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## **High School Exit Exams Not Used To Gauge College or Work-Readiness in Most States**

### ***Purpose of “High Stakes” Tests is Unclear From State-to-State, But They Have a Major Impact on Teaching and Learning***

WASHINGTON—September 6, 2007—65 percent of the nation’s public high school students must pass an exit exam in order to receive a diploma. But doing well on that test does not necessarily mean that a student is ready for the demands of college and work, according to a report released today by the independent, Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy.

Of the 23 states with exit exams that responded to this question, only six say that the purpose of the test is to measure the knowledge and skills needed for college-readiness, while nine indicate work-readiness as a purpose.

In contrast, 18 states say that the tests—which are generally aligned to the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade level—are intended to determine mastery of the state curriculum (e.g. standards, curriculum framework). And 18 states say that the exams are used to provide data to state policymakers on student progress toward state education goals to inform policy decisions.

Meanwhile, 19 of the 26 states that now have or will soon have exit exams use the same test to fulfill No Child Left Behind requirements that call for states to test students at least once in high school. However, 10 of these states have a lower cut score for their graduation requirement than for NCLB purposes.

“States have poured valuable resources into exit exams without seemingly having a clear purpose for their use,” said Jack Jennings, president & CEO of the Center. “And regardless of the aim of the tests, they are having a major impact on classroom teaching and learning, which leads to serious questions about the rigor of state standards and tests.”

The report—*State High School Exit Exams: Working to Raise Test Scores*—indicates that high school exit exams remain a force in American education, with 26 states expected to have them in place by 2012. At that point, 76 percent of the nation’s public high school students—and more than 82 percent of minority students—will be required to pass the tests to graduate.

All states using exit exams continue to show significant gaps in pass rates between student groups, with English language learners, African-American students, and Latino students among those most likely to fail the exams. However, states report that students with disabilities are the at-risk group whose performance is most difficult to lift.

States are working hard to improve pass rates for these groups, according to the report. More than half of the exit exam states reported providing targeted funding or technical assistance intended to close achievement gaps in mathematics (14 states) and reading/language arts (15 states). Programs often included funding specifically to help English language learners, disabled, and low-income students.

All exit exam states reported providing general, statewide assistance to help raise pass rates, with the most common forms of assistance being additional supports for teachers, including help in test administration and test preparation, and helping teachers become proficient in their content area. The least common forms of assistance included support for districts to improve professional development for teachers, formative uses of assessment, and instructional leadership provided by administrators. In addition:

- A majority of exit exam states reported providing exam preparation materials for teachers (17), released test items from prior years (15), and exam preparation materials for students (15).
- A majority of exit exam states reported providing remediation for students who fail the test on their first try.
- At the local level, all exit exam states except one said that their districts are using various strategies aimed at raising pass rates, the most common of which was offering remediation outside the regular school day. However, only two states—California and Florida—require this by law.

### **Recommendations**

In its report and a complementary set of case studies in five states with exit exams, the Center finds that the effectiveness of intervention and remediation strategies is largely unknown, and that many states do not have the capacity to track the impact of these efforts. As such, the Center recommends that as states devote an increasing amount of time and resources to improve pass rates, they should also develop ways to evaluate the effectiveness of those efforts.

In contrast, the Center's findings indicate that the exams are having a major impact in influencing curriculum and instruction, especially for disadvantaged students. To develop a better understanding of this relationship, the Center recommends that states take steps to monitor the effectiveness of high school exit exams as a tool for influencing and advancing curriculum, instruction and student performance.

\* Individual state profiles can be found at the back of the report \*

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