

January 24th, 2017 Board Report
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Hello everyone! It's midterm season at PHS. That means many students are stressing about tests and cramming at the cost of sleep. As we walk around the halls during break, we see countless nervous students who are desperately trying to memorize those last few facts before taking their next dreaded exam.

Recently, we've seen a decline in midterms and finals across the country. From Hightstown to Hopewell Valley, nearby school districts are taking action to refocus education on student learning. Data even shows finals are on the decline in many universities in the United States. At Harvard, only 23% of undergraduate courses and 3% of graduate courses hold finals exams.

From the perspective of a 180 day school year, midterms detract from instructional time. After spending a week reviewing the material from the first half of the year, teachers and students must sacrifice an additional week of learning to be spent taking these exams. In hastily cramming the first 5 months of the year, students are often forced to repeatedly go over the same content right before AP exams because the inefficient learning structure does not promote knowledge retention. Considering the May deadline for AP's, it's no wonder several teachers have voiced concerns about losing many days to review. This puts our students at a disadvantage to the ones in other districts who have had those 10 additional days to learn.

In 2015, Maryland's highly competitive Montgomery County School District, the 17th largest public school system in the nation, stopped administering midterm and final exams in response to increasing test pressures from the state government. In its decision, Board President Patricia O'Neill said, "While we can't control the outside assessments that are imposed on us, we can control the assessments we impose on our kids. We're trying to regain more instructional time. Parents and educators want more teaching and less testing."

The parallels to Princeton High School are clear. As PARCC gains weight in teacher and district evaluations, it becomes even more crucial to regain lost instructional time. Swiftly responding, Millburn Township Public Schools canceled final exams and Livingston Public Schools canceled midterms.

Such tests are too often based on how many facts a student is able to memorize in the short duration leading up to an exam. Executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, Richard Bozza, argues: "[Midterms and finals reflect the] old standard of what can you keep in your head and spit out? Now it's all about how can you apply it? How can you show you understand?"

In *The Wisdom of Finals*, Educator Jon Orech notes that midterm and final exams do not align with the current trends of student-centered classrooms, project-based learning, and collaborative education. He observes that such assessments are "done in a timed,

isolated setting with a student completing primarily recall questions in a passive, non-creative fashion.”

Given these statements, the current exam structure at Princeton High School fails to encourage creative thinking. When students sit down with flashcards to memorize dates and vocabulary, people and numbers, the true purpose of the midterm exam is lost. Instead of asking probing questions and employing critical thinking, students become instead focused on engaging a subject at only the superficial level.

David Jaffee, a professor of sociology at the University of North Florida, states “learning is [too often] equated with studying for exams and, for many students, studying for exams means ‘cramming,’ and a growing amount of research literature consistently reports that cramming—short-term memorizing—does not contribute to retention or transfer.” Though perceivably counterintuitive, midterm and final exams are hindering the ability of students to actually learn the material of their classes.

Linda Serra Hagedorn, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs at Iowa State University, believes it is better “to have a more holistic approach to learning where one learns in steadier and smaller increments.”

Some teachers and departments within Princeton High School have already taken steps towards alternative methods of using exam time and evaluating student progress. For example, a few of the AP World History teachers use the first half of the 2 hour block of time to administer a short practice exam that is not part of a student’s final grade. This significantly reduces stress associated with cramming for the exam, allowing students to familiarize themselves with the AP structure while seeing what areas need improvement. In the second hour, the teachers review the questions that were answered incorrectly so that students can have immediate feedback on their work and re-learn concepts that may have slipped their minds. All of this happens in a relaxed atmosphere that promotes understanding of the material.