 29 percent didn't know how long it took for the Earth to orbit the sun.
- 11 percent didn't know three countries that fought during World War II.
- 10 percent didn't know how many states make up the United States.

"It's troubling that the students couldn't answer, but it's not surprising. Our students don't know a lot," said Neal McCluskey, associate director for the CATO Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. "We have a one-size-fits-all school system."

McCluskey said it's critical for parents to have school choice and for all schools to engage students, because when they're not interested in the subject matter, they may not retain the information beyond the tests of a single course.

Nearly a quarter of students couldn't compute one-half plus one-fourth.

Arnt said that could be because "adding fractions is a middle school thing. ... They haven't done that kind of math in so long."

Schlegel said she was surprised that 9 percent didn't know the three branches of government

"because it's one of the things they learn in high school government."

Serrano High School student Ashley Gregory, who answered all questions correctly, said for her the quiz "was pretty easy because all of it I learned in school." She added some seniors may have "read the questions too fast."

When asked about the economic system of the United States, some responded "bad" or "recession," suggesting they may have not been taking the quiz seriously or they misunderstood the question.

Several students wrote that there are 52 states in the United States, and many said it only takes 24 hours for the Earth to orbit the sun.

Students did best when asked to name two works by Shakespeare, with only 6 percent getting it wrong, and when asked to name three of seven continents, with only 7 percent not knowing the answer.

Only a handful of the graduates surveyed scored 100 percent.

Lynne Munson, executive director of Common Core, a research organization that promotes quality educational standards and liberal arts curriculum, said it's so important to have a "comprehensive, not narrow," subject matter in U.S. schools to rise to the same level as other industrialized countries.

Munson points out the fact that nine other countries have consistently outranked the United States on an international assessment.

"If schooling is taught in a comprehensive manner, you'll do better all around," said Munson.

Common Core recently released its own national high school quiz of 1,200 17-year-olds, finding half have no idea what the Renaissance was and nearly a quarter cannot identify Adolf Hitler, with 10 percent thinking he was a munitions manufacturer.

"We have to keep working harder on standards," Arnt said. "We have to hold students more accountable."

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