



NEWS RELEASE

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States Must Do More To Ensure Students Have Necessary Support To Learn Subject Matter Tested on State High School Exit Exams

Large Gaps in Pass Rates Persist for At-Risk Students; Alternative Routes To Diploma Widely Available But Largely Unused

WASHINGTON – August 18, 2004 – With high school exit exams now determining whether the majority of the nation’s public school students will graduate, states must do more to address achievement gaps for students most likely to fail. And with exam policies and student expectations more firmly in place, states have an opportunity and responsibility to give students a better chance to learn material being tested, according to a study released today by the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP).

According to the report, which tracks the impact of the tests in 20 states that now require them and five more that will by 2009, most states report pass rates of 65 to 85 percent for students taking the exams the first time. However, large gaps in pass rates persist for black and Hispanic, low-income, and disabled students, and English language learners who in some cases can be more than twice as likely to fail.

Meanwhile, 19 of the 25 states surveyed have completed or are now studying the alignment of their exams with state standards. But despite research showing that teachers’ coverage of standards is clearly linked to improved student performance, most states have not examined whether schools are actually covering content assessed by the tests, the study reveals.

“States have held firm on exit exam policies and requirements,” says Jack Jennings, director of CEP. “But ensuring that all students have an opportunity to learn the material being tested is the next great challenge for states, who must address the adequacy and effectiveness of exam-related supports they provide.”

Currently, more than half (52 percent) of all public school students and even more (55 percent) minority public school students live in states requiring they pass the tests in order to graduate. By 2009, 7 in 10 public school students and 8 in 10 minority students nationwide will be affected, according to *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*, the third in a series of annual studies conducted by the Center.

The report finds that with the right conditions, exit exams “probably have some positive effects on student motivation and achievement,” but also may encourage some students to pursue a general education diploma (GED) instead of a regular diploma, and that the tests may be linked to increased dropout rates for key groups of students and states with tougher exam systems.

But while percentages of students eventually passing exit exams after multiple attempts are 90 percent or more in states reporting these data to CEP, these figures are only available from in a few states and may not include students that have dropped out before their senior year. Ultimately, most states are not yet able to determine how many students have been denied a diploma for failing an exit exam.

To address these challenges, more states are offering exam-related support to teachers and students, including targeted professional development programs (14 states), and information guides, lesson plans, or curriculum guides for teachers (19 states). However, only 11 states have developed programs to help

students prepare for or retake the test, such as weekend, after-school or summer tutorial programs, computer-based lessons, or study guides. In addition:

- Only five states are developing or using diagnostic or formative evaluations to identify students at risk of failing exit exams, though they have been shown to help reduce failure.
- States generally provide only limited, targeted funds for “hidden” costs involving remediation, prevention, and professional development, which make up most of the overall costs for exit exams.
- Programs or funding to help special populations pass exit exams – particularly students with disabilities and English language learners – are not common.

Alternative Pathways Go Largely Unused

All states with current or planned exit exams allow multiple opportunities for students to retake the tests – and most allow students to keep trying after 12th grade. In addition, many allow failing students to earn a diploma through waivers and exemptions, alternate and substitute tests, and alternate diplomas.

But aside from New Jersey – where about 15 percent of all graduates earned diplomas through the state’s alternative testing program – alternative options for students have had little impact, according to the report. In Indiana, just 4 percent of students who took the state’s exit exam in 2003 applied for waivers. In New York and Virginia, states with the most extensive systems of substitute tests, only 0.1 percent and 0.08 percent of students, respectively, took advantage of the option last year. In Mississippi only two students were given the state’s relatively unique alternate evaluation in 2003.

Special accommodations for key student groups most likely to fail are popular, but uneven. The majority of states with exit exams – at least 19 out of 25 – allow students with disabilities to earn regular diplomas without passing the tests, but English language learners appear to receive no special options beyond those afforded to all other students except for limited testing exemptions in a few states and policies to allow ELLs to take exit exams with accommodations.

“States are doing a better job than in the past of helping at-risk students, but more is needed” says Keith Gayler, associate director for CEP and lead author of the report. “States must take advantage of the current stability in testing policy and devote more energy and resources toward helping more students master the knowledge and skills required to pass the tests.”

Exit Exams: Beyond the Diploma

Many states are using exit exams for purposes other than awarding a diploma, though these efforts are proving to be challenging, according to the report. On the federal front, 19 of 25 states plan to use their exams to meet NCLB’s high school testing requirement, a move that could save resources and minimize time spent preparing for exams. However, six of these states use different cut scores to award diplomas and to determine NCLB proficiency, creating the possibility that a student could score high enough to earn a diploma yet still not be considered proficient under federal law. Educators, under pressure to improve achievement, could also be tempted to encourage low-performing students to drop out or transfer to improve their school’s average test scores.

And while improving the link between high school and postsecondary education is a major focus for the education reform community, the report finds that exit exams are neither sufficient for this purpose in most cases nor do states intend them to be. Only Georgia claims college/workforce readiness as an official purpose of its exam, and only Texas and New York say that exam performance is used in admissions and placement decisions at some public universities and community colleges. However, several states (Ariz., Mass., Nevada, and Wash.) have plans to award partial or full scholarships based at least in part on exit exam performance, which could encourage students to take the exams more seriously.

Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995, 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.

State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform, and additional information on CEP, its publications and its work, is available on the web at www.cep-dc.org.

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