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CONTACT: Megan Cotten at 301-656-0348 or megan@thehatchergroup.com

As States Embrace Higher Standards on Exit Exams, Schools and Students Will Feel the Impact

More rigorous standards will pose challenges

WASHINGTON, D.C. — September 19, 2012— After more than a decade of growing reliance on high school exit exams, states are rethinking how they use these popular assessments, a new Center on Education Policy (CEP) report finds.

New data released today show that eight of the 26 states with exit exam policies have aligned these exams to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or other college- and career-readiness standards, and 10 more states plan to do so in the near future, according to “State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition,” the 11th annual report on high school exit exams by CEP at George Washington University.

“CEP has been studying high school exit exams for 11 years and this year’s report shows that the national move towards more rigorous college and career ready standards has definitely placed these exams at a crossroads,” said Maria Ferguson, CEP’s executive director. “While exit exams remain an influential force in education, state policies will likely continue to evolve as both schools and students adjust to more rigorous standards.”

Aligning exit exam policies to more rigorous standards will almost certainly impact the performance of students taking the exams, the report notes. Passing rates on exit exams already vary among states, and these rates tend to be lower for minority and poor students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

“Students who are already struggling with the current state standards will soon be expected to pass exit exams aligned to more rigorous standards, and there’s a good chance many will fail to do so,” said Shelby McIntosh, CEP research associate and author of the report. “While high schools should prepare all students for college or careers, policymakers must consider whether all students have had the opportunity to learn the content of these new, more rigorous standards before attaching such high stakes to the exams.”

The report also notes that despite potential concerns regarding the impact of more rigorous high school exit exams on student performance, very few postsecondary education institutions pay attention to exit exam results when making decisions about student admissions, course placement, or awarding scholarships, according to the report.

Currently, 25 states require their high school students to pass an exam to graduate, and a 26th state, Rhode Island, is phasing in an exit requirement for the class of 2014. Twenty-two of these exit exam states have adopted the CCSS in English language arts and math. But the move to the types of college- and career-readiness standards embodied by the CCSS does not mean an end to exit exams, according to CEP's research. At least 14 CCSS-adopting states intend to maintain a requirement for high school students to pass an exam to graduate.

Reductions in education budgets have also affected state high school exit exams, according to the report. Three states have responded to budget cuts by dropping exit exams in certain subjects, and two states have reduced the number of retake opportunities for students who fail the exams.

End-of-course exams—which assess students' mastery of the content learned in a particular course rather than the content learned in multiple subjects as of a particular grade level—have grown in popularity throughout the past decade. Nine states currently require students to pass end-of-course exams to graduate, compared with two states in 2002. Three additional states are phasing in requirements for end-of-course exit exams, and six more states currently require or will soon require students to take, but not necessarily *pass*, end-of-course exams to graduate. Thus, 18 states altogether have policies requiring some type of end-of-course exams.

The report also reviews lessons learned from states' experience implementing exit exams. For example, the report notes, successful implementation of a new or revised exit exam policy often depends on states' willingness to phase in policies over several years, provide alternate routes to graduation for students who fail exit exams, adapt policies to meet changing needs, and make a sufficient financial commitment, among other actions.

The report, as well as individual profiles of states with exit exams, can be accessed free of charge at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national 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.