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ABSTRACT

By 2008, according to this policy brief, half the states are likely to have adopted high-school exit exams. These exams, which students must pass to graduate, are part of state accountability systems and are above and beyond the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. This brief discusses high-school exit exams. It begins with answers to three key fairness-related questions that state policymakers should address when considering exit-exam policies: (1) Who will be tested? (2) What are the stakes? and (3) What is needed to help students pass? The brief then describes the experiences of Arizona, California, Maryland, and Massachusetts with exit exams. The brief concludes with a list of policy recommendations to assure that the system guarantees the following: match of exam content and purpose; alignment of standards, curriculum, and graduation requirements; well-prepared teachers and high-quality professional-development programs; early identification and intervention; testing at appropriate grade level; test accommodations to address special needs of students; use of effective data systems; remediation strategies to help all students pass the exam; and ongoing evaluation of the exit exam and its consequences. (WFA)

Making Sure Exit Exams Get a Passing Grade

Policy Brief

June 2003

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graduation tests

making sure exit exams get a PASSING GRADE

The trend is clear: By 2008, half the states are likely to have adopted high school exit exams.[1] *These exams, which students must pass to graduate, are part of state accountability systems, above and beyond the requirements of the federal* No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. *The main intent is to boost the value and credibility of a high school diploma and, in the process, motivate students to work harder. In some states, the exit exam is designed to guarantee that those who pass are prepared for college entrance; in others, it is intended to guarantee that graduates have mastered agreed-upon basic skills.*

Often, however, exit exams are implemented without adequate commitment to ensuring student success or sufficient attention to the costs of student failure. In such cases, one unplanned outcome may be high failure rates, especially for poor and minority students. Another risk is increased dropout rates, fueled by the frustration of students who have failed or who simply expect to fail. Due to these risks, some states have postponed this graduation requirement to give students and teachers more time to prepare. Other states issue alternative diplomas to allow graduation when students have met all requirements other than passing the exit exam.

This brief examines three key fairness-related questions that state policymakers should address when considering exit exam policies. It also describes states' experiences with exit exams, and it offers policy recommendations.

Who will be tested?

Numerous states require that all high school students take the exit exam. But given the high stakes, many observers question the fairness of this approach, especially for students living in poverty and for racial and ethnic minorities, most notably African American and Latino students.[2] On the one hand, poor and minority students have the most to gain from efforts to hold schools accountable. Graduation and other high-stakes tests can focus attention on how a system is failing to serve all students.[3] However, critics say that a high-stakes exit exam places the onus, wrongly, on students, whose schools may not have offered them sufficient opportunities to learn what is needed to pass the exam. The worry is that poor and minority students will be disproportionately denied regular high school diplomas,[4] a concern that has been borne out in some states. In Indiana, 65 percent of all students passed the mathematics portion of the exam, but only 31 percent of African Americans and 46 percent of Latino students passed.[5]

Other concerns focus on English language learners and students with disabilities (including special education students), traditionally allowed exemption from high-stakes assessments. Some states allow accommodations in the administration of exit exams[6] or offer alternative assessments to ensure that these groups can participate in a meaningful way. Research shows that accommodations can produce unrealistically high scores for some special needs students, raising questions of fairness and validity.[7] However, states that choose not to allow accommodations, alternative assessments, or exemptions risk making the test unfair to these students, many of whom would otherwise have earned a diploma.

What are the stakes?

FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS

In some states, students who cannot master the exit exam are offered a different route to graduation. For example, they may be able to earn a lower-status diploma (e.g., a certificate of completion or equivalence), earn a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, seek a waiver from taking the test, or, even, take a special alternative assessment.[8] But some of these options may affect college admissions, financial aid eligibility, or employment opportunities. Students — and their parents — who do not understand the possible consequences of alternative graduation routes may end up scrambling during students' senior year and beyond.

FOR STATES

Exit exams raise the threat of lawsuits. But when state policies establish the overall fairness of the exam, courts have typically ruled for the state.[9] In this context, fairness is guaranteed when students have been: given adequate advance notice of the graduation testing requirements; afforded multiple opportunities to take the test; taught the tested content; and provided with opportunities for remediation.[10] The risk of lawsuits lessens when

- exit exam content is aligned with curriculum and instruction from early elementary grades onward, and when the content reflects course requirements for graduation;
- the exam is offered late enough in high school for students to have had ample time and adequate notice to learn the necessary content, but early enough so students who fail can profit from remediation strategies and have multiple opportunities to re-test before their expected graduation; and
- teachers are prepared and supported to teach a standards-based curriculum, and they receive timely data on student test results so they can ready students for re-testing by targeting their areas of difficulty.

In hopes of increasing pass rates, states may make content less rigorous or lower the pass/fail cut score, as Massachusetts, for example, has done. But such strategies must strike a balance between creating fairness and staying true to the exit exam goals.

What is needed to help students pass?

Given that patterns of low student performance are usually clear long before high school,[11] the best way to support a high pass rate on exit exams is to guarantee strong curriculum and instruction starting in kindergarten, or even preschool.[12] This includes making sure that all teachers have the capacity to identify struggling learners and address their learning needs immediately.

While the goal is prevention, for students who fail the exit exam, remediation is essential. Research on remediation highlights key characteristics of effective programs, among them, attention to individual needs and learning styles, consistency of instruction in the regular school curriculum, and parent involvement. Yet only about half the states with mandatory exit exams set aside any funds for instructional assistance to students who do not pass. Some states, however, invest millions in remedial tutoring, targeted classroom instructional programs, computer-aided instruction, summer school, and after-school programs.[13]

The return on remediation investment is likely to depend on the approach. A study of the California High School Exit Exam revealed that some remediation programs in that state rely on traditional, but not necessarily proven, approaches. For example, after-school tutoring is a popular remediation strategy, but can suffer from inconsistent attendance and an over-emphasis on having students complete homework even when it may not cover the skills and concepts with which individual students are struggling. Some California districts have created special remediation classes in mathematics or language arts for students who have failed the exit exam. Yet when such classes employ "skill-and-drill" or simply repeat methods that have not proven successful for these students in the past, no one profits. However, some remediation programs, targeted to exit exam content, are showing early promise.[14]

No matter how good the remediation approach, its effectiveness is contingent on students attending. When scheduling programs, districts and schools must consider students' family and employment responsibilities, which can make after-school or summer attendance difficult for many.

A critical gap in most remediation programs is the tracking of student participation and progress, an oversight that greatly hinders the ability to judge program effectiveness.

Policy recommendations

If a state is going to require students to pass an exit exam before receiving a diploma, decisionmakers must embed the exam in a broader policy system oriented toward student success. The system would guarantee

- Match of exam content and purpose. The goals of the state's testing program should be clear, and any exit exam should reflect those goals. Is the goal to have students demonstrate skills in basic literacy and mathematics or the more rigorous standards-based content needed for college admission?
- Alignment of standards, curriculum, and graduation requirements. Exit exam content must be taught in courses required for graduation, with students having adequate opportunity to learn it.

More broadly, the state must identify and communicate to districts, schools, and teachers, the sequence of grade-specific standards that students must meet as they move through the grades if they are to be prepared for success on the exit exam.

- Well-prepared teachers and high-quality professional development programs. All K-12 teachers must have adequate training, time, and support to successfully teach a standards-based curriculum and use test results, along with other academic data (e.g., previous standardized test scores, classroom work, grades), to identify and understand how to meet student needs.
- Early identification and intervention. States must develop strategies for early identification of students in need of extra help and at risk of failing the exit exam. Academic support should be targeted to these students before they are asked to take the exam.
- Testing at appropriate grade level. States should consider when — by what grade level — students will have had ample opportunity to learn the exit exam material. To ensure fairness, students can be required to take mandated graduation courses (e.g., algebra) prior to taking the exit exam.
- Test accommodations to address special needs of students. Policies should include effective and fair testing accommodations or alternatives for English language learners and students with disabilities.
- Use of effective data systems. States need adequate data and reporting systems that deliver detailed, easy-to-use scores to teachers, students, and parents, to inform appropriate remediation. This should not require extensive new data systems, just a more efficient process of data collection, delivery, and reporting.
- Remediation strategies to help all students pass the exam. States need to establish, integrate, and track effective remediation programs, which are essential for students who fail the exam. Data from successful remediation programs should be shared.
- Ongoing evaluation of the exit exam and its consequences. States should monitor what happens to students who fail the exit exam, choose alternative routes to graduation, or pass on the first try. Without tracking the impact on students after high school, it is difficult to evaluate whether the exam, in fact, brings more value to the diploma. When pass rates are low, especially for minority or low-income students, English language learners, or students with disabilities, states may choose to postpone the stakes, giving schools time to improve learning opportunities.

STATE EXPERIENCES WITH EXIT EXAMS

CALIFORNIA

Catalyst for School Change: The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) is intended to become mandatory, with stakes attached, starting with the class of 2004. Early findings from an evaluation of the voluntary CAHSEE implemented in low-performing schools found that the exam pushed teachers and administrators to align their curriculum to the standards being tested. This process, in turn, served as a catalyst for broader school improvement, including teachers' higher expectations for students.[15] These positive results notwithstanding, low pass rates have prompted a push in some quarters to delay the requirement. The State Board of Education is expected to rule on that issue in Summer 2003.

MARYLAND

End-of-Course Exams: To align high-stakes testing with classroom curriculum, Maryland is replacing its basic skills exit exam with a series of standards-based, end-of-course exams taken only after completion of appropriate coursework.[16] Starting with students entering 9th grade in 2003, passing these exams will be a graduation requirement. For students who fail, remedial instruction is required. The state has committed funds specifically to intervention for middle school students at risk of failing the exit exam, remedial instruction for students who have failed, and professional development to help teachers identify students at risk.[17]

ARIZONA

Consequences of Delaying: Arizona has struggled to find a balance between delaying high-stakes consequences for its exit exam and risking loss of support for the exam. With very low passing rates in 1999, the state recognized that schools needed more time to prepare themselves to ensure student success. Thus, for the fourth time since 1996, Arizona postponed tying the test to graduation, this time until 2006.[18] Repeated retreats may have hurt credibility, not just with the public, but among students and teachers who may regard the test less seriously.[19]

MASSACHUSETTS

Alternative Diploma: The class of 2003 is the first that must pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to earn a regular diploma. As of March 2003, 6,000 seniors still had not passed after four tries.[20] As an alternative route to graduation for such students, Massachusetts had approved a "certificate of attainment." The certificate is available to those who fail the state exit exam, but have taken it at least three times, have attendance of 90 percent or better, and meet all other district graduation criteria. But whether the certificates will make students eligible for federal financial aid is still uncertain. Federal financial aid criteria require that students have a diploma, a GED, or pass a federally approved exam intended to gauge their "ability to benefit" from higher education.[21]

ENDNOTES

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[5] Cavanagh, S. (2002, September 4). Study says to states: Don't rush; provide support on exit exams. *Education Week*. Available online: http://www.edweek.org/ew/ew_printstory.cfm?slug=01high.h22.

[6] Accommodations can include: test settings, such as administering tests one-on-one or in small groups; test times, such as giving students extended time to finish or extra breaks; test presentation, such as allowing students to use magnifying equipment or use readers, signers, or transcribers; and response modes, such as allowing students to dictate answers.

[7] Abedi, J. (2001). *Assessment and accommodations for English language learners: Issues and recommendations.* Policy Brief 4. Los Angeles: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), University of California, Los Angeles.

[8] Chudowsky et al.

[9] Chudowsky et al.; GI Forum v. Texas Education Agency (1997); Debra P. v. Turlington (1981); Rene v. Reed (2001); Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education (1982).

[10] Chudowsky et al.

[11] *Standards: When students get behind.* (1997, December). ECS StateNotes. Denver: Education Commission of the States. Available online: http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/15/36/1536.htm.

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See reference list and additional resources at www.WestEd.org/online_pubs/pbhsee.pdf

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WestEd
730 Harrison Street • San Francisco • California • 94107-1242

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