



NEWS RELEASE

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Achievement Gaps on High School Exit Exams Largely Unchanged, Despite Major Push By States To Boost Pass Rates

English Language Learners Much More Likely To Fail Exams, At Greater Risk of Being Denied Diplomas Based on Test Performance

WASHINGTON – August 16, 2004 – Achievement gaps on high school exit exams remain largely unchanged, despite a major push by states to boost pass rates, according to a study released today by the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP).

Half of all states – 25 – now use or plan to soon implement exit exams, tests that students must pass in order to graduate from high school. The exit exams are, on average, required in about three subjects and generally measure 10th-grade level skills and knowledge.

By 2012, three-quarters of all American public school students (72 percent) will be required to take the exams, including disproportionate amounts of minority students (82 percent) and ELL students (87 percent), in part due to the heavy concentrations of Latino students currently living in exit exam states.

And while many states have rolled out new policies, programs and resources to help more students pass the tests, pass rates have not budged much in the last year. Small increases have been realized in a few states, while little or no change has been seen in many others, according to the report, the fourth in a series of annual reports from CEP tracking the status, characteristics and effect of the exams.

Pass rates for all students taking the exams for the first time ranged in most states from 70 percent to 90 percent, but achievement gaps between white students and black and Latino students remain very large, averaging 20 to 30 percentage points in most states. Gaps are often greater for students from low-income families and students with disabilities, and in particular for English Language Learners, who had initial pass rates of up to 30 to 40 points below the student average in math, and often greater gaps in reading.

And though all students receive multiple opportunities to pass the tests, disaggregated data from a few states show that key groups of students still lag far behind state averages. In two states (N.C. and Texas), less than 60 percent of students with disabilities passed after

multiple attempts. In four states reporting cumulative rates for English Language Learners, three indicated gaps of 18, 35 and 41 percentage points – a major concern given that ELL students are tested more frequently than any other student group.

“We have to resolve the fundamental questions about the fairness of exit exams,” said Jack Jennings, president & CEO of the Center, “if this reform strategy is going to succeed we need to make sure that there are appropriate supports for ELL, students with disabilities and all others. States have started to move towards greater supports but they must greatly accelerate their efforts.”

Ultimately, most states cannot yet fully gauge the impact of exit exams on graduation rates, given the lack of clear data tracking students and confusion over how it should be collected and interpreted. However, according to the report, 17 states now have or are developing systems to follow the performance of individual students. This information is critical to understanding the impact of these exams and to help state develop strategies that will close the achievement gap.

Currently, state reported graduation rates in exit exam states range from a high of 96 percent to a low of 63 percent, but were much lower for black, Hispanic, and Native American students. And while few states provided data on English language learners, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities, these populations typically have much lower graduation rates.

Major Push To Improve Pass Rates

In the past year, most states have been moving to improve pass rates on exams, pursuing innovative programs and shifting policies aimed at helping more students succeed. The number of states offering preparation and remediation programs has nearly doubled in one year, from just 10 in 2004 to 19 today.

Eleven states have provided new funding or programs for remediation and test preparation. Two states (Tenn., and Wash.) slightly lowered passing scores in some subjects. Others (Md., Ariz.) have adopted alternative scoring methods that allow student flexibility based on overall performance on exit exams across subjects or grades in corresponding academic courses.

In addition, a few states have moved beyond basic remediation or preparation and are rethinking curriculum as a way to better prepare students. Strategies include requiring more challenging course material at lower grade levels.

“There is no question that states are providing more supports to help students pass exit exams,” said Patty Sullivan, director of CEP. “But with little movement on pass rates and a growing number of students in jeopardy of not graduating, the question is whether it will be enough to avoid having to deny large numbers of students a high school diploma.”

Multiple-Use Assessments

Most states using exit exams – 16 out of 19 – are now using more challenging standards-based or end-of-course exams, rather than the minimum competency tests that predominated just three years ago, and nearly every exit exam state (20) is using the tests to meet the high school testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. This trend expected to continue in 2007 when 11 states plan to use the same science exam to award diplomas and meet the NCLB high school science test requirement.

However, nine states use different – often higher – cut scores for NCLB proficiency than they do for graduation purposes, creating the possibility that a student could score high enough to earn a diploma yet still not be considered proficient under federal law.

And while improving the link between high school and college has been a major focus for the education reform community, the report finds that few states currently use exit exams in college admissions decisions (three states), scholarship determinations (three states), or assessments of college readiness (one state). In fact, only three states – Ga., Md. and Wash. – even list exit exam results on student transcripts, according to the report, and most states do not expect the tests to measure college or work-readiness.

Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 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 special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

High School Exit Exams 2005: States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist, along with CEP's previous annual reports on exit exams and other publications are available at the Center's Web site:
www.cep-dc.org.

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