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Report Investigates the Impact of High School Exit Exams In Two Urban School Districts

Curriculum & Instruction Significantly Changed to Focus on Tested Subjects

WASHINGTON – March 7, 2007 – A new report from the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP) provides a unique look at the impact of high school exit exams in two urban districts, offering an on-the-ground perspective of the effect of the high-stakes tests on teaching and learning. The report is part of CEP's multi-year effort to monitor the impact of exit exams which will soon determine the graduation status of millions of students in 25 states.

According to the study, *"It's Different Now": How Exit Exams Are Affecting Teaching and Learning in Jackson and Austin*, the assessments appear to have increased instructional time in tested subject areas in both districts, often at the expense of other high school learning experiences and electives.

And while curriculum and Instructional changes were seen district-wide in both the Jackson (Miss.) Public Schools and the Austin (Texas) Independent School District, the shift was even more pervasive at schools serving greater numbers of lower-income and minority students in Austin, according to the report. Teachers at such schools reported that the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) had influenced every aspect of the curriculum, while their peers at a school serving greater numbers of higher-income and white students reported that the TAKS was an inconvenience.

The report also suggests that the exams are virtually ignored by colleges and universities in making admissions and scholarship decisions. Instead, a variety of approaches have been used to encourage and expand college readiness and access, including Advanced Placement courses, dual-enrollment, and financial aid workshops.

"The experience of these districts provides important lessons for elected officials and educators in states and districts that now – or soon will – use exit exams," said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. "Like the assessments required by No Child Left Behind, exit exams seem to be driving increased energy on mastering tested content, which may have both positive and negative effects."

Many educators in both districts reported that the intense focus on tested subject matter has helped to increase consistency in instruction across schools in the district by ensuring that teachers are accountable and adhere to the prescribed curriculum. Further, the report notes that most of the changes in curriculum and instruction in each district are aimed at providing additional support to help students pass the tests, including:

- **Interim assessments** aligned with the state exit exams have been used to monitor students' progress throughout the year;
- **Double doses of the same subject** have been offered to students that have been placed in remediation; and
- **Frequent use of test-preparation** strategies during class time.

"It's Different Now": How Exit Exams Are Affecting Teaching and Learning in Jackson and Austin is available online at the Center's Web site, www.cep-dc.org, along with other reports and information from CEP's ongoing efforts to track the implementation of exit exams.

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Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.