



Research Brief

Effects of Exit Exams on At-Risk Students

Question: How are at-risk students doing on the CAHSEE (Ca. High School Exit Exam) and its equivalents nationwide?

Summary of Findings:

In 2005, 19 states gave exit exams, such as California's CAHSEE (Ca. High School Exit Exam). An exit exam is a test students must pass in order to get a high school diploma. Students will be passed over for graduation if they don't pass the test, even if they have passed all necessary coursework. The theory is straight-forward – test the students so that everyone can be held accountable. The belief was that the exams would force the improvement of curriculum and instruction, therefore improving learning, and closing achievement gaps.

But results have been less than hoped. Some studies show that dropout rates increase, but others claim no effect of the tests on dropout rates. But data are clear that large numbers of children don't pass the test, especially students from low-income families, minority students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners. Further, among the students who pass the tests, there are gaps (sometimes large gaps) between specific groups of students, again disfavoring the same groups of students just mentioned.

There is strong evidence that states have tried hard to close achievement gaps, but unfortunately much of the work seems to be misguided. According to one study of the work in Texas:

[T]he policies fail to touch many of the students defined as at risk using TEA criteria; and second, they do not influence many unidentified at-risk students who experienced difficulties. Specific policies are perceived to have little impact on regular students, but are viewed as having a neutral or negative impact on at-risk students

Speaking specifically of California, Linda Darling-Hammond (2005) points out some of what is missing from policies:

Our research on state graduation policies shows that states that have successfully raised standards and improved graduation rates have done several things California's policy does not yet do: First, as currently proposed by Assemblywoman Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, AB 1531 would consider students' academic records and performance assessments such as essays, research papers, science experiments and senior projects along with the exam when making graduation decisions... States like Oregon, Washington, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maine and Rhode Island -- all higher achieving than California -- require these kinds of performance assessments as part of the graduation decision... Second, nearly all other states have also developed appropriate and valid assessments for students with disabilities and those who are limited-English-proficient -- something California has not yet done... Third, they have invested significantly in improving education for at-risk students.

A Center on Educational Policy study also examined the financial costs of exit exams, finding that expenses such as preventive services for at-risk students and professional development for teachers account for a large share of program costs. "States should stop treating exit exams as if they are low-cost or no-cost solutions to reform schools," said Center director Jack Jennings. "If states expect exit exams to improve instruction and raise achievement, they should contribute more to the costs of remediation, professional development, and prevention."

Online Resources:

(Note: ERIC documents can be found by going to <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> and entering the ERIC ID#)

High School Exit Exams

In August of 2005, the Center on Education Policy released its fourth annual report on high stakes high school exit exams. "States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist: State High School Exams, 2005". Based on this report, the Center has produced two policy briefs. The first, "Basic Features" provides an overview of what high stake exit exams are and describes the basic



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characteristics of the exams that are currently used in the 25 states that require students to pass them to graduate. The second, "Effects on Traditionally Underserved Students," describes the effects that these exams have on traditionally underserved students. For a copy of the briefs, the full report, or additional information about the work of the Center on high schools, click on "high school exit exams" under Publications By Topic.

<http://www.ctredpol.org/highschoolexit/>

High School Exit Exams: Basic Features PDF

<http://www.ctredpol.org/highschoolexit/ExamMailers/CEPEExamMailers.pdf>

High School Exit Exams: Effects on Traditionally Underserved Students PDF

<http://www.ctredpol.org/highschoolexit/ExamMailers/CEPEExamMailers2.pdf>

Education Reform Can't Rely on High School Exit Exams, Study Says

The benefits of high school exit exams — namely, improved curricula and instruction — may be outweighed by drawbacks such as high implementation costs and disproportionately low pass rates for minority and low-income students. Nineteen states currently administer exams that students must pass to receive a diploma.

<http://fdncenter.org/pnd/news/story.jhtml?id=41800006>

Exit Exams Don't Increase Dropouts, Study Finds

Robert Holland

School Reform News; July 1, 2004

Critics of high-stakes testing have argued that public high school exit exams cause many students, particularly minority-group members, to drop out in frustration without gaining a diploma that would be valuable to them in the job market. However, a new study by Manhattan Institute scholars finds the exit exams administered by 24 states have had no net effect on graduation rates.

<http://www.heartland.org/Article.cfm?artId=15224>

State hasn't done its homework on high school exit exams

By Linda Darling-Hammond and Elle Rustique-Forrester

San Jose Mercury News; June 21, 2005

Our research on state graduation policies shows that states that have successfully raised standards and improved graduation rates have done several things California's policy does not yet do: First, as currently proposed by Assemblywoman Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, AB 1531 would consider students' academic records and performance assessments such as essays, research papers, science experiments and senior projects along with the exam when making graduation decisions. States like Oregon, Washington, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maine and Rhode Island -- all higher achieving than California -- require these kinds of performance assessments as part of the graduation decision. Second, nearly all other states have also developed appropriate and valid assessments for students with disabilities and those who are limited-English-proficient -- something California has not yet done. Third, they have invested significantly in improving education for at-risk students.

<http://ed.stanford.edu/suse/news-bureau/displayRecord.php?tablename=notify1&id=404>

Are High-Stakes Tests Punishing Some Students?

Can high-stakes tests cure what ails education? Today, Education World explores the issue of high-stakes testing. We examine whether the tests hurt some students, especially English-learning, low-income, and learning-disabled students. It sounds so simple: Test kids on what they should know, and hold teachers -- and students -- accountable for those scores. If students don't pass the test, then hold them back a grade or deny them their high school diploma. However, as large numbers of children -- including many low-income, ethnic- or racial-minority, and special-education students -- fail those tests, a quiet revolt is mounting. The revolt is led by those who feel that a single test should not be the basis for such things as getting a diploma or being promoted to the next grade.

http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues093.shtml



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The Achievement Gap: Causes (Part I)

One of the most troubling problems facing schools today is the achievement gap -- the disparity in academic performance between different groups of students. This two-part special report offers a collection of resources designed to help educators better understand the issues surrounding achievement gap. Part I of the report explores the causes of the gap, while Part II examines strategies for closing it.

<http://www.smartbrief.com/alchemy/servlet/encodeServlet?issueid=51F2E644-4620-4FE1-92B7-34A018A931B3&lmid=17828>

Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations, Phase III: Interim Report. Executive Summary.

This report presents findings from the 3rd year of a 4-year study of the impact of educational reform on at-risk students in Texas. Findings suggest that the four policies do not increase academic achievement or graduation rates, which are the two purposes for implementing the reforms. First, the policies fail to touch many of the students defined as at risk using TEA criteria; and second, they do not influence many unidentified at-risk students who experienced difficulties. Specific policies are perceived to have little impact on regular students, but are viewed as having a neutral or negative impact on at-risk students. Effective policy implementation must take local variability into account, be ongoing, utilize locally existing networks, and promote cooperation among all levels. General policy recommendations are included at the end of the report.

ERIC #: ED359641

Full text: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED359641>

An Examination of the Correlates to Achievement on the California High School Exit Exam.

Garcia, Paul; Calhoun, David O.;

The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), established in 1999, requires all high school students beginning with the class of 2004 to pass the CAHSEE to earn a high school diploma. A study was conducted in a large urban school district in central California of the first year of implementation of CAHSEE. Findings suggest that this high stakes testing has contributed to increased test preparation, especially among students with limited English language proficiency. The student survey data also provide some evidence that for some students the curriculum has narrowed. Disparate achievement levels were found when white and nonwhite students were compared, and the small number of beginning English learners with passing CAHSEE scores raises the question of when high stakes tests are appropriate for students not proficient in English. Preliminary evidence does not support the idea that poor performance on the CAHSEE had adverse effects on students academic grades. However, changes in school attendance were significantly related to number of test sections passed on CAHSEE.

ERIC #: ED471663

Full text: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED471663>

The Relationship to Achievement on the California High School Exit Exam for Language Minority Students.

Garcia, Paul A.; Gopal, Malati;

NABE Journal of Research and Practice; v1 n1 Win 2003

Examines first year results of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) required for students to earn a high school diploma. Results suggest this high stakes test failed to meet legislative objectives to increase achievement and close the achievement gap. Instead, language-minority students with passing scores achieved significantly below white students on CAHSEE and on a grade level standards-based assessment.

ERIC #: EJ666293



The Principals' Partnership
<http://www.principalspartnership.com>
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