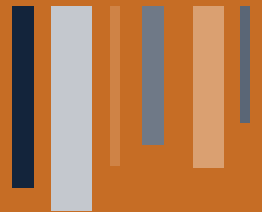




STATE HIGH SCHOOL **EXIT EXAMS**  
A MATURING REFORM

Center on Education Policy • August 2004



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The Center receives nearly all its funding from charitable foundations. The Center would like to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, especially David Ferrero; the Ford Foundation, especially Cyrus Driver and Janice Petrovich; the Rockefeller Foundation, especially Fred Frelow; and the George Gund Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, Phi Delta Kappa, International and all of our other funders for making possible this report and our continuing work on exit exams. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Center.

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# Chapter

# 1

## What Are the Center's Main Findings about Exit Exams This Year?

State exit examinations—tests that students must pass to graduate from high school—are more influential than ever. As Figure 1 shows, 20 states had mandatory exit exams in 2004—one more than last year with the addition of Alaska. Five more states plan to phase in these tests by 2009. More than half (52%) of all public school students and even more (55%) minority public school students currently live in states with exit exam requirements. If states stick to their plans, exit exams will affect roughly 7 in 10 public school students and 8 in 10 minority students by 2009, based on enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2004).

This is the third annual report on state exit exams produced by the Center on Education Policy, an independent advocate for public education in Washington, D.C. It is a product of the Center's comprehensive multi-year study of exit exams and is based on information we collected from all 25 states with current or planned exit exams, on our own research, and on our review of other major research in this field. The report aims to be a comprehensive review of the status, characteristics, and effects of exit exams. It emphasizes developments that have occurred and research findings that have been released or publicized since the Center's August 2003 report, *State High School Exit Exams: Put to the Test*.

This chapter summarizes the report's major themes and findings. It also describes the methods we used to identify issues and collect information for this year's study.

### SUMMARY OF MAJOR THEMES AND FINDINGS

This year the Center on Education Policy reached six new main findings about state exit exams:

- On the whole, exit exam policies, trends, and student outcomes are largely unchanged from last year.

- Ensuring that students who must take exit exams have adequate opportunities to learn the material being tested is the next great challenge states with exit exams face.
- The evidence on the effects of exit exams is mixed and tentative. With adequate supports and the right policy context, exit exams probably have some positive effects on student motivation and achievement and on curriculum and instruction, at least for some groups of students. But there is also enough evidence of negative effects of these exams, such as encouraging some students to pursue a GED instead of a diploma, to suggest that policymakers are making tradeoffs when they adopt exit exam requirements.
- Contextual factors, such as a history of standards-based reform, and state level choices, such as the availability of appeals processes, appear to contribute to how smoothly implementation of exit exams proceeds in states and how many changes states make in their exit exam policies.
- States vary greatly in how many alternate paths to a diploma they offer for students who have not passed exit exams and how difficult they make it for students to qualify for these alternatives. However, these alternate paths do not appear to be widely used.
- Using exit exams for purposes other than awarding a diploma, such as to indicate college readiness or to meet the accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, is proving to be challenging for states.

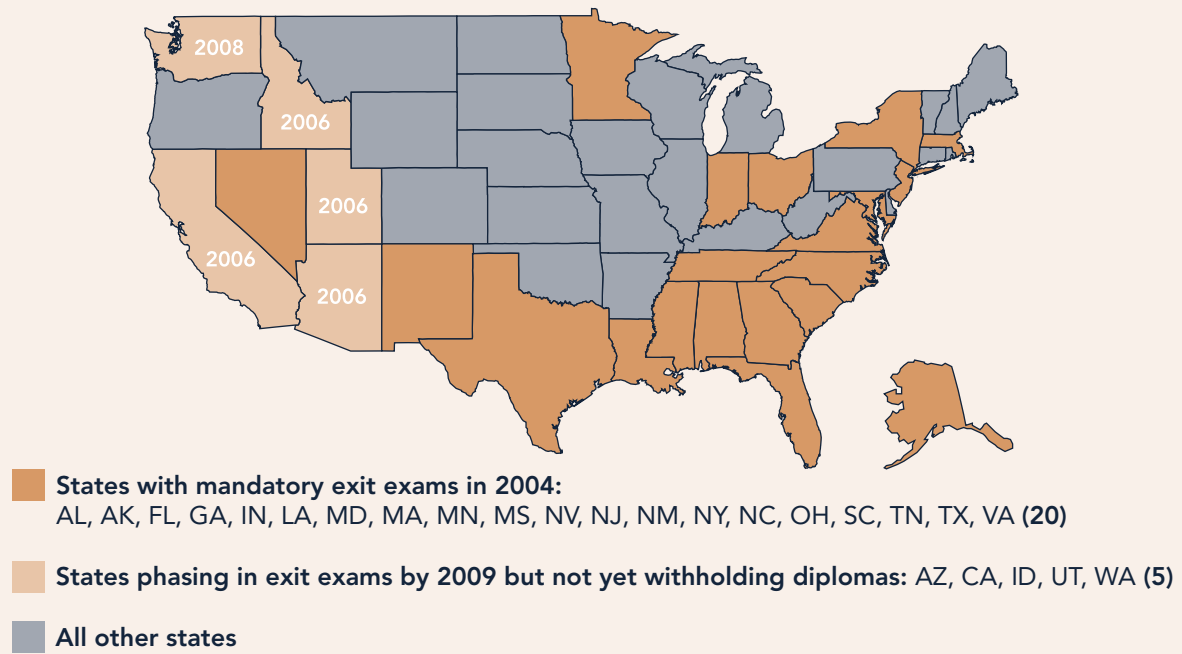
The sections that follow explain each of these six findings. In addition to these broad findings, the Center has arrived at specific key findings for each chapter. These appear in the Highlights section at the beginning of the chapter.

### General Stability of Policies, Trends, and Outcomes

Exam exit policies were relatively stable during the 2003-04 school year, despite strong opposition to the exams in some states. As described in more detail in chapter 5, fewer states than last year made last-minute or major changes in testing policy. Minor policy changes—such as adjusting the score required to pass the test, making slight changes in the content of the tests, or revising testing policies for students with disabilities—occurred in Alaska, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New York. Larger changes—such as determining when an exam will become effective as a graduation requirement, revising the difficulty of the tests, or creating a new option for students to retake exams—took place in Maryland, Ohio, and Washington, but these changes were part of the process of phasing in and developing new tests for the states. Changes were considered in other states, such as New Jersey, Texas, Utah, and Virginia, but in the end no significant changes were made.

State policy changes during the past year resulted in a small increase in the number of students and states affected by exit exams. One additional state (Alaska) began withholding diplomas from students who did not pass the state exit exam for the first time in 2004, and another state (Idaho) decided to begin implementing an exit exam system. A few more states began requiring students to pass tests in science and social studies. And states have continued the shift we noted last year toward more varied types of test questions. This year 15 states ask students to produce an essay or other written piece as part of their exit exams, 9 states include short-answer

**FIGURE 1: STATES WITH MANDATORY EXIT EXAMS**



Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

questions, and 6 include extended-response items that call on students to construct their own answer or perform a task.

The trend has continued away from tests of basic skills and toward more challenging standards-based or end-of-course tests. The number of states using minimum competency tests as an exit exam has dropped from 10 in 2002 to 7 in 2004, while the number using standards-based or end-of-course exams has increased from 9 to 13. This year, students in Virginia had to pass a series of end-of-course exams for the first time to receive a diploma, rather than passing the state's former minimum competency exam. Still, most states are using the same exit exams as last year.

State policies for scoring and reporting exam results have also changed little from last year. All states give students written feedback showing their overall test scores for the major subjects and their subscores for particular content areas and skills within those subjects. More than half the states require students who fail the tests to receive information about future test dates and opportunities for remediation. And 15 of the 25 states with exit exams release test questions and answers from past tests to students and teachers to review.

As described more in chapter 2, the percentages of students who passed exit exams on the first try this year stayed about the same or showed small improvements, with most states having initial pass rates of between 65% and 85%. States that report pass rates for specific subgroups of students show large gaps of up to 30% or 40%, depending on the subject, in the pass rates for black and Hispanic students, low-income students, English language learners (ELLs), and students with disabilities, compared with the rates for white and Asian students or for all students.

On the whole, exit exam policies, test characteristics, and student outcomes are largely unchanged from last year. This stability may give states a chance to implement exit exam policies without major disruptions, secure wider acceptance of exit exam policies, and focus more on improving student performance and enhancing students' opportunity to learn.

### The Next Challenge—Opportunity to Learn

Although exit exam policies in most states seem firmly in place, states still must address achievement gaps in the test performance of various subgroups and real concerns about the fairness of their exam systems. States must also look at the adequacy and effectiveness of the exam-related supports they provide for students, teachers, and school systems. While we have found that states are doing a better job than in the past of providing these supports, there is significant room for improvement. Now that the policy climate has stabilized, states will be expected to show more improvement in student achievement and provide more evidence that they are ensuring an adequate opportunity for their students to learn the knowledge and skills needed to pass exit exams.

A strong case can be made for focusing on opportunity to learn as the next major challenge for exit exams. Teachers and students who participate in exam-related professional development, remediation, or preparation programs say they are helpful. Students who participate in these programs and supports do better on the tests and feel better about themselves. By contrast, when funds targeted for remediation are withdrawn, the programs go away, to the detriment of the students. Attention to student and teacher supports can also lead to broader public support for the exams.

As explained in chapter 4, more states indicated this year that they are offering materials, supports, and training to teachers and students. Fourteen of the twenty-five states with exit exams have developed or supported specific professional development programs to help teachers better prepare students for exit exams. Nineteen states have developed materials related to their exit exams, such as information guides, lesson plans, and curriculum guides for teachers. However, only eleven states indicated that they had developed programs or materials to help students prepare for or retake the test, such as weekend, after-school or summer tutorial programs, computer-based lessons, or study guides. Although this may be an artifact of a history of local control in states, and although districts are likely developing these supports on their own, remediation and preventive programs have proved to be effective, and state-prepared materials bring districts a step closer in providing needed supports for their students.

Studies of the degree of alignment between exit exams and state content standards, curriculum, and instruction are important indicators of the fairness and usefulness of exit exams, because it is unfair to test students on curriculum they have not been taught. Nineteen of the twenty-five states we surveyed reported that studies on the alignment of their exit exams with state content standards have been completed or are in process. As explained in chapter 3, states generally have found these reviews to be constructive and have used the results to better align their exam systems. However, we also found that the majority of states have not conducted studies to determine whether schools are actually teaching the knowledge and skills



being assessed by state exams, even though research has shown that teachers' coverage in the classroom of content in state standards is clearly linked to improved student achievement. More information on the alignment of exit exams with curriculum and instruction can be found in chapter 4.

We found several other areas for improvement in states related to students' opportunity to learn, as outlined in chapter 4. First, only five states report that they are developing or using diagnostic or formative evaluations to identify students at risk of failing exit exams, yet these kinds of evaluations can help to reduce failure.

Second, our studies of exit exam costs in Indiana, Massachusetts, and Minnesota show that most of the costs of implementing an exit exam policy are not related to developing or administering the tests, but rather involve the costs of remediation, prevention, and professional development activities necessary to help students pass the exams. Our research found that these "hidden" costs of exit exams are large and are mostly borne at the local level, since states provide only a limited amount of targeted funds for exam-related remediation, prevention, or professional development.

Third, we found that programs or funding to help special populations pass exit exams—particularly students with disabilities and English language learners—are not common.

Finally, of the states that provide specific funds for student remediation, only Indiana noted that funds were distributed in a way that takes into account the level of student performance on the exam.

Comprehensive, well-publicized packages of supports are important not only for reasons of fairness. They also appear to have helped Maryland and Virginia secure support for exit exams from policymakers and the public, as evidenced by the relative lack of opposition to Virginia's new requirement to withhold diplomas based on performance on its Standards of Learning exams and the recent passage of new end-of-course exams in Maryland after almost a decade of debate.

## The Tradeoffs of Exit Exams

As research continues to accumulate about the impacts of exit exams, more answers are becoming available to questions about how these exams are affecting students. (Chapter 2 reviews the research on the effects of exit exams.) Although the research does not provide simple answers or sweeping conclusions, new findings are beginning to suggest that exit exams have differential effects, depending on the test and the group of students, and may require policymakers to weigh the tradeoffs between possible benefits of the exams and potential negative effects.

With adequate supports and the right policy context, exit exams probably have some positive effects on curriculum and instruction and on students' motivation and achievement, although these effects are likely to differ for different groups of students. More evidence has accumulated during the past year to suggest that exit exams are having positive effects on curriculum and instruction by encouraging school districts to cover more of the content included in state standards, better align curriculum and instruction with standards, and add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing the exams, all of which may be necessary pre-

cursors to increased student achievement. Recent reviews of research on exit exams and student achievement and recent reanalyses of state and national test results have found some limited evidence of a link between high-stakes testing policies and achievement gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), although the data are not sufficient to assume that the testing policies are causing the achievement gains. In general, because states frequently implement exit exams at the same time they are putting in place other school reforms, researchers have difficulty attributing outcomes specifically to the presence of exit exams.

There is also new evidence of negative impacts of exit exams, such as dampening some students' motivation to try harder, encouraging some students to pursue a general educational development (GED) certificate instead of a regular diploma, and creating incentives for educators to hold back students in non-tested grades. Some of the research suggests that these effects are significantly greater for certain groups of students, such as minorities, English language learners, and poor students. Signs are also emerging that in some schools, exit exams are spurring teachers to narrow the curriculum, emphasizing content that is likely to appear on tests rather than the fuller range of knowledge and skills contained in the state standards. In addition, although the academic community is still divided on the issue of whether exit exams cause more students to drop out of high school, new findings suggest that education leaders should be prepared for a possible slight increase in dropout rates among some groups of students and in states with more difficult exit exam systems. Finally, even though more states have data on pass rates, few states can really say how many students do not receive diplomas because they failed an exit exam.

More comprehensive, long-term, state-level research may enable analysts to reach stronger conclusions in coming years about which exit exam policies lead to higher achievement and fewer drawbacks.

### Smooth or Bumpy Road to Implementation

States' histories of policy changes and implementation of exit exam show a wide variety in both the smoothness of implementation and the number of significant changes states make. As described in chapter 5, several contextual factors and state-level choices appear to influence how implementation unfolds in states.

Implementation of exit exams seems to proceed more smoothly and require fewer changes in states with histories of standards-based reform and aligned exams, higher initial passing rates, and appeals and remediation opportunities. Implementation of these exams is more contentious in states that lack a culture of standards-based testing, have well-organized opposition to the tests, have high initial failure rates, and face other policy challenges, such as changes in state standards, at the same time they are implementing exams.

For example, Texas has a relatively long history of standards and testing and has made relatively few changes to the new exit exam system it is currently phasing in. Virginia's new exit exam system has had a relatively smooth implementation process, which is likely a consequence of both a well-publicized set of student supports and a governor and board of education that strongly support the exit exam policy.

On the other hand, Alaska lacks a history of using aligned exams and did not develop detailed state standards until 1999, which may have led to low initial pass

rates and several significant changes, including a delay in withholding diplomas and revisions in test content. Arizona has delayed implementation of its exam system several times, due in part to low initial pass rates and revisions to its standards in the middle of implementation. In California, well-organized public opposition to exit exams, a lawsuit on behalf of students with disabilities, and other factors have contributed to changes and to a contentious implementation process.

Multiple factors affect implementation, and some are outside of state policy-makers' control. However, some patterns do emerge, and states can learn lessons from the experiences of others in how to improve implementation in their states.

### Many Paths to a Diploma, Few Taken

In general, states are increasing the options for obtaining a diploma available to students who are having trouble passing exit exams, as discussed in chapter 4. Providing multiple opportunities for students to retake the exams and instituting other paths for these students to earn a diploma not only helps students who fail exit exams but can also help states maintain political support for exit exams. While all states allow retesting, other options to help students who cannot pass exit exams vary by state and include waivers and exemptions, alternate and substitute tests, and alternate diplomas. The strictness of these policies also differs by state. Each type of options has benefits and drawbacks.

All 25 states with current or planned exit exams provide or will provide retest opportunities, and most of these states allow students to retake the tests after 12th grade. Thirteen states provide some sort of alternate diploma or certificate of achievement for students who do not pass the state's exit exam. Nine states have some sort of waiver or appeals process in place that allows students who have failed exit exams after multiple tries to receive a diploma if they meet certain criteria. But these states differ in the strictness of the requirements necessary to initiate the waiver or appeals process, such as requirements for grades, attendance, and documentation. Seven states allow scores from substitute assessments like the SAT to count as passing the exit exam, but cut scores on these substitute tests vary across states. For example, a student in North Carolina needs a 480 on the SAT verbal section to substitute for a passing score on the reading portion of the state exit exam, while students in Florida only need to score a 370 on the SAT verbal section to meet that state's substitute requirement in reading. Five states have reciprocity agreements that allow students to substitute passing scores on other state exit exams for passing their own state exams. Three states have developed or are developing alternate examinations.

Some citizens have expressed concerns that these options are “watering down” standards or serving as easy ways out for students. However, available data on the numbers of students actually using these options indicate that these alternatives appear to have little impact on the numbers of students receiving diplomas. Indiana, for example, reports that 4% of students who took the state's exit exam in 2003 applied for waivers. The percentages are much smaller in other states. New York and Virginia have the most extensive systems of substitute tests for students, yet the numbers of students taking the substitute tests in both states is very small—0.1% of students in New York and 0.08% of students in Virginia. In Mississippi, one of the few states that has developed an alternate test only two students were given the state's alternate evaluation in 2003. The notable exception to this finding is New

Jersey, where in 2003, roughly 15% of New Jersey's graduates received a diploma through the state's alternate testing program (Mooney, 2004).

Data from our state survey also reveal that in addition to these alternatives for all students, some states have developed alternate paths to a diploma specifically for students with disabilities, a group that has some of the lowest pass rates of any student group on state exams. At least 19 states with exit exams have some type of policies that allow students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma without passing the regular state exam. But states have not been as active in developing alternatives for English language learners, another group with generally low pass rates. Except for limited testing exemptions in a few states and policies to allow ELLs to take exit exams with accommodations, English language learners appear to receive no special options beyond those afforded to all other students.

### Using Exit Exams for Other Purposes

In an era when students take numerous standardized tests, states are exploring whether and how to use exit exams for other assessment purposes—not only to save resources and cut down on testing, but also to create a more cohesive and integrated testing system. While states have found some benefits in trying to use exams for multiple purposes, there have also been significant setbacks and complications.

Improving the linkage between high schools and postsecondary education is a major focus in the education reform community. The American Diploma Project, the Bridge Project, and Standards for Success are just three of the efforts that aim to strengthen this transition. While exit exams may play a role in this effort, we have found that they will not be sufficient for this purpose nor do states necessarily mean for them to be.

When we asked the states we surveyed about the purpose of their exit exam systems, only Georgia claimed that an official purpose of its exit exam was to certify that students are ready for the workforce or college. This does not mean that states are not striving to prepare their students for college, but it does suggest that they do not expect an exam that is usually aligned to 10th grade standards to be an indicator of college readiness. Studies from Achieve, Inc. and Standards for Success also have shown that the material on exit exams is generally not of a high enough level to signal that students are prepared for college (Achieve, Inc., 2004; Conley 2003).

In addition, when we asked states about whether their exit exams are used for admissions and course placement decisions, only Texas and New York reported that some public universities and community colleges use exit exams for these purposes. We also asked state K-12 education officials about whether they had had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college. While two states, Maryland and Washington, expressed the greatest commitment to this effort, other states described ongoing debates about whether this is an agenda worth pursuing with their current exit exam systems or talked about how they were developing other policies or end-of-course exam systems not linked to graduation to strengthen links between high school preparation and higher education.

More states are beginning to discuss the possibility of using exit exam scores in decisions about college scholarships as a way of providing extra incentives to

students to take the exams seriously—especially students who do not find the exams challenging. Arizona, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Washington all have plans to award partial or full scholarships based at least in part on exit exam scores.

This year the number of states that plan to use their exit exams to fulfill the high school testing and accountability requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) rose to 19 out of 25 states. Using the same test for both NCLB and graduation purposes can help streamline the testing process in several ways, such as minimizing the amount of time spent on preparing students for the tests and saving money on test development and administration. However, using the same test for both NCLB and graduation requirements could have some unintended consequences or create perverse incentives. For example, when schools are held accountable for student performance, as they are with NCLB, they might feel added pressure to nudge students who are low performers to drop out or transfer to improve the school's average test scores.

Several states have further complicated the process by using different cut scores and different subsets of items from the same test for these different purposes. Six of the nineteen states that are using exit exams for NCLB intend to use different cut scores to determine whether to award diplomas than they will use to determine whether students have met proficiency benchmarks for NCLB accountability. In these states, the cut scores for NCLB purposes are generally higher than those for awarding diplomas. Using different scores could be confusing for educators and the public and difficult to justify, since a student could pass a state's exit exam yet not be considered proficient under NCLB. This situation could imply that the state has low expectations for graduation in some minds. Three states also plan to use only a subset of items from the exit exam for NCLB testing, perhaps because certain items might be more appropriate for different purposes. In particular, the state might have different expectations for student-level accountability than for school- and district-level accountability of the sort embodied by NCLB, since in the former case, the stakes are higher for students. Simply because states are excluding certain items from NCLB accountability doesn't necessarily mean that they are setting lower standards for NCLB proficiency, although it may appear that way and be difficult to defend.

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

Based on the findings of our exit exam study, the Center on Education Policy has reached several recommendations for policymakers, intended to help states that have or are contemplating an exit exam.

1. **Integrated, well-funded package of supports.** Although states report this year that they are providing more supports to students and teachers than last year, many states are still not doing enough to plan for or provide a comprehensive and timely set of supports. We recommend that states expand their supports to help students pass the exams and help teachers prepare students for the exams. In particular, we advise states to consider developing and funding remedial programs and materials for students issuing study guides, computer-based tutorials, and sample test questions, and providing other supports to help prepare students for the tests. We also suggest states develop curriculum guides and lesson plans, and exam-related professional development for teachers, along with diagnostic assessments to help teachers identify students' areas of weakness before they

have to take the test. The benefits of investing in these types of supports are higher test scores, less public backlash, and lower costs in the long term.

2. **More state-level research and data.** While several states report conducting studies of the alignment of their exit exams to their standards, fewer report doing studies of the alignment of curriculum and instruction to their exit exam, and almost none report conducting studies on the impacts of their exit exam systems. We recommend that states undertake or encourage others to do studies of alignment between exit exams and curriculum and instruction and studies of the effects of their own exams. Admittedly, these studies are not cheap and may take several years to yield useful results, especially about the impact of exams on students' workforce preparation or college readiness. But states that have done these studies report using them to improve their testing systems and have seen the benefits of collecting information on specific impacts in their own states, rather than trying to extrapolate from studies of other states with different exam systems and policies. We also urge states to strengthen their data systems to better determine how many students fail exit exams, which subgroups have lower pass rates, how many students are using alternate paths to a diploma, and how many are ultimately being denied diplomas at least in part due to the exit exam requirement.
3. **Statements of purpose.** We recommend that all states with exit exams develop a clear, explicit statement of purpose to guide their test development process and ensure that the test will be valid for making graduation-related decisions. Where a statement of purpose already exists, we recommend that states review and, where necessary, refine it to ensure it addresses the outcomes for students that the exams are expected to produce. A well-articulated purpose is also important for increasing public understanding about the well-intentioned goals of exit exam policies.
4. **Other policies to improve student achievement.** Other reform policies can work with or against exit exam goals of improving student achievement. We recommend that states consider how other reforms, such as increasing course requirements or expanding early graduation options, may interact with exit exam policies before adopting them. Since exit exams do not appear to be sufficient to ensure college or workforce readiness, we further recommend that states seek ways of continuing to measure and improve student achievement in the years between passing an exit exam and graduation to make sure that students are better prepared and challenged prior to graduation.
5. **English language learners.** States should reexamine their system of supports and options for English language learners. Students in this subgroup have similar pass rates and achievement gaps as students with disabilities, yet the options to help them pass the exams or receive a high school diploma are not as extensive as those for students with disabilities.

In addition to offering these recommendations, this report highlights many promising approaches states are taking to address common issues that arise with exit exams. These approaches include such interesting concepts as:

- Maryland's coordinated package of steps the state has taken or will take to ensure students have an opportunity to learn what they need to pass its end-of-course tests

- New Jersey's efforts to maintain the motivation of students who have already passed exit exams
- Washington State's study to assess opportunity to learn several years before the state withholds diplomas
- Virginia's pilot program to provide intensive remedial services to students who are struggling to pass exit exams and share best practices in tracking student progress
- New York's process for involving teachers in scoring its Regents exams

We encourage policymakers to look through the entire report for these and many other examples of how states are actively confronting challenges as their exit exam systems mature.

## STUDY METHODS

The Center on Education Policy used a variety of methods to identify issues and collect information for this year's study. In particular, we formed a national steering committee to guide our work, conducted a detailed survey of states with current or planned exit exams, convened a national panel to closely examine student achievement and other effects of exit exams, reviewed major research conducted by others on exit exams, and kept abreast of important events related to exit exams.

### National Steering Committee

For the past several years, the Center on Education Policy has been reporting on the implementation and effects of high school exit examinations. To guide our work in this area and ensure that it continues to evolve and remains useful in coming years, the Center convened a national steering committee in January 2004. The committee for 2004 consisted of Dr. Reg Allen, former director of assessment of the Minnesota Department of Education; Dr. David Conley, associate professor at the University of Oregon, director of the Center for Educational Policy Research, and director of Standards for Success; Matt Gandal, executive vice president of Achieve, Inc.; Dr. Lorraine McDonnell, professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara; and Dr. Kirk T. Schroder, former president of the Virginia Board of Education.

The steering committee was charged with evaluating how our work was progressing, identifying areas on which we should focus more attention, and advising us on how to begin providing more judgments about the quality of state testing systems and policies. Based on the committee's advice, the Center made some substantial changes in this year's report.

First, this year we report on more topics than in previous years, such as the alignment of exit exams to curriculum, instruction, and standards; the research that states are undertaking on student impacts; how states frame the purposes of their exit exam systems; and how and why states' exit exam policies have changed over time. We also go into greater depth about areas on which we have reported in the past, such as opportunity to learn, student options and supports, interactions with the No Child Left Behind Act, and supports for special populations.

Our second change this year is one of tone. As always, the Center is committed to providing unbiased information about state policies and the latest research on exit examinations. As we continue with our work, however, we are able to come to stronger conclusions and recommendations than we have in the past about what works and what doesn't when it comes to exit exams, which policies and supports seem to help, and what drawbacks are associated with certain exit exam policies. We challenged our steering committee to help us decide how to provide more judgments about exit exam quality and policies.

*Their advice to us was clear, and we agree with it.*

- Limit overly simplistic comparisons between states, and do not grade states on their policies. Without contextual information that takes into account a state's reform history, political context, the intended goals of the test, and other educational priorities, comparisons may not be fair. However, we should strive to gather more of this contextual information over the years so that any comparisons can be improved.
- Few policies or testing features are clearly better than others. Instead, report more on the benefits and drawbacks of certain features of exit exam systems and support policies. By reporting in this way and providing useful examples of the policies being implemented, states will be better able to make adjustments to their policies.
- When there are clear benefits to certain actions or policies, report on the benefits in a way that makes it clear that more states should be engaging in these activities but recognizes that this may be difficult for some states, given their political or resource constraints. Also try to report on the contextual factors that may impact how effective these policies are.
- Lay out what additional information would be necessary for the Center to make better quality judgments in the future. When the Center reexamines the literature and evidence on exit exam policies and features that has accumulated in the future, there may be more clarity about what constitutes "good" exit exam policy. At some point, it may be fairer to make quality judgments about exit exam systems.
- Rely on existing sources of information when available but discuss their limitations. They may be imperfect proxies for some of the features we would like to measure.
- For some areas where we would like to make quality judgments, we may never have the information, access, or resources necessary to do so. For example, a detailed technical analysis of a state's test would require access to state test item banks, panels of researchers, and the time and effort of overextended state department of education staff.

### State Survey

As our primary research tool for this year's study, the Center on Education Policy designed and conducted a survey of state department of education officials, usually officials from the state's assessment department. In March and April 2004, we con-



tacted these officials and asked them to fill out surveys and verify information we had collected and reported in our 2003 report. We used these data to develop the state profiles at the end of this report and to calculate the tallies of state exam characteristics, policies, and actions that appear throughout the report. After developing the profiles, we sent them back to states to ensure that we had accurately portrayed states' testing systems.

Of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams, 24 responded to our survey. Some questions were left unanswered, often simply because the data were not available or the policies in the state were in flux. We have tried our best to include accurate and up-to-date information in this report, but undoubtedly some statistics or policies will have changed soon after publication because events in this field move so quickly. For several questions, states were unable to provide supporting documentation of their responses, or the Center might have been unable to verify the information provided by states. In those cases, we have included their responses in the report but noted that we could not verify their responses. South Carolina did not respond to our survey, so Center staff used the state department of education website to find any available information on the state's exit exam. We used this information to write a state profile, which we then submitted to the state for verification.

### National Panel on Student Achievement

Each year, the Center on Education Policy reviews and attempts to synthesize the latest research on high school exit examinations so we can provide updated information on student impacts. In addition, each year we assemble a group of national experts whose broader knowledge of the research in a specific field can help us report more deeply and accurately about one area of interest. In 2003, we brought together a panel of national experts to examine the topic of exit exams and their potential impact on dropouts. In March 2004, the Center convened a panel of experts for a day-long discussion of exit exams and student achievement, broadly defined to include student motivation.

The panel participants were Dr. Dawn E. (Sunny) Becker of the Human Resources Research Organization; Dr. Henry Braun of the Educational Testing Service; Dr. Thomas S. Dee of the Department of Economics at Swarthmore College; Dr. Laura Hamilton of the RAND Corporation; and Katherine A. (Kit) Viator of the Massachusetts Department of Education. We asked this expert group to consider the findings, limitations, and difficulties of the current research on student achievement and exit exams and suggest topics for future research in this area. The Center drew heavily from the panel's work in its discussion of student outcomes in chapter 2.

### Other Research Methods

The Center staff and consultants also conducted literature reviews of relevant studies that were published or publicized during the past year. In addition, we tracked media coverage of exit exams and searched state department of education websites for exit exam developments.

## Criteria for Including States in Our Study

This study focuses on mandatory exit exams. These exams merit attention because they are becoming more widespread and will potentially have a greater impact on students' futures than most other tests. Included in our study are states that meet the following criteria:

- States that require students to pass, not just take, state exit exams in order to receive a high school diploma, even if the students have completed the necessary coursework with satisfactory grades
- States in which the exit exams are a state mandate rather than a local option—in other words, states that require students in all local school districts to pass exit exams, rather than allowing local districts to decide for themselves whether to make the exams a condition of graduation

We also include states that are phasing in mandatory high school exit exams that meet the two prior criteria. By phasing in, we mean that the state has a legislative or state board charge to have a test in place between 2004 and 2009; has already begun developing the tests; and is trying out the tests with students, although diplomas are not yet being withheld.

This report often refers to an exit exam in the singular, but actually a state exit exam is more like an exam system, consisting of multiple tests in different subjects, such as mathematics, English/language arts, science, or social studies.

As an alternative to requiring exit exams as a condition for receiving a diploma, some states use graduation exams to motivate students in different ways, but these states are not included in this study. Recently, Illinois passed legislation to require that all high school students take the Prairie State Achievement Exam as a condition of graduation, but students do not have to pass the exam to graduate. Nor does this study include states that have differentiated diploma systems instead of mandatory exit exams. Delaware, for example, plans to use state high school exams to award advanced or endorsed diplomas to students who perform well on the tests. Wisconsin has a state high school exam, but has left it up to local school districts to determine whether to require students to pass this test before graduating, or even whether to develop their own local graduation test. Some Wisconsin districts do make the test a condition for graduation, while others focus their graduation requirements on grades and course completion. Starting with the class of 2004, Wisconsin districts that do make the test a graduation requirement may begin withholding diplomas from students who have failed.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT

The report is organized as follows:

- Chapter 2 discusses the effects of state exit exams on curriculum and instruction and on students.
- Chapter 3 describes the main features of exit exams as they existed in 2004.
- Chapter 4 explores the kinds of supports and options for earning a diploma that states are providing for students.

- Chapter 5 details the changes states have made in their exit exam systems.
- Chapter 6 covers the interactions and connections of exit exams with other education policies.

A “highlights” section at the beginning of each chapter summarizes the key findings of the chapter. The State Profiles section at the end of this report provides detailed information about each state’s testing policies, features, and impacts. A list of references for the entire report follows the state profiles.



# Chapter 2

## How Are Exit Exams Affecting Curriculum, Instruction, and Students?

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### Curriculum and Instruction

- More evidence has accumulated during the past year to suggest that exit exams are having positive effects on curriculum and instruction by encouraging school districts to cover more of the content included in state standards in areas tested, better align curriculum and instruction with standards, and add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing the exams, all of which may be necessary precursors to increased student achievement. At the same time, there are signs that in some schools, exit exams are spurring teachers to narrow the curriculum, emphasizing content that is likely to be on tests rather than the fuller range of knowledge and skills in the state standards.

#### Student Achievement and Motivation

- With adequate supports and the right policy context, exit exams probably have some positive effects on students' motivation and achievement, although these effects seem to differ for different groups of students. There is also enough evidence of negative impacts, such as dampening some students' motivation to try harder, encouraging some students to pursue a GED instead of a diploma, and creating incentives for educators to hold back students in non-tested grades, to suggest that policymakers are making tradeoffs when they adopt exit exam requirements.
- Recent reviews of research on exit exams and student achievement and recent reanalyses of state and national test results have found some limited evidence of a link between high-stakes testing policies and achievement gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, although the data are not sufficient

to assume that the testing policies are causing the achievement gains. In general, because states frequently implement exit exams when they put other school reforms in place, researchers have difficulty attributing outcomes specifically to the presence of exit exams.

## Pass Rates

- The percentages of students who pass exit exams on the first try vary widely among states, although most states have initial pass rates of between 65% and 85%. States with lower initial pass rates on state exams—in the range of 35% to 60% passing—are often states where the exams have not yet become a graduation requirement.
- Average initial pass rates have stayed about the same or increased slightly in states that report multiple years of data. In a few states, these rates have gone up notably. In Nevada, for example, pass rates rose by six percentage points in reading and seven points in math, and in Virginia, they climbed by six percentage points in reading and four points in math. There continue to be serious concerns about gaps in pass rates by race and ethnicity, income, home language, and disability status. Some states report gaps as large as 30 or 40%, depending on the subject and the subgroup.
- The percentages of students who eventually pass exit exams after multiple tries are 90% or more in the states that reported these data to the Center. Critics charge, however, that some states' methods for calculating these cumulative pass rates may overstate the percentage of students who ultimately pass because they may omit students who have dropped out before their senior year. And since most states are still unable to report cumulative pass rates, the question of how many students are being denied a diploma because they failed an exit exam is still largely unanswered.

## Dropouts

- The academic community is still divided on the issue of whether exit exams cause more students to drop out of high school. However, new findings suggest that education leaders should be prepared for a *possible* slight increase in dropout rates among some groups of students and in states with more difficult exit exam systems.
- Press stories have documented instances across the country—most notably high-profile cases in Massachusetts, Texas, and New York—of educators pressuring lower-performing students to leave school or enter GED programs so the district could maintain higher average test scores.

In 2002 and 2003, the Center on Education Policy reported the evidence about the impacts exit exams were having on curriculum and instruction and on student outcomes, which we defined broadly to include student attitudes and motivation, student achievement, pass rates on the examination, and dropout rates.

While we cannot provide simple yes or no answers at this point to the questions of whether student achievement is improving and whether dropout rates are increasing due to exit exams, we do hope to shed more light on these issues and provide more nuanced answers to these questions with each year of our exit exam study. For this year's report, we convened a national panel on the impacts of exit exams on student achievement, reviewed the latest research on achievement, motivation, and dropout rates, and gathered more extensive, disaggregated data on students' pass rates on these examinations. We also reviewed states' own efforts to track the impacts of their exit exams.

This chapter looks at the impact of exit exams in four main areas:

- Curriculum and instruction
- Student achievement
- Initial and cumulative pass rates
- Dropouts

We have chosen to devote separate sections to pass rates and dropouts, even though they are closely related to the broader topic of student achievement. First, pass rates warrant their own section because although they are of great concern and interest, their connection to actual gains or decreases in student learning is somewhat murky. Changes in pass rates may have as much to do with yearly changes in the group of students taking the exams, the extent to which teachers are teaching to the test, changes in subject matter tested from year to year, and a variety of other factors as they do with improved student learning. Second, dropout rates have proved to be of particular interest to policymakers and the public, and the body of research on dropouts is more extensive and focused on a specific topic than other research on exit exams and student impacts.

## CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

One of our major findings last year was that exit exams appear to encourage school districts to cover more of the content in state standards, to more closely align curriculum with state standards, and to add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing. This year, more evidence has accumulated to suggest that this is the case.

In 2001, the California legislature mandated an ongoing independent analysis of the state's exit exam program, the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), to measure the effects of the exam and its potential benefits and drawbacks. The analyses have been performed annually by the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). In fall 2003, the year 4 evaluation report of CAHSEE (Wise et al., 2003) continued to provide evidence of promising effects on curriculum and instruction. The percentage of principals reporting that their school had

conducted local workshops on CAHSEE content rose from 41% in 2002 to 62% in 2003. From 2002 to 2003, the percentage of principals reporting that more than 95% of their students received instruction in the math content standards rose from 22% to 33%, while the percentage estimating that fewer than 75% received instruction in the content standards declined from 48% to 33% for math and from 34% to 27% in English language arts (ELA).

In 2002, 24% of the California schools surveyed by HumRRO planned to implement remedial courses, 33% had partially implemented these courses, and only 10% had fully implemented the courses. Only one-third had no plans to increase remedial courses (Wise et al., 2003). But in 2003, 10% of California schools were planning to implement remedial courses, 37% had partially implemented them, and 33% had fully implemented them; only 20% had no plans to implement remedial courses.

Results from a Washington State study of standards and accountability were also promising. The study found that curriculum alignment was improving at the secondary level in the state, that the results of state tests were being used to guide planning and instructional practice, that extra help was being made available for students having difficulty meeting the standards, and that most teachers support the reform movement in the state (Educational Service District 101, 2003).

Although a goal of these testing programs is to better focus instruction on state standards, testing may be narrowing the focus too much, to the detriment of other instructional goals. For instance, evidence exists of a narrowing of the curriculum in some schools and of teaching to the test. In the same Washington study, 24% of high school teachers said their major instructional priority was to cover the material on the state exam rather than the material from the state standards, from a combination of the standards and the exam, or from another content source such as the local curriculum or the textbooks. Only 5% of superintendents said that teaching the content on the state test was the major instructional priority in schools in their district, which may indicate although district leaders believe that teaching to the test is rare, it may happen more often than they expect.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that in at least some cases, the increased focus on standards and assessment may change the instructional emphases or priorities. For instance, one county in Florida reported that the number of students participating in the county science fair had dropped by half at the same time the science portion of the state's high school examination was introduced (Thomas, K., 2004). In addition, community members in Florida have complained that the state's focus on state standards has thwarted their fight to keep agricultural classes and other academic areas that are not tested from being cut (Behrendt, 2003).

## **STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND MOTIVATION**

In previous years, the Center has reported on some studies which found that exit exams have no effects on student achievement, or at least result in few "transferable" academic gains, but do produce negative effects on students, such as heightened test-related stress. We also reported on other research that found positive impacts of exit exams on student achievement and motivation. More information on these studies can be found in our previous years' reports on exit exams (Center on Education Policy, 2002 and 2003).



The past year has seen the release of additional research on student achievement and motivation that clarifies and in some cases calls into question earlier suppositions. Our discussion of student achievement and motivation begins with a summary of the work of our expert panel, because we felt that the panel's suggestions can serve as a lens for viewing a range of issues related to achievement, motivation, and other impacts of exit exams. Our discussion next reviews the findings of new research on student achievement and motivation that has been published or publicized during the past year. Finally, we discuss states' own efforts to track the impact of their exit exams on students.

### National Achievement Panel

As noted above, the Center convened a national panel of experts to examine the impact of exit exams on student achievement and student motivation. In particular, we asked panel members to come to a day-long meeting prepared to discuss:

- Whether consistent findings emerge from the research on student achievement and exit exams to date
- What the limitations are of the current research and why it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about the relationship between exit exams and achievement
- What a future research agenda on this issue might look like
- What sorts of messages we should convey to policymakers about the relationship between exit exams and student achievement

We provided panelists with a sample list, though not an exhaustive one, of research papers on the subject to help start the discussion, but the discussion was not limited to these papers (Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; Bishop, 1998; Braun, 2004; Dee, 2002; Garcia & Gopal, 2003; Hamilton, forthcoming; Jacob, 2002; Muller, 1998; Wise et al., 2004). The specific research findings from these papers and others are described later in this chapter.

Below is a summary of the main themes that emerged from the day's discussion. It is important to note that not all the panelists agreed with all of the day's conclusions and that the summary that follows is the Center's perspective on the panel's work.

### Do Exit Exams Affect Student Achievement?

While many critics and supporters of exit exams point to the body of research that was conducted on the first wave of minimum competency tests (MCTs) in the 1980s to back the case for or against exit exams, the panelists cautioned that findings from this work are not necessarily relevant to the new exit exam experience. The older MCTs took place in a different reform context and are generally considered to be less rigorous than those given by most states today.

Based on current research, panelists agreed that it is too early to determine the overall impact of current exit exam policies on student achievement, but testing is undoubtedly affecting high school education. At this point in the implementation of exit exams, researchers do not know how these exams are affecting such measures as adult literacy rates and success in postsecondary education, because

they do not yet have the data necessary to answer those kinds of questions. Many of the panelists agreed, however, that exit exams are likely affecting curriculum and instruction, students' course-taking patterns, their exposure to standards, and their access to remediation. Exit exams may also be influencing some labor market outcomes for students and their educational attainment (in other words, whether they get a GED or diploma or drop out of school).

If exit exams are having an impact on student achievement, it is also possible that any effects would be different for different groups of students, based on such factors as students' initial achievement levels or facility with the English language. For example, lower achieving students may be affected more—or less—by exit exams than higher achieving students, or one group of students may experience positive or negative effects that other groups do not experience.

When our panel participants were asked whether they believe that exit exams could have a positive impact on student achievement, many said that the exams could, if schools provided students with adequate supports and devoted sufficient resources to carrying out the policy. However, there is not enough research to know what a comprehensive set of supporting reforms and policies would look like to ensure improved student achievement. One panelist also cautioned, based on some states' experiences, that “it may be too Pollyannaish to suggest that coupling exams with other state initiatives would improve the relationship between exit exams and student achievement.”

### **Why Can't We Say More Than This?**

Answering the question of whether exit exams improve student achievement is difficult for a number of reasons. The first may be that the question is not being asked in the right way. State exit exam programs vary greatly in terms of the supports provided for students, the rigor of the exams, the broader reform context of the states, the length of time the exit exam has been in place, and a variety of other input measures that will be difficult to account for in any comparison. One panelist said, “We can't treat all exit exams as one type. It is not only the structure of exams, but the reforms in which the exams are embedded that are important . . . The other piece is looking at the states and their policy efforts over time . . . States could have very different results, not because of a high-stakes exam but because of how they got to that exam.”

This suggests that a more appropriate question than “Do exit exams improve student achievement?” might be “How does an exit exam with the following features, supports, and concurrent reform efforts affect the achievement of different groups of students?” But doing a comprehensive analysis of the reform context in a state is a difficult enterprise, and even the most sophisticated ways of analyzing data only allow researchers to take into account a handful of other factors at the state, district, and school levels.

Other difficulties have more to do with a lack of time and information. As one panelist said, “We design a test in two years, but to force change through a system, we really need half a generation.” Time is necessary not only to change a system but also to measure the long-term effects of the change. In addition, much of the data that we need to answer some questions has not been collected or cannot be collected without better data systems and a stronger impetus to collect the information. One panelist felt strongly that exit exams would translate into lower expectations for high-per-

forming students, while another pointed to evidence that “there has been a dramatic [positive] change in the expectations for [low-performing] students.”

### How Might We Improve the Body of Research?

Panelists recommended a number of topics for further research that would improve understanding of the impacts of exit exam policies. These recommendations fell into the following categories.

#### *Variation in policy implementation between districts, states, schools, and teachers*

The panel called for more data to be collected about differences in how states and districts implement policy and how that affects student achievement. One panelist said, “If we looked broadly at one point in time, two states could be at the same point in 1996, but how they got to that point could be as important as noting where they are. These [studies would require] simple quantitative regressions, but we don’t have the data.” Another panelist added that districts and schools respond differently to new state policies and recommended looking at variations among districts and schools within the same state.

#### *Implications for classroom practice and opportunity to learn*

While a few states are beginning to examine how classroom practices have changed because of exit exams and whether students have had an adequate opportunity to learn the material on which they will be tested, panelists agreed that more work in these areas was necessary. One panelist asked, “What are [teachers] doing? At what grade levels are they doing it? What do [exit exams] look like in practice?” Another panelist cautioned that this kind of research is a first step but explained, “You can document that the teachers understand the standards and are teaching them, but what is really being delivered and received?” Another panelist stressed the importance of including students in the research by asking them such questions as: How do you view standards and exit exams and how have your ideas changed? What do you think about standards? How do you think it affects what is going on in your classes?

#### *Factors that distinguish accountability and testing programs*

The panelists suggested a list of factors that distinguish one state’s testing and accountability system from another’s and argued that these items make a difference in how the exams affect student achievement. The factors include:

- The rigor of the state’s performance and content standards
- The alignment between the exam and the standards
- Policies for releasing test items that make up students’ scores
- Course requirements
- The design of the accountability system
- Teacher quality
- Support for professional development
- State and local funding formulas
- Accommodations for special needs and ELL students
- Safety nets for students, such as appeal and retesting procedures

#### *Transferability of skills from the test to the real world*

One panelist noted that the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) has shed light on the transferability of skills taught in high school to the real world. The NALS is based on functional skills, and researchers could look at student performance results in different states compared with the NALS and explore such questions as: Are students in states with better supported exit exams attaining higher scores on measures of functional literacy? Are we seeing higher scores in functional literacy in the real world from students who perform well on exit exams?

#### *Exit exam content*

Panelists proposed that research address how well states rotate content in high-stake tests over the years. For example, if a state has 50 content standards, are the same ones being assessed year after year, or is there an unpredictable distribution? This may affect content coverage in the classroom. In addition, more research should examine the difficulty of individual exam items, an issue that groups like Achieve, Inc. are beginning to address.

#### *Student motivation to learn*

The panel also discussed the notion of evaluating the effects of exit exams on student motivation, especially among high-performing students, who are often overlooked in the research. One panelist was especially concerned that exit exams could retard student motivation if the content is viewed as too easy or if students have already passed the exit exam. One panelist reported that surveys in some states have found that some high-performing students who took an exit exam did not even know they had taken part in a high-stakes assessment.

### **What Should We Tell Policymakers?**

The panel came to several conclusions, both individually and as a whole, about the messages that should be relayed to policymakers about high school exit exams and student achievement.

#### *Align exit exams with a cohesive system of standards and accountability*

The panelists agreed that exit exams should be aligned with state standards and that standards should be aligned with the curriculum. As one panelist summarized, “We keep coming back to this notion that if you think of the state education system as a house, the exit exam is the roof. You wouldn’t start building a house with the roof and building your way down...well-designed systems are [making] and can make a difference.”

#### *Be patient*

Panel members agreed that policymakers should be patient if they want to see exit exams produce results. Real change does not occur immediately after a policy is put into place. Improved instruction and achievement take time. One panelist explained, “Patience has to do with two things: (1) holding constant the fundamentals of the program, and (2) making the program nimble enough to make minor changes when it gets feedback from schools and districts.” In other words, policymakers should keep expectations and policies in place long enough for change but should be willing to make adjustments.

#### *Be careful when using cross-state analysis*

Analyses that look for trends across multiple states can take too broad a view of accountability and testing by comparing very different programs and can miss effects, as illustrated by problems with the current body of research. One panelist was especially

concerned that if policymakers cannot detect a general effect across all states from a study, they might dismiss the reform effort all together. Panelists suggested encouraging policymakers to look at general rules for high-stakes testing, but to examine closely what happens in the one or two states that are closest to their own, in terms of standards, testing policies, demographics, socioeconomic levels, and other key features. This will help policymakers gain a better sense of the possible impacts of exit exams.

#### *Combine quantitative and qualitative analysis*

Panelists suggested that policymakers should encourage and use both quantitative and qualitative analyses of exit exams, because each helps to answer different kinds of questions and both provide useful types of information. One panelist said that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research can help policymakers understand what they should consider “before tinkering with an exit exam system.”

#### *Use benchmark or interim tests to increase student achievement*

The panel agreed that formative assessments can help monitor student progress, guide instruction, and improve achievement.

#### *Improve data systems*

All panel members agreed that states need to have better data systems that can track students over time and across districts and states. Understanding long-term student impacts will require this improvement in the infrastructure.

## **Findings from New Research on Student Achievement and Motivation**

The studies we reviewed for this year’s report, which include many of the same studies reviewed by our national achievement panel, yield mixed results about the impact of exit exams on student achievement and motivation. This is not surprising. As our panel discussion made clear, the research in this area is still in its early stages, and how researchers ask their questions may influence the findings.

### **Overview of Student Impacts**

A useful overview of research on the impacts of assessments on students and instruction was conducted this year by Laura Hamilton of the RAND Corporation (forthcoming). Hamilton’s review also provided recommendations for using tests more effectively. In discussing the influence of testing on student morale, motivation, and stress, the author remarked on the notable dearth of solid research in this area, perhaps because researchers have difficulty gaining access to students. According to the review, existing studies indicate that teacher perceptions of student morale are higher in states without high-stakes testing, but that actual student views are unknown. In addition, some research suggests that high-stakes testing may improve students’ motivation to learn, but these effects seem to vary by age and depend on the incentives for passing the test. Finally, some research also suggests that if students view the test as too difficult, the motivation effects become smaller or even negative.

Hamilton noted that it is difficult to isolate the extent to which increases in test scores are attributable to accountability systems, because reforms often are enacted in packages. It is also difficult to perform meta-analyses of past studies because some studies look at performance increases on the same test, while others measure gains on other tests. On the whole, she concluded that there is some limited evidence of

a link between high-stakes testing and student gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, although she cautioned that there is insufficient data to establish whether the testing policies actually cause the gains. She also warned that some of these gains may be a result of more students being excluded from testing after an accountability system is implemented. Hamilton further observed that recent achievement gains on many state tests are significantly larger than the corresponding gains on NAEP.

Hamilton's review also called attention to some evidence that high-stakes testing leads to reduced achievement gaps and performance gains for some subgroups of students, although some of these gains may be due to lower starting points and thus more room for improvement for lower achieving students. Finally, Hamilton noted that evidence about the impact of high-stakes testing on dropout and retention rates is mixed but points to slight increases in both with testing. There is also some evidence that greater shares of students are placed in special education and excluded from testing in response to implementing accountability systems, but the number of studies addressing this topic is small and limited to a few specific testing programs.

### **Real Gains or Teaching to the Test?**

As we reported in 2002, there is evidence that when a new mandatory graduation test is introduced, student performance on that test increases for the first few years (Linn, 2000). Some proponents of high-stakes testing point to these test score gains as evidence of increased student achievement, while opponents express concern that this is just a sign that teachers are teaching to the test. New research has come to light that may help clarify this issue.

After conducting a 2002 study in the Chicago public schools that found sharp score increases on the high-stakes exam after accountability measures were implemented but found no corresponding jumps on other state achievement tests, Brian Jacob (2002) conducted a follow-up study to determine the nature of the gains. While this was not an exit exam, it may be instructive for our purposes. Jacob determined that students began guessing more on the exam when accountability was introduced, as measured by the number of unanswered questions on exams. Even though guessing had increased, the author determined that guessing could explain only 5% to 15% of score gains. In addition, the test score gains were not disproportionately from easier questions, which suggested to the author that teachers were not simply changing their instruction to cover material that could be easily mastered to help increase student scores.

Multiple studies by researchers Amrein and Berliner of Arizona State University have found little evidence to suggest that high-stakes testing increases student achievement, but other researchers have reanalyzed the team's baseline data over the past year and have reached different conclusions. Box 1 describes these reanalyses.

### **Differential Impacts**

Another source of concern about exit exams is whether they affect different groups of students differently. Two researchers from California (Garcia & Gopal, 2003) have argued that the state's exit exam does not increase student achievement but rather

## BOX 1: RE-EXAMINING AMREIN AND BERLINER

Researchers Audrey Amrein and David Berliner from Arizona State University have produced a body of research that finds little evidence to suggest that high-stakes testing increases student achievement (Amrein and Berliner, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c). Their research has led to much debate in the testing research community and has spawned several reanalyses over the past year that have come to different conclusions.

Henry Braun (2004) aimed to reanalyze one component of Amrein and Berliner's work which found that states with high-stakes testing did not show corresponding increases on NAEP scores and which concluded that there is no strong evidence that high-stakes testing leads to increased student achievement (Amrein and Berliner, 2002a). Braun reanalyzed the NAEP test score data for cohorts of students in school at the same time and for cross-sections of students in the same grade at different times; he also examined changes in scores at the 25th percentile instead of state mean test scores. Although he took issue with some of Amrein and Berliner's classifications of states as high- or low-stakes testing states, Braun used their original classification system so his results would be comparable. He also noted that using NAEP data is somewhat problematic because the NAEP tests have no consequences for individual students to motivate them to do well, although this limitation is likely to be similar across all states.

After reanalyzing the aggregated data from 1999-2000 and comparing them to data from states without high-stakes tests, Braun found significantly larger gains in math for grades 4 and 8 in states with high-stakes tests. The difference in mean test scores between high-stakes states and low-stakes states was 4.3 points in 4th grade and 3.99 points in 8th grade. Braun concluded that this was not due to an increase in the percentage of students excluded from testing during that period. He also did an analysis that followed the achievement of the same cohort of students as they moved from 4th grade to 8th grade (cohort analysis), instead of comparing the achievement of the students enrolled in grade 4 one year with the achievement of the different group of students enrolled in grade 4 the next year (cross-sectional analysis). When Braun looked at cohorts of students, states with low-stakes had greater gains on NAEP. He attributed this result partly to the different sets of states used in each analysis.

Overall, Braun suggested that his data make it impossible to conclude that high-stakes testing does not improve achievement but did not go so far as to suggest that testing is causing achievement gains. He suggested that the amount of improvement may be correlated with the strictness of the state's accountability efforts and cited some preliminary research that supports this theory. He noted that other education initiatives are usually introduced around the same time as changes in testing policies, which makes it difficult to attribute subsequent changes in achievement exclusively to testing. Also, he observed that states differ in how closely their curriculum and standards match the material tested on NAEP, which also may be creating problems in the data, although it is unclear how this interacts with exit exam status.

Barak Rosenshine (2003) also reanalyzed the data used in another study by Amrein and Berliner (2002b) of NAEP, ACT, and SAT results in states with exit exams. Rosenshine noted that the original research did not contain a comparison group, so this reanalysis employed a control group. Ultimately, the author used only states that both studies deemed "clear," in that they had not increased their rates of excluding special education and ELL students. After using a control group and a cohort analysis, the author found that students in states with high-stakes testing had comparatively higher scores on 4th and 8th grade NAEP math tests than students in low-stakes states. The average increase in 4th grade math scores between 1996 and 2000 was 3.45 points in high-stakes states, compared with 2.40 points in low-stakes states. Similarly, the average increase in 8th grade math scores during the same period was 3.42 points in high-stakes states and 1.63 points in low-stakes states. The author recommended doing a closer examination of states that have successfully raised student achievement after implementing high-stakes tests and comparing them with states that have not been as successful. He also suggested a further examination of the consequences attached to tests to see if some are more effective than others in boosting performance.

sorts and selects students into “unequal learning opportunities” and denies many a fair opportunity to learn. Their research focused in particular on English language learners. Since these students are often assigned to remedial instruction or are required to take English language development classes, the researchers contended that ELL students had limited access to grade-level academic content compared with other students, and that the exit exam served to exacerbate educational inequalities. According to their research, in 2002 in California, 29% of 8th grade students took grade-level algebra, compared with 3% of ELL students.

Thomas Dee (2002) compared the intentions of the “first wave” of school reform with its actual measured outcomes, using data from two separate sources. In particular, he looked at reforms that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, as states increased graduation requirements, began to implement standards, and established minimum competency tests. He noted that the intent of these reforms was to close achievement gaps and enhance productivity, as well to provide incentives for marginal students to exert more effort. He suggested that the results of these reforms should be carefully analyzed when proceeding with additional state reforms.

Dee analyzed data from the 1990 Public Use Microdata Sample and a combination of later data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the High School and Beyond study, and the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), a longitudinal survey of randomly selected 8th grade students that started in 1988 and was augmented by follow-up surveys in 1990, 1992, and 1994. The author found largely negative impacts of the first-wave reforms. Although his results looked at reform holistically, he restricted some of his analysis to examining the impact of MCTs. He found some evidence that MCTs increased dropout rates from high school and reduced educational attainment for black students. The author reported that MCTs are also associated with a decline of about 5% in the number of students taking math and science classes. In addition, he found a reduction in the amount of time students spent doing homework, but no impact on the number of students taking arts classes. The only positive impact he reported from MCTs was an increased chance of post-high school employment for students. He suggested that MCTs may not have accomplished what was intended because they had been diluted as a result of political pressure and therefore failed to deliver anticipated benefits. The author also suggested that “second wave” reform efforts attempt to better balance the positive and negative impacts of new policies.

International studies have also pointed to differential and unintended effects of exit exam policies. Amit and Fried (2002) analyzed the effects of the National Completion Exam in Mathematics in Israel. The Israeli exam system has numerous parts, and students must pass each part, including math, to graduate with a high school diploma that provides them with access to higher education. The country has struggled with how to implement the exam in a way that rewards high achievers but does not discourage other students and does not encourage students to drop out or stop taking math classes. The researchers discussed the competing roles of the exam in promoting high achievement but also serving as an “agent of democracy” and raising expectations for all students. Unfortunately, because many students viewed the exam as a daunting task, they opted not to take the exam and subsequently stopped taking math. The exam also seemed to stigmatize students who were not pursuing the curriculum for the exam. The Israeli math exam, which includes material from beginning calculus, contains much more advanced material than that covered by U.S. high school exit exams.



To maintain the exam's role in motivating students to achieve highly in math but eliminate some of its negative consequences, Israel decided in 1996 to divide the ordinary (lowest) level of the math exam into two components, basic and supplementary, which students could take independently. The basic part contained more elementary concepts and focused on math useful for everyday experience. Since this change was made, the study documents an increase in the number of students taking math classes, an increase in students' motivation in math, a growing feeling of accountability among teachers, and a rise in students' motivation to do well in other academic subjects. Also, an increasing number of students opted to take the test: the number of students taking both components of the ordinary exam rose by 21%, and the number taking the basic part grew by 33%. The researchers also noted that the goal of dividing the exam into two parts was not to lower standards and expectations but simply to encourage students on the cusp of not passing to continue in their studies (Amit & Fried, 2002).

### Student Motivation

A significant amount of new information on the impacts of exit exams on student motivation surfaced over the past year. In general, students appear to be taking these exams more seriously than they did in past years. In California, more students in the class of 2005 than in the class of 2004 reported that the CAHSEE was important to them and that they did as well as they could on the exam (Wise et al., 2003).

It appears, however, that students' level of effort on exit exams is likely influenced by whether or not they believe the results matter in terms of graduation. Over 82% of the California class of 2005 reported that they did as well as they could on the English language arts exam after taking it. But in Washington, only 47% of 11th grade students in the class of 2004 said that they tried to do their best work when they took the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) (Educational Service District 101, 2003). While the results did not end up counting for either group of students, the California students believed the results would count toward their graduation since they took the exam before the state delayed its consequences until 2006.

Some new reports have also suggested that some students become more motivated to do well on exit exams and coursework even after they have failed an exit exam. The Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (2003a) reported that of those students who failed the MCAS on their first try, 47% said they were increasing their level of effort in their schoolwork. Only 5% reported responding to the MCAS by putting less effort into schoolwork. In addition, students who failed the exam reported that they were paying more attention in class (41%), taking fewer absences (24%), and spending more time on homework (22%). For each of these measures, students who reported making these positive changes outnumbered those who reported making corresponding negative choices. Hence, while the benefits seem to outweigh the problems, some students are still reacting negatively to the initial failure.

Increased motivation to cheat is another potential impact of high-stakes testing on students—one that is rarely mentioned in research. Massachusetts is considering changing its testing guidelines to prohibit the use of cell phones during administration of the state's exit exam because of concerns about students sending each other answers through instant messages or taking cell phone pictures of their tests (State

may ban electronic devices during MCAS testing, 2004). A few hundred students in Florida had their exit exam results flagged as suspicious by anti-cheating software and will likely have their scores invalidated (Harrison, 2004).

### State Efforts to Assess Impacts

We asked states whether they were conducting research on the outcomes of their exit exams, including such issues as how much remediation affects student performance; what changes have occurred in dropout rates, course-taking patterns, or college remediation; or whether student achievement has increased on other measures such as the SAT or ACT. Only three states reported that they have conducted or are planning to conduct such research—California, Maryland, and Ohio.

In each of these cases, the impetus for the research appears to be a desire to ensure that students are not affected too adversely by the exit exams. We have reported in past years on the evaluation of California's exit exam being conducted by the Human Resources Research Organization, and additional new results from this study are described in this and other chapters of this report. Maryland has mandated a final data review in 2008, before its exit exam formally becomes a graduation requirement, to ensure that the exam has not negatively affected certain groups of students or increased the dropout rate. Ohio also has legislation in place that requires a study of the performance of the class of 2007, the first class of students required to pass the new Ohio Graduation Tests.

Several other states, such as Texas and Washington, indicated that they have not done these types of studies because it is too early in the implementation of their exit exam systems to demonstrate outcomes, at least in the case of the TAKS in Texas. It is also likely that many states are doing less structured reviews of their student achievement data rather than a formal study, or are planning such studies in the future, or have done studies of exit exams that they did not mention because they felt the studies did not fit the criteria listed in our survey. For example, several states said that they have conducted studies of the alignment between exit exams and curriculum and instruction (described in the section on opportunity to learn in chapter 4), which can show classroom impacts. Additionally, states may not have mentioned research that external organizations, such as Mass Insight Education in Massachusetts, have conducted on the impacts of specific state exit exams.

### INITIAL AND CUMULATIVE PASS RATES

For an exam that is a graduation requirement, the statistics of most immediate interest are those showing how many students have passed the exam. Information is available on two types of "pass rates": initial pass rates, which tell the percentage of students who passed the exit exam on the first try, and cumulative pass rates, which show the percentage who passed an exam after multiple retake opportunities and met the graduation exam requirement.

#### Initial Pass Rates

On our survey this year, most states reported rates similar to last year's of students passing exit exams on the first try. The general trend appears to be toward small gains

**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING STATE EXIT EXAMS ON THE FIRST ATTEMPT**

STATES	ENGLISH			MATH	SCIENCE	SOCIAL STUDIES
	Reading	ELA	Writing			
Alabama (2003)	88%	83%		79%	83%	72%
Alaska (2004)	70%		86%	67%		
Arizona (2003)	59%		67%	36%		
California (2003)		78%		59%		
Florida (2004)	54%			76%		
Georgia (2003)		95%	91%	91%	69%	81%
Indiana (2003)		69%		67%		
Louisiana (2003)		71%		68%	77%	79%
Maryland (2003)		40%		53%	54%	60%
Massachusetts (2003)		89%		80%		
Minnesota (2004)	81%		91%	71%		
Nevada (2004)	77%		87%	43%		
New Jersey (2003)		80%		66%		
New Mexico (2003)	89%	77%	97%	81%	78%	82%
Ohio (2004)	79%			68%		
Tennessee (2003)		87%		75%	95%	
Texas (2004)		87%		85%	85%	97%
Utah (2004)	83%		72%	67%		
Virginia (2003)		92%	90%	80%	81%	82%
Washington (2003)		60%	61%	39%	32%	

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

in initial pass rates or flat rates. Twenty-one states were able to provide us with data on initial pass rates this year, an increase over the 17 that provided us with any data last year. More states were also able to disaggregate the data by race or ethnicity, poverty status, and special populations (18 states this year versus 16 last year). For the majority of states, the most recent pass rate data available were for 2003, which represented the first year that new tests or test sections had consequences in numerous states, including Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, and New York.

Table 1 provides initial pass rate data from states with available data. Generally, initial pass rates stayed stable, with only minor decreases or increases of one to three percentage points from the rates we reported last year. Some states, however, saw more substantial changes between 2002 and 2003. In Nevada, for instance, pass rates increased by six points in reading and seven points in mathematics. Louisiana saw a five-point decrease in English language arts, a six-point increase in mathematics, and five-point increases in science and social studies. Virginia experienced a six-point increase in reading and a four-point increase in writing.

Initial pass rates across states vary quite widely, but overall many rates were between 65% and 85%, as we had reported for last year's results. A few states have far lower initial pass rates, but these are often states where exit exams currently do not have graduation consequences attached, such as Arizona, Maryland, and Washington. In Maryland, for example, where the exam is not yet a graduation requirement for students, the pass rate on the state's English language arts exam was only 40%, compared with initial pass rates of more than 70% in this subject in most other states. Similarly, in math, only 39% of Washington State students and just 36% of Arizona students passed on their first attempt.

The rest of our comparisons among states of initial pass rates do not include results from states where tests are not yet a graduation requirement, because the application of consequences for students does appear to affect initial pass rates. For example, in Texas, the 2004 TAKS results were the first that counted toward graduation for students. Table 2 shows a dramatic increase in initial pass rates between the 2003 and 2004 administrations of the exam in Texas.

In states where stakes are attached, initial pass rates in math varied from a low of 43% in Nevada to a high of 91% in Georgia. Initial pass rates in English language arts or reading tests ranged from 69% in Indiana to 95% in Georgia. On writing exams, pass rates ranged from a low of 72% in Utah to a high of 97% in New Mexico. Writing scores were generally slightly higher than scores on reading or English language arts exams in most states.

Fewer states administered social studies and science tests than administered reading and math tests. Pass rates on science tests ranged from a low of 69% in Georgia to a high of 95% in Tennessee. The span of initial pass rates on social studies exams went from a low of 72% in Alabama to a high of 97% in Texas.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine if these figures accurately represent student performance. Because test difficulty and grade level alignment vary considerably by state, a student passing in one state would not necessarily be passing in another. Also, as already noted, the data from states without graduation consequences

**TABLE 2: INITIAL PASS RATES IN TEXAS ON THE TEXAS ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

STUDENT SUBGROUPS	MATH 2003	MATH 2004	ENGLISH / LANGUAGE ARTS 2003	ENGLISH / LANGUAGE ARTS 2004
All	68%	85%	69%	87%
White	77%	91%	75%	92%
Black	52%	73%	59%	82%
Hispanic	57%	78%	63%	81%
Asian	87%	95%	82%	91%
Native American	70%	88%	70%	89%
ELL	37%	59%	33%	42%
Title I, Part A*	59%	79%	64%	82%
Students with disabilities	33%	55%	33%	56%

\* Instead of reporting on achievement results for students eligible for free or reduced lunch, Texas uses students counted under the Title I formula as a proxy for low-income students.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from the Texas Education Agency, July 2004.

are hard to interpret because students may be less motivated and may not perform at their full capacity on the tests. Additionally, many states are still in the process of modifying instruction and assessments to ensure alignment with state standards. Last year's report detailed possible explanations of why pass rates may vary so widely, such as state differences in the difficulty of the tests, the recency of the exam requirement, students' familiarity with the exam, and coverage of the tested material in classrooms.

As in the past two years, initial pass rates this year show continuing racial-ethnic achievement gaps, although gaps vary widely across states, and some states are showing encouraging signs of improvement. In addition, score disparities continue to exist for English language learners and special education students, as well as for students who receive free or reduced lunch. Table 3 presents the differences in initial pass rates for various subgroups of students across subject and state.

The trends in pass rates for disaggregated subgroups of students are similar to the overall trend—most states showed either very small improvements or flat rates. As illustrated in Table 3, gaps between white and black students remain large, averaging between 20 and 30 percentage points in most states, with Georgia and Minnesota having the smallest and largest gaps respectively. In reading/ELA, disparities between these two subgroups range from a 8 percentage point gap in Georgia to a 37 percentage point gap in Minnesota. Math pass rate gaps vary from a 16 percentage point gap in Georgia to a 47 percentage point gap in Minnesota. Similar but slightly smaller gaps exist between white and Hispanic students. For these two subgroups, reading/ELA gaps vary from 7 percentage points in Tennessee and Virginia to 36 percentage points in Arizona, and math pass rate disparities go from 12 percentage points in Virginia to 33 percentage points in Minnesota.

The gaps reported between white and Asian students are smaller overall, and in many states, Asian students initially pass exit exams at a higher rate than their white classmates, especially in math. Not all states follow this pattern, however, and a few states, like Alaska and Minnesota, show sizable gaps for Asian students. The discrepancy between the scores of white and Native American students is also quite variable, but the gaps do not appear to be as large as those of African American and Hispanic students. States with the largest gaps for Native Americans include Arizona and Minnesota.

Other groups that have low initial pass rates include students from low-income families (those who receive free and reduced lunch or are counted under the Title I formula), English language learners, and students with disabilities. Students with disabilities show extensive achievement gaps in every state reporting data, and in many states, all three of these subgroups lagged behind. Although these gaps are based on students' first attempt to take the test, and although they have opportunities to re-take the tests and do better, the rates at which all three of these subgroups are failing in comparison with most students are alarming and point to significant problems in their academic preparation. With such widespread failure on initial administrations, it is clear that states face a challenge in providing remediation to so many students, especially in these subgroups.

Just as overall initial pass rates can mask disparities for lower-performing subgroups, so can looking at pass rates on a state level hide the significantly poorer performance of districts within states. In Massachusetts, MCAS results from 2003 showed 80% of students passing math and 89% passing ELA on their first attempt.

**TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING AN EXIT EXAM ON THE FIRST TRY FOR ALL STUDENTS AND BY SUBGROUPS**

STUDENT SUBGROUPS	AL math 2003	AL reading	AK math 2004	AK reading	AZ math 2003	AZ reading	GA math 2003	GA ELA	IN math 2003	IN ELA
All	79%	88%	67%	70%	36%	59%	91%	95%	67%	69%
White	86%	93%	76%	82%	49%	74%	94%	97%	73%	75%
Black	66%	79%	44%	58%	21%	44%	78%	89%	33%	39%
Hispanic	73%	72%	53%	61%	18%	38%	79%	79%	46%	44%
Asian	91%	87%	68%	64%	61%	72%	94%	90%	85%	78%
Native American	82%	90%	58%	68%	14%	35%	86%	94%	54%	57%
ELL	74%	68%	38%	29%	7%	13%	68%	61%	41%	27%
Free or reduced lunch	68%	80%	47%	46%	NA	NA	NA	NA	46%	48%
Students with disabilities	46%	59%	23%	22%	10%	26%	52%	69%	27%	22%
STUDENT SUBGROUPS	LA math 2003	LA reading	MD algebra 2003	MD English	MA math 2003	MA ELA	MN math 2004	MN reading	NV math 2004	NV reading
All	68%	71%	53%	40%	80%	89%	71%	81%	43%	77%
White	85%	87%	68%	52%	86%	94%	78%	87%	54%	86%
Black	51%	55%	28%	20%	57%	76%	31%	50%	22%	62%
Hispanic	68%	69%	39%	29%	54%	66%	38%	52%	25%	62%
Asian	87%	77%	76%	59%	88%	88%	58%	63%	53%	81%
Native American	77%	80%	46%	26%	65%	80%	43%	56%	29%	72%
ELL	60%	47%	NA	NA	57%	42%	29%	36%	13%	34%
Free or reduced lunch	54%	57%	NA	NA	NA	NA	47%	61%	25%	60%
Students with disabilities	23%	18%	NA	NA	53%	70%	28%	40%	6%	30%
STUDENT SUBGROUPS	NJ math 2003	NJ lang. arts	NM math 2003	NM reading	NC reading & math 2002		OH math 2004	OH reading		
All	66%	80%	81%	89%	78%		68%	79%		
White	77%	88%	91%	96%	87%		74%	83%		
Black	33%	61%	71%	86%	66%		38%	58%		
Hispanic	42%	63%	76%	87%	52%		50%	63%		
Asian	83%	87%	94%	93%	77%		84%	84%		
Native American	57%	74%	72%	81%	66%		71%	76%		
ELL	22%	18%	64%	75%	38%		NA	NA		
Free or reduced lunch	36%	57%	72%	83%	NA		NA	NA		
Students with disabilities	22%	35%	43%	60%	45%		NA	NA		
STUDENT SUBGROUPS	TN math 2003	TN lang.	TX math 2004	TX ELA	VA math 2003	VA English	WA math 2003	WA ELA		
All	75%	87%	85%	87%	80%	92%	39%	60%		
White	85%	90%	91%	92%	85%	95%	44%	65%		
Black	52%	78%	73%	82%	65%	86%	14%	37%		
Hispanic	71%	83%	78%	81%	73%	88%	16%	35%		
Asian	87%	90%	95%	91%	89%	94%	47%	64%		
Native American	76%	83%	88%	89%	77%	92%	22%	43%		
ELL	60%	55%	59%	42%	74%	79%	8%	12%		
Free or reduced lunch	61%	77%	79%	82%	69%	86%	24%	43%		
Students with disabilities	41%	43%	55%	56%	51%	70%	4%	12%		

NA= not available

**Notes:** Alaska's results are preliminary as of May 2004 with district verification still pending. Nevada's figures for students with disabilities are only for students with Individualized Education Programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and do not include students with disabilities who are served under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Texas and Washington, instead of using free or reduced lunch data to determine low-income students, disaggregate data by students' eligibility for Title I, Part A.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

These encouraging statewide results nevertheless hide the fact that at least 50% of students failed on the first try in the states' poorest cities, including Lawrence and Chelsea. Wealthier towns, such as Weston and Lexington, had initial pass rates of 98%, and in a few communities all members of the class of 2005 passed on their first attempt (Rothstein, 2003d).

### Cumulative Pass Rates

While low initial pass rates are alarming to policymakers and educators, what matters most are cumulative pass rates. Determining how many students were denied a diploma because of a failure to pass the required exam is of great concern to states and the public. But many states do not have these data yet, either because they have not yet attached consequences to their exam or because they are unable to calculate these numbers on a statewide level. And when they do have this information, there is significant variation in how states calculate these cumulative pass rates. States differ in how they treat dropouts or students seeking GEDs and when they do a baseline count of students.

Cumulative pass rates tend to rise over time, as students and teachers become more familiar with the exam. While gaps generally remain among subgroups of students, these often gradually narrow over time. The reasons for this decline are hotly contested. Some observers claim that students in lower-performing subgroups are dropping out and are no longer counted, while others suggest that remediation is helping students to pass the exams on later tries. Table 4 shows disaggregated cumulative pass rates in the only two states, Alabama and Massachusetts, that reported disaggregated cumulative pass rate data for all sections of their tests. While one year's results are not enough to draw broad conclusions, the results seem encouraging. Alabama showed significant improvement in cumulative pass rates for every subgroup. In Massachusetts, cumulative pass rates for the class of 2003 increased between April 2003 and February 2004 for all subgroups of students, due to students' success in retesting or in gaining competency determinations through the state's appeals process. The results for the Massachusetts class of 2004 are from June 2004, so it is difficult to make comparisons with the class of 2003, since these results are later than first set of results for the class of 2003 but earlier than the second set of figures from the June 2004 results. In other words, students who took the test in June 2004 would have had more chances to pass the test or complete the review process than the students who took it in April 2003, but not as many chances as students from the class of 2003 who took the exam in February 2004.

Many states reported graduation or cumulative pass rates similar to those of Alabama and Massachusetts. Louisiana reported that 7.2% of its students failed to graduate because of the state exit exam in 2003. When those who also lacked necessary coursework are excluded, this number falls to 4.9%, representing 2,006 students. Virginia estimates a graduation rate of 94% for the class of 2004, the first class required to pass the state's new end-of-course exams for graduation. The 2004 rate represents a slight decrease from the 95% rate of the year before, but it is unclear how many students are failing to graduate specifically because of the state test (Sampson, 2004). In Minnesota, a much higher percentage of students passed the exam after retesting, with over 99% passing each section, although the state did not report an overall graduation rate. In North Carolina for the class of 2002, 86% of 12th grade

**TABLE 4: CUMULATIVE PASS RATES IN ALABAMA AND MASSACHUSETTS**

STUDENT SUBGROUPS	AL class of 2002	AL class of 2003	MA class of 2003 (April 2003)	MA class of 2003 (Feb. 2004)	MA class of 2004 (June 2004)
All	90%	93%	91%	95%	96%
White	95%	96%	94%	97%	98%
Black	80%	86%	75%	88%	88%
Hispanic	88%	84%	70%	85%	85%
Asian	NA	94%	90%	96%	95%
Free or reduced lunch	81%	86%	77%	77%	NA
Students with disabilities	61%	66%	69%	85%	84%
ELL	NA	98%	67%	83%	78%

NA= not available  
 Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

students had passed the computer skills test, and 94% had passed both the reading and mathematics sections of the test. There was no information on what percentage of students had passed all three sections.

How states calculate cumulative pass rates is very controversial. Critics charge that many states use methods that inflate their rates but don't give an accurate portrayal of what is happening to students. Many states calculate their cumulative rates by dividing the number of students who passed by the total number of 12th grade students. Some argue that this method is flawed because it fails to account for students who drop out before their senior year. State officials counter that many of the missing students have either moved to another state or transferred to private schools. In last year's report, we highlighted the controversy in Massachusetts over what the "true" pass rate was for the MCAS.

A similar controversy is taking place in other parts of the country, as people try to figure out exactly how many students are being denied a diploma because of exit exams. In Virginia, for example, about 70,000 students will graduate in 2004 compared with the approximately 98,000 who began 9th grade four years before. Critics in the state charge that this reduction is due to dropouts, which they say may increase with exit exams. State officials counter that this is an unfair assumption, because students fail to graduate and drop out for a variety of reasons, including not meeting general course requirements. The state plans to introduce a more accurate tracking system to follow individual students in 2006, but until then it is not clear what happened to the 28,000 students (Helderman, 2004c).



In other states, the best information we could find was the number of students who may be denied a diploma because of exit exams. In Alaska, uncertainty exists about the number of students who will not graduate in 2004 because they failed exit exams. During the final 2004 retest, 554 students had failed at least one part of the exam. Like students in other states, some of these Alaska students will receive waivers or exemptions, and others may have also failed to meet coursework requirements (Pesznecker, 2004). In Florida, approximately 13,000 seniors failed the FCAT last year. This year an estimated 14,000 students failed, though both these rates are similar to those in previous years with a different exam (Matus, 2004). In Indiana, only 855 students out of roughly 100,000 failed to graduate specifically because they failed the state exit exam (Stockman, 2004).

Calculating the number of students denied a diploma for failing exams is difficult not only because of the problems described above, but because some students who fail exit exams also do not complete required coursework to graduate and fail to receive a diploma for both these reasons. Separating out those who do not graduate exclusively due to testing is tricky and not reported by many states. Also, many states are unable to collect data on cumulative pass rates at the state level because of poor data collection and tracking systems. Further complicating reporting issues in many states are appeals processes, which allow students to contest failing an exam. Until these appeals are completed, states may not have final numbers of those who graduated, and people will still be asking how many students are not graduating because of exit exams.

## EXIT EXAMS AND DROPOUT RATES

Education researchers and policymakers continue to struggle with the question of whether exit exams cause more students to drop out of school. Critics of exit exams often claim that these tests will encourage more students, particularly poor and minority students, to drop out, yet much of the research shows no evidence of a relationship between exit exams and dropouts. Because the data are vast yet incomplete, because many interrelated variables affect students' decisions to drop out, and because researchers disagree over how to calculate dropout rates, no consensus has emerged among researchers or policymakers about the effect of exit exams on dropout rates. To confuse matters further, researchers and education leaders examine both dropout rates and graduation rates, but those are not necessarily a mirror image of one another. All students who do not graduate are not necessarily counted as dropouts. As we will see in some of the cases below, it is possible for students to leave school, fail to pass an exit exam, and fail to secure a diploma or a GED, and still not be counted as a "dropout." In this section, we do not use the terms interchangeably; rather, we use the term used in the study or press report to which we are referring.

States like Alaska, Maryland, Utah, and Ohio are holding off on, or at least showing apprehension about, introducing more rigorous exams or making them a graduation requirement partly out of fear that dropout rates will rise. For example, Ohio will replace its Ohio Ninth Grade Proficiency Test, which actually tests what a student should know by the end of 8th grade, with the more rigorous Ohio Graduation Test in 2005, which is slated to be a 10th grade level test. Two percent of the

students who took the Ninth Grade Proficiency Test in 2003 did not pass it, and were denied a diploma. In a 2003 pilot of the new Ohio Graduation Test, 76.9% of students failed, sparking fears of higher dropout rates (Fisher & Elliott, 2004).

This year, several academic studies were released concluding that exit exams do not affect dropout rates. Also this year, numerous stories appeared in the press of school administrators essentially forcing students out of school to maintain high test score averages. Press reports also indicated that growing numbers of students—as young as 17—were enrolling in GED classes meant for adults rather than face exit exams.

### Academic Studies on Exit Exams and Dropout Rates

As noted in last year's report, the Center on Education Policy convened an expert panel on exit exams and dropout rates in 2003. A major topic of discussion was how limited and inconclusive research was in this area, owing largely to data collection and analysis problems. Nonetheless, based on the limited empirical evidence available, the panel concluded that:

- There is only moderately suggestive evidence of exit exams causing more students to drop out of school. Other educational policies, such as retaining students in grade or instituting tougher course requirements for graduation, have been shown to be associated more strongly with students dropping out or getting a GED instead of a regular diploma.
- Exit exams are more prevalent in states with higher percentages of poor and minority students, so these students are more likely to be faced with exit exams. But there is no consistent evidence that exit exams are directly causing certain groups of students to drop out of school at increased rates.

Our review of research in last year's report indicated that studies have come out on both sides of the question about whether exit exams are linked with higher dropout rates. This lack of consensus continued in 2003-04. A few new studies were released showing no effects of exit exams on dropout rates, while others showed some effects—one study in particular showed an effect in states with higher poverty rates. The question, “do exit exams increase dropout rates?” seems like a simple one, but the answer is very complicated.

As more and richer data accumulate, some researchers are uncovering the complexities underlying the relationship between exit exams and dropout rates. Warren and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have conducted a series of studies, some of which have found no effect of exit exams on dropout rates (see Box 2). Broader and deeper data led the researchers to conclude that there is an effect, and it depends, in part, on factors such as the difficulty of the test and the level of poverty in the state. These researchers are starting to show that there isn't a simple “yes” or “no” answer to the question of whether exit exams cause students to drop out, that the effect is likely to vary from state to state.

A widely publicized study released during the past year found no evidence that exit exams increase dropout rates. This study, by Jay Greene and Marcus Winters (2004), compared state-level graduation rates (using two different ways of measuring such rates) before and after the implementation of exit exams. The researchers

controlled for only two state-level variables, per pupil spending and student teacher ratios, and found that the implementation of exit exams had no statistically significant impact on statewide graduation rates.

The studies that have found little or no effect of exit exams on high school completion rates include discussion of their results being counterintuitive. To many, it would seem that exit exams, representing an additional burden on students and a formidable hurdle for some, should cause more students to drop out. Researchers offer a number of explanations of why this may not be the case:

- Perhaps more schools and teachers are rising to the challenge posed by the exams and other graduation requirements by encouraging students who were in danger of dropping out to work harder, pass the exams, and graduate. Greene asserts that this number may cancel out the numbers of student who fail to get a diploma because of the exams—thus no effect on graduation rates.
- The large numbers of opportunities for retesting and remediation may help most students pass.
- Warren and Jenkins highlight exemptions as a possibility: a sizable number of students who might have left high school or who were at risk of failing were instead exempted from taking exit exams, as shown in Texas and Florida. This may have the effect of muting the impact of exit exams on dropout rates.

Walter Haney and colleagues (2004) studied the issue of why the high school dropout rate has increased in the U.S. over the past decade or so by looking at enrollments in each grade from kindergarten through 12th, from 1968 to 2001, using data from the U.S. Department of Education. The team was able to measure the progression of students through 13 “transition points”—that is, each step from grades K through 12 and graduation itself. The study found that over the past three decades, a “bulge” had developed of students enrolled in 9th grade. In the 1970s, there were typically 4–6% more students in 9th grade than had been in 8th grade the previous year. By 2000, however, this 9th grade bulge had more than tripled, to the point that there were 13% more students in 9th grade than had been in 8th the previous year, reflecting the fact that more students were repeating 9th grade. And over the same three decades, the rate of student attrition between 9th and 10th grade similarly tripled. During the first half of the 1970s, there were less than 4% fewer students enrolled in grade 10 than in grade 9 the previous year. By the 1999–2000 school year, 11.4% of 9th graders did not continue to 10th grade—what the authors call the “largest leak in the education pipeline.” The researchers viewed this 9th grade attrition problem as part of the problem of higher dropout rates, because previous studies have shown that retention in grade has a negative impact on students obtaining diplomas.

While admitting to some conjecture—that it is difficult to directly gauge the impact of historical events and separate them from other factors—Haney and his colleagues assert that the main reasons for the 9th grade attrition problem have been the wave of minimum competency testing and the movement toward higher standards and high-stakes testing, including exit exams. Their data show that the first increase in 9th grade attrition took place in the late 1970s, coinciding with the introduction of minimum competency exams; another large increase occurred during the 1990s, coinciding with the introduction of standards-based exit exams

## BOX 2: IMPROVED DATA CHANGE FINDINGS ON EXIT EXAMS AND DROPOUT RATES

The experience of one group of researchers led by sociologist John Robert Warren at the University of Minnesota illustrates how a richer, expanded set of data and improved methods can lead to differing conclusions on the question of whether exit exams are associated with an increase in dropout rates. Dr. Warren and his colleagues Melanie Edwards (University of Washington), Krista Jenkins (University of Pennsylvania), and Rachael Kulick (University of Minnesota) have produced four papers over the past two years on the exit exam/dropout issue.

In the Center's 2003 report, we described Warren and Edwards' initial research that showed that exit exams had a negative impact on diploma acquisition (Warren & Edwards, 2003a). In their January 2003 manuscript, the authors concluded that exit exams result in higher numbers of students receiving GED certificates instead of regular high school diplomas. As their research evolved and their pool of data expanded, their results changed, illustrating some of the nuances of this complex issue.

In December 2003, Warren and Edwards updated their research by employing more sophisticated modeling strategies and by adding a number of new variables to their database (Warren & Edwards, 2003b). The variables were organized into three categories: state-level variables (such as an exit exam requirement, student-teacher ratios, per pupil spending, etc.) school-level variables (number of students, rural/urban status, percentage of minorities, etc.) and individual student level variables (socioeconomic status, performance on previous tests, grades, student expectations for finishing high school, etc). In addition, the team also merged some of the outcome categories they had previously used into three categories: 1) diploma recipients; 2) GED recipients, and 3) those with neither a diploma nor a GED after two years. The results showed that student-level variables—grade retention, socioeconomic status, grades, and educational expectations—are all strongly associated with acquisition of a diploma. None of the state-level variables, including an exit exam requirement, had an effect, so “students in states with high school exit examination requirements are no more (or less) likely than other students to earn GEDs or to find themselves with no secondary school credential . . . [T]here is no significant relationship between high school exit examination requirements and high school diploma acquisition” (Warren & Edwards, 2003b, p. 17).

Virtually all published research on the question of whether exit exams lead to an increase in dropout rates has used data from the NELS:88, which is a study of students who should have graduated in 1992. Because exit examinations are now required in many more states and have become more challenging in some states, Warren and colleagues have recently completed two new papers that go beyond the class of 1992.

Warren and Jenkins conducted a study of dropout rates and exit exams in Texas and Florida (Warren & Jenkins, forthcoming). This study was a longitudinal one—it focused on two states with exit exams and followed graduation rates before and after implementation of the exam to see if the rates changed. The team used data on the high school classes of 1971 through 2000 in Texas and Florida from the U.S. Census Bureau's annual Current

## BOX 2 CONT'D

Population Survey. Florida introduced an exit exam for the class of 1983, and made it more difficult for the class of 1996. Texas introduced its exam for class of 1987, and introduced the more rigorous TAAS for the class of 1994. Therefore, the researchers were able to examine dropout rates through three periods: no exit exam, a minimum competency exit exam, and a more rigorous exit exam. The results showed no effect of either minimum competency exams or more rigorous exit exams on dropout rates. No effect was found on the graduation rates of racial and ethnic minorities or low-income students. Instead, the variables which showed the strongest relationship were at the student-level; that is, students from single-parent homes, from lower income families, and from homes in which the head of household had little education were less likely to graduate. These factors, rather than the introduction of exit exams, had the greatest effect on dropout rates. The study did indicate that the numbers of 16- and 17-year-olds getting GEDs increased, but policy changes and data problems complicated the relationship of that phenomenon to exit exams. Another interesting finding from this study was the large number of exemptions granted to students eligible to take the exams—approximately 20% in Florida and 10% in Texas in the early 1990s—which the authors assert may have muted the effect of exit exams on graduation rates.

In their most recent study, Warren and colleagues conducted state-level analyses of exit examination requirements and high school completion rates in all states and the District of Columbia for each graduating class between 1973 and 2000 (Warren, Jenkins, & Kulick, 2004). In their analyses the authors used a variety of indicators of high school completion, including traditional status dropout measures derived from the Current Population Survey (which counts GED recipients as graduates); a measure developed by Dr. Warren that produces estimates of the proportion of incoming 9th graders who go on to obtain a high school diploma; and estimates of how many 16- to 19-year-olds take the GED in each state from the American Council on Education, which administers the exam. In addition, the researchers classified exit exams into two groups by the grade level tested: exams aligned to 8th grade level content were classified as “minimum competency, while those aligned to 9th grade standards and above were classified as “more difficult.” Also added were state-level data on factors such as poverty rates, unemployment, and per-pupil spending. Student-level variables, such as grades, grade retention, and expectations of finishing high school were not used in this state-level study.

The researchers found that high school completion rates were about 1.2% lower in states with minimum competency exams and 3.2% lower in states with more difficult examinations. States with exit exams showed about 1% higher rates of GED test-taking. Poverty rates also matter: states with high poverty rates and “more difficult” exams have the lowest completion rates. As poverty rates increase, completion rates decline in both the minimum competency and more difficult exit exam states. However, high school completion rates are actually lower in poorer states with more difficult exit exams than in poorer states without exit exams.

**TABLE 5: CALIFORNIA ENROLLMENT DECLINES, 10TH TO 11TH GRADES**

SCHOOL YEAR	HIGH SCHOOL CLASS	11TH GRADE ENROLLMENT	PRIOR YEAR'S 10TH GRADE ENROLLMENT	DECREASE IN NUMBERS	PERCENTAGE OF DECREASE
02–03	2004	428,117	459,588	31,471	6.8%
01–02	2003	420,295	455,134	34,839	7.7%
00–01	2002	409,119	444,064	34,945	7.9%
99–00	2001	401,246	433,258	32,282	7.4%
98–99	2000	390,742	423,865	33,123	7.8%
97–98	1999	378,819	413,725	34,906	8.4%

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that were intended to be more rigorous. However, some researchers have objected to the study’s findings, based on its methods and on their conviction that alternative reasons for the bulge could not be ruled out (Viadero, 2004).

Another ongoing longitudinal study may provide additional information on the dropout issue. In its 2003 evaluation report on California’s exit exam (Wise et al., 2003), HumRRO found that the CAHSEE has not led to any increase in dropout rates. Instead, the researchers found some evidence that fewer students were dropping out than in past years. The declines in enrollments between 9th and 10th grade, and from 10th to 11th grades, shrank slightly, meaning that fewer students were dropping out between those grades over the past several years. Table 5 shows the figures for enrollment declines between 10th and 11th grades. However, the authors qualified their analysis with an important caveat: of the groups shown in Table 5, only the class of 2004 took the CAHSEE with the understanding that passing the test was a requirement for graduation. This was later changed by the legislature, which postponed the requirement until 2006.

HumRRO found a similar pattern of enrollment declines between 9th and 10th grades. Enrollment declines between these grades decreased from 6.0% for the class of 2000 to 5.4% for the class of 2004 and 5.6% for the class of 2005, the latter two of which took the exams the first time with the understanding they would need to pass to graduate. While the results from HUMRRO are still somewhat inconclusive due to California’s delays of the exam, future reports should bear watching for clues as to how dropout numbers change for the class of 2006 and beyond. The evaluations of California’s exit exam can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/evaluations.asp>.

In sum, the academic community is still divided on the issue of whether exit exams cause more students to drop out of high school. A positive trend is that researchers are gaining access to larger pools of data and examining them in more sophisticated ways. Research is starting to focus on the fact that not all exit exams are alike, and that different types of students are affected in different ways. What can policymakers take away from the research to date? The results are inconclusive. However, education leaders should be prepared for a *possible* slight increase in dropout rates among some groups of students and should focus attention on low-performing and low-income students, to be sure they have the opportunity to learn and are given adequate supports to help them pass the exams.

### State Issues Concerning Exit Exams and Dropout Rates

The issue of exit exams and dropouts continues to concern many states, and several are monitoring trends in their dropout rates. As with the academic studies, it is difficult to ascertain from state data that exit exams are causing more students to drop out. This is the case for two reasons. First, studies have pointed to a general increase in the dropout rate nationwide over the past decade (Haney et al., 2004) but have also exposed controversies about data shortcomings and a lack of uniformity in how to measure dropout rates in the first place (Swanson & Duncan, 2003). Some scholars strongly believe dropouts are undercounted, particularly among minority students (Greene & Winters, 2002; Orfield, Iosen & Wald, 2004). Second, it is difficult to separate the effects of exit exams from other major education policies—most notably, the No Child Left Behind Act. The federal law puts a great deal of pressure on school administrators and education leaders to show improvements in test scores, as well as decreases in dropout rates. In addition, some states, such as Florida, have their own state-level accountability programs which grade schools based on test results and other factors. In this rapidly changing policy environment, it is difficult to isolate the particular effects of exit exams.

Nonetheless, there have been numerous press reports about schools “pushing out” lower-performing students, increases in dropout rates, and higher GED enrollments. This problem has been reported in Massachusetts, Texas, and New York. The pushout problem illustrates the need for states to address the problem of school administrators trying to manipulate test scores by administratively shifting and shaping the pool of students taking exit exams.

#### Massachusetts

Dropout rates increased in Massachusetts for the 2002–03 school year, the first year that students had to pass the MCAS to graduate. Altogether, 3.5% of the 2003 senior class dropped out, compared with 2.9% of the 2002 class, which did not have to take the MCAS to graduate. The increase was most marked in urban school districts. According to the state’s education department, the jump may not be attributable to MCAS, because about 39% of the dropouts passed the MCAS (Vaishnav, 2004b). However, press reports indicate that many students are dropping out of school as early as the 9th grade and taking GED courses instead of facing the MCAS test. Adult education programs in western Massachusetts report huge increases in GED enrollments, and some speculate that the MCAS is the main reason.

## New York

The “pushout” phenomenon caused a major stir in New York City. Press reports indicated that large numbers of students who were struggling academically were counseled by school officials to leave school, so that school officials could maintain higher graduation rates and higher pass rates on the Regents exit exam. As noted in chapter 6, the Regents exam is also the accountability measure used for NCLB purposes, raising the stakes for administrators even further. The New York Times found that the New York City school system “discharged” 55,000 students in grades 9–12 during the 2000–01 school year, in contrast to the 34,000 who graduated in 2001. Discharged students include dropouts, those who transferred to private schools, and those who moved. About 40% of those 55,000 were classified as “transferred to another educational setting,” a classification reporters assert is used as a catchall to include students who were simply told to leave school and pursue a GED or go to an alternative high school. Many of these students do enroll in GED preparation programs, as GED administrators report a large number of high-school-age students in their classes. These students are disproportionately black and Hispanic (Lewin, 2004). Many students, however, do not continue with their GED classes and leave. Despite their failure to pass the Regents exam or receive a GED or diploma, they are never counted as dropouts (Lewin & Medina, 2003a; 2003b). An advocacy organization, Advocates for Children, sued one high school in Brooklyn and won, forcing the New York City school system to make provisions for students who were pushed out to return to school. Advocates for Children asserted that the “pushout” phenomenon was largely due to intense pressure put on administrators to show improvements on the Regents exam (Rubin, H. G., 2004a).

## Texas

The issue of misclassification of students who leave school in order to deflate dropout figures—and raise test scores—also arose in Texas. A television news station charged that Houston school officials commonly classified students who left school as pursuing a GED, moving, or being home schooled, despite having little or no proof of the student’s intentions. This way, the students would not be classified as dropouts. One media report focused on Houston’s Sharpstown High School, whose administrators reported a dropout rate of zero, despite the fact that the school’s enrollment typically declines by half between 9th and 12th grade (Archer, 2003). In an example of Haney’s “9th grade bulge” phenomenon, Houston school officials used administrative methods to increase test scores by increasing requirements needed to pass from 9th to 10th grade—the point when Texas students start taking the TAAS exit exam. One Houston high school in particular held back a large number of low-performing students in the 9th grade, and its TAAS scores increased, as shown in Table 6.

Some students were kept in 9th grade for as many as three years. School officials replied that holding students in 9th grade was part of an effort to eliminate social promotions, and since 1998, graduation rates at the Houston high schools in question had increased (Abbott, 2003).

## Florida

Administrators at South Plantation High School in Broward County, Florida, reportedly told lower-performing students as young as 16 to enroll in GED or night classes, just one month before administration of the FCAT exam (Malernee, 2004).



<b>TABLE 6: AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL (HOUSTON) ENROLLMENTS AND TAAS PASS RATES</b>			
<b>YEAR</b>	<b>9TH GRADE ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>10TH GRADE ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>GRADE 10 TAAS PASS RATE</b>
1998	900 (approx.)	580	68%
1999	1,200 (approx.)	235	86%

*Source: Werner, 2003.*

Unlike New York City, however, this is not as clear a case of “pushout.” Last year more than 2,000 Florida students used the “GED Exit Option,” whereby they can stay in school (in alternate classes) to get a GED and perhaps a regular diploma. The exit option is due to an agreement that Florida has with the American Council on Education, which produces the GED, as a means to reduce the dropout rate. The program identifies potential dropouts who meet the following criteria:

- Are 16 years of age or older and currently in school
- Are overage for grade, are behind in credits, and have a low grade point average
- Are in jeopardy of not graduating with their age cohort
- Can read at the 7th grade level and can pass GED practice tests

School administrators can identify these students and propose they be moved to the GED program, but the child’s parents must approve the move (although press reports indicate some administrators strongly pressure parents or students). Students must also receive various types of support and counseling. In some cases, students must attend daytime classes focused on completing the GED and preparing for the FCAT, and attend work-study programs. The students can participate in normal school activities, such as sports and regular graduation ceremonies. Students who pass the GED test but not the FCAT may be awarded a “State of Florida high school diploma.” If they pass both the GED and the FCAT, they also receive a “standard” diploma. Of the 2000 students who participated in this program in 2003, 92% passed the GED and received the state diploma (Flannery, 2004). A complete description of the Exit Option program can be found at <http://www.firn.edu/doe/bin00014/pdf/ged-exit.pdf>.



# 3 Chapter

## What Are the Characteristics of Exit Exams and How Well Are They Aligned with State Standards?

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### Purposes of Exit Exams

- A clear, explicit statement of purpose is important to guide the test development process and ensure the test will be valid for making graduation-related decisions. Of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams, 15 had articulated an official statement of purpose for their exams. But the other 10 states gave purposes that were unclear or not relevant to our survey, or indicated that they do not have an official position on their exam's purposes (although some had an unofficial, common way of communicating in the state about the purpose).
- Despite the rhetoric often used to build political support for exit exams, surprisingly few states mentioned the need to prepare students for work, college, and adult life as key purposes of their exit exam programs.

#### Characteristics of Exit Exams

- Twenty states currently require students to pass an exit exam to graduate, and five more states are preparing to phase in these exams by 2009. During the past year, states have continued to shift from using minimum competency exams that assess basic skills toward more challenging standards-based or end-of-course exams.
- States are continuing the trend of greater variety in their test questions—in particular, asking students to respond to writing prompts, short-answer items, or extended-response tasks, in addition to multiple-choice questions. For example, 15 states ask students to respond to a writing prompt. Nine states currently include short-answer questions on their exit exams, and five more plan to add these short-answer questions by 2009.

## Alignment with Standards

- Studies of alignment between state exit exams and state content standards have generally found that exams are aligned with state standards but that some of the exams, or too many questions on the exams, are targeted to a lower grade level than many people would expect.
- External reviews of the alignment between exams and standards can help states determine whether their exams are less rigorous than their standards or whether test questions overemphasize some standards at the expense of other important ones. Several states have used the results of these reviews to improve the quality and fairness of their exit exams.

## Scoring and Reporting

- Most states include some open-ended questions on their exit exams, which are scored mostly by testing company employees with college degrees. A few states involve teachers in the scoring process—a promising approach, because it builds teachers' understanding of state expectations and makes them a vital part of the testing process.
- All states give students written feedback showing their overall scores in each major subject tested and their subscores for specific content and skill areas within each subject. More than half of the states with exit exams report that students who fail these exams must also receive information about future test dates and opportunities for remediation. Research on student score reports has found that most states provide students with a variety of useful information to help them understand their test results, but that this information is not always presented in a clear, understandable format.
- State policies for releasing test questions have changed little since last year. Fifteen of 25 states with exit exams report that they release test questions and answers from prior tests—most often by posting them on the internet—to help students and teachers prepare for future exams.

When implementing an exit exam system, state leaders must make numerous decisions about the specific characteristics of the exam—for example, what its purpose will be, when its consequences for students will begin, what grade level it will target, and what kinds of questions it will include, to name just some. States must also make an effort to ensure that the content of the exam closely matches the states content standards for what students should know and be able to do—a characteristic called alignment in the testing world. Finally, states must make critical decisions about their policies for scoring the exams and reporting results. All of these characteristics of exit exams have a strong bearing on the effectiveness, fairness, and ultimate impact of the exam.

This chapter looks at four key aspects of exit exams:

- Purpose of the exams
- Basic characteristics of the exams
- Alignment of exit exams with state content standards
- Scoring and reporting policies

The chapter reports new information from our states survey about exam purposes; updates information on the basic characteristics of the tests to include changes that have occurred between 2002 and 2004 and changes expected over the next five years; summarizes findings from our review of key studies of alignment between tests and standards in various states; and describes state scoring and reporting policies.

## PURPOSES OF EXIT EXAMS

Guidelines for good testing practices emphasize that test development should begin with a clear statement of the purpose of a test (American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA) & National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), 1999; Joint Committee on Fair Testing Practices, 2003). An agreed-upon statement of the purpose, or multiple purposes, for a test should inform decisions about the kinds of information to be reported in test results, which in turn will largely determine the content of the test questions. For instance, an exit exam intended to provide information about whether students have mastered basic knowledge and skills at the 10th grade level will look quite different than one intended to certify that students have the requisite skills to enter higher education.

It is widely assumed that state policymakers adopt exit exams to motivate students and teachers to work harder in high school and to ensure that a diploma “means something”—namely, that the student has attained the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a job, college, or other aspects of daily life. To explore whether these are actually the reasons why states are implementing exit exams, the Center added a question to its 2004 survey asking whether there is a state department of education position on the purpose of its exit exam. States often referred us to their website or to the law which authorizes the exit exam or the state's accountability system in general. These sources and survey results suggest that many states have not clearly defined the purpose of their exit exams, and even states that have done so do not necessarily mention preparation for work, college, or daily life.

The Center found that 15 of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams had an official state department of education position on the purpose of their exams. In five states, the purposes include ensuring that students are prepared for

citizenship and life after high school, although only one state, Georgia, specifically mentioned certifying that students are prepared to enter the workforce or college. The following excerpts from state survey responses show how states frame this purpose of preparation for life after high school:

*To significantly improve pupil achievement in public high schools and to ensure that pupils who graduate from public high schools can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing and mathematics. The CAHSEE helps identify students who are not developing skills that are essential for life after high school and encourages districts to give these students the attention and resources needed to help them achieve these skills during their high school years... (California)*

*Minnesota Rules...require statewide standards that define what a Minnesota public high school graduate should know and be able to do to function effectively as a purposeful thinker, effective communicator, self-directed learner, productive group participant, and responsible citizen. (Minnesota)*

*The test shall measure those basic skills all students must possess to function politically, economically and socially in a democratic society... (New Jersey)*

*To assure that graduates...possess the skills and knowledge necessary to function independently and successfully in assuming the responsibilities of citizenship. (North Carolina)*

*The tests are grounded in the State's Quality Core Curriculum and ensure that students have mastered the content necessary to be successful in post-secondary school or to become productive members of an increasingly mercurial and competitive job market. (Georgia)*

More frequently, states had official purposes that focus on assessing whether students have achieved competencies to be expected at the high school level, but stopped short of implying that the exit exam certifies that students are ready to perform competently after high school. Ten states (Florida, Idaho, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington) had this type of statement of purpose. For example:

*[Provide] evidence that students have successfully met state standards in the content areas of reading, writing, and in 2010, science (Washington)*

*All students in the public education system will graduate from high school with a world class education... [The state department of education] will provide the state's public education system with program leadership to ensure all students are challenged, perform at grade level or above, and demonstrate strong performance in reading and the foundation subjects of mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies. (Texas)*

Six of the twenty-five states—Arizona, Indiana, New Mexico, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia—said that there is an official state department of education position on the purpose of their exit exams, but their survey responses did not articulate this purpose. Some of these states simply said that the exam is mandated by state law, while others provided lengthy excerpts from legislation stating that students must pass the exit exam to graduate without describing the purpose behind the exam. For instance, New Mexico and Utah officials wrote the following:

*A student shall not receive a high school diploma who has not passed a state graduation examination in the subject areas of: English language arts, reading, mathematics, science, social science, and composition... (New Mexico)*

*Legislation states that the Utah Basic Skills Competency Test (UBSCT) is to be administered to Utah students beginning in 10th grade and must include, at a minimum, components on English, language arts, reading and mathematics. Utah students must satisfy the requirements of the UBSCT, in addition to state and district graduation requirements, before receiving a basic high school diploma. (Utah)*

The website of the Tennessee Department of Education does include statements about its exit exams, such as “Algebra I is a gateway subject, needed for future success in math and in the increasingly technical workplace.” English II is included on the exit exam because “the ability to communicate is critical for future academic success and success in the workplace.” For biology, “an understanding of science content and science reasoning is crucial for success in the workplace.” While these types of statements do provide a vision for why the state might implement an exit exam and are posted on an official website, it is unclear to what extent they represent an official position or whether they have as much impact on practice as an official pronouncement might have. We believe that many states are in similar positions—visions and purposes of the exit exam do exist, but they may not be very unified.

Three states indicated that there is no official state position but there is a common way of communicating in the state about the purpose of the exam. The “unofficial” purposes that were reported include the following:

*To assure that all Maryland high school graduates have attained a minimum level of achievement (Maryland)*

*[The exit exam] validates the high school diploma in that students who receive a high school diploma can read, write and handle mathematical operations. (Louisiana)*

*The goal [is] that all students should have the opportunity to learn the minimum knowledge in the core courses to earn a high school diploma. (Alabama)*

Only one state, Alaska, reported that there is no department of education position on the purpose of its exit exam. However, the case study of Alaska published in the Center’s 2002 report cites documentation from Alaska noting that its exit exam is designed to measure minimum competencies and basic skills—what all students should know and be able to do prior to receiving a diploma.

In conclusion, states provided statements about the purposes of their exit exams in response to our survey that varied in terms of clarity and relevance. These findings suggest that many states should try to reach a clearer consensus about their purposes. A clear, explicit statement of purpose is important for guiding the test development process and ensuring that the resulting test is valid for making decisions about whether a student deserves a high school diploma. A well-articulated purpose is also important for increasing public understanding about the well-intentioned goals of exit exam policies.

We were surprised to find that of the states that did articulate a clear purpose for the test, only one claimed that its exit exam was intended to certify that students are ready for the workforce or college, a point we return to in the discussion in chapter 6 of the relationship between exit exams and higher education. More typically, states claimed that the purpose of their exit exams is to ensure that all students who receive a diploma have achieved the competencies to be expected at the high school level, without implying that students are prepared for life after high school. In many states, the purpose of the exit exam lacks definition altogether. This may be

the case for a number of reasons. First, the statements of purpose for exit exams are typically not developed by testing experts but by political leaders, such as legislators, who may not be aware of the importance of developing a clear purpose for a test. Second, in the course of bill drafting and legislative horse-trading, a very bland statement of purpose may make the testing program more politically viable in the short term. This may have negative long-term political consequences, however, if public opposition to the test arises or validity concerns emerge, and political leaders cannot adequately explain or defend the testing program.

## **BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF EXIT EXAMS**

The Center on Education Policy's 2002 and 2003 reports on high school exit exams described the main features of state exit exams, including the types of exams given, grade levels in which they are first administered, subjects tested, types of test questions used, time limits for taking the tests, and policies on calculator use. This year we expanded our survey to gather more information about the alignment of exit exams to state standards, the entities that develop the tests, and the total amount of testing time.

The trends described in our previous reports continued in 2004—states keep moving toward exit exams that they characterize as more rigorous and better aligned with state content standards. There is also a continued shift toward testing in more subject areas, using more varied types of test questions. More detailed, state-level information about each of these features can be found in the state profiles at the end of this report.

### **Numbers of States with Exit Exam Requirements**

In 2004, 20 states required students to pass an exit exam to graduate from high school, compared with 19 states in 2003. Alaska was the additional state that began withholding diplomas for students in the class of 2004 if they did not pass the exit exam. Five more states plan to phase in exit exams by 2009. Idaho decided in January 2004 to implement the state's first exit exam, which will be a graduation requirement for the class of 2006; this action made it the fifth state with an exam slated to be phased in by 2009.

During 2004, landmarks also occurred in exit exam policies in Virginia and Maryland. In Virginia, the class of 2004 was the first group of students required to pass the state's new end-of-course exams instead of the state's old minimum competency exit exam. And this year Maryland decided to make its new end-of-course tests a graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2009. The class of 2004 was the final group of Maryland students required to pass the state's prior exit exam, a minimum competency test. Next year, Maryland will have no exit exam requirement, but will be giving the new end-of-course exams. The class of 2009 will be the first required to pass those new exams—the latest phase-in year for any of the state exit exams. Because of this change in Maryland, the Center's report this year shows the total number of states phasing in exit exams by 2009, instead of the total numbers phasing in these exams by 2008, as we reported last year. And as described in chapter 5, several other states changed their specific exit exam policies.

Table 7 summarizes some of the main features of the 25 state exit exams being fully implemented or phased in.



## Types of Tests

As in past years' reports, the Center this year grouped state exit exams into three categories, based on states' own description of their tests:

1. *Minimum competency exams* (MCEs), which generally focus on basic skills below the high school level
2. *Standards-based exams* (SBEs), which are aligned with state standards and are generally targeted at the high school level
3. *End-of-course exams* (EOCs), which are tied to the content of specific courses at the high school level and are usually standards-based, but the distinguishing feature is that students take each test after completing a specific course

Figure 2 shows the types of exit exams states are using or plan to use within the next five years. As we noted in past years' reports, there is a trend away from reputedly easier minimum competency tests toward more challenging standards-based and end-of-course exams. Between 2002 and 2004, the number of states using minimum competency exams dropped from 10 to 7, while the number of states using more challenging standards-based or end-of-course exams rose from 9 to 13. By 2009, only 4 states plan to use minimum competency exit exams, while 21 intend to use standards-based or end-of-course exams. One exception to this trend is Alaska's new exit exam, which is a minimum competency exam and is being required for graduation for the first time this year.

The remainder of this chapter describes various features of exit exams. Five states (Maryland, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) are in the process of phasing out old exams and phasing in new ones. Our analysis includes information on the new tests these states are phasing in, which are also the testing systems described in the state profiles at the end of this report. We also provide data on the five additional states that plan to have their first exit exam with consequences in place by 2009 (Arizona, California, Idaho, Utah, and Washington). For more detailed descriptions of the features of each state's exit exam, see the state profiles.

## Subjects Tested

Every state with an exit exam assesses students in the two areas of English language arts and mathematics. The trend toward also testing students in science and social studies, observed by the Center last year, continued during 2004. As shown in Figure 3, 10 states tested science in 2004, compared with 7 states in 2002; 13 states will test science by 2009. Nine states tested social studies in 2004, compared with 5 states in 2002; 11 states will test social studies by 2009. North Carolina is the only state that tests in another subject area—computer skills.

## Types of Test Questions

In 2004, all states used multiple-choice questions on their exit exams, but only two, Alabama and Tennessee, relied solely on this format. As Figure 4 illustrates, most states (17) also had students respond to a writing prompt—that is, a test question that requires students to produce an essay, letter, or other written product. The trend we observed in past years toward greater variety in test items continued in 2004. Nine states used short-answer questions in 2004, compared with just six states in 2002;

**TABLE 7: MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF STATE EXIT EXAMS**

State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Graduating Class	Subjects Tested	Grade Level Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Prior High School Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Alabama	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 3rd Edition	2001	Math, reading, language, science social studies	11th	Standards-based	11th	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 1st and 2nd Editions
Alaska	Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE)	2004	Math, reading, writing	10th	Minimum competency	10th	None
Arizona	Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)	2006	Math, reading, writing	10th	Standards-based	10th	None
California	California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)	2006	Math, (including Algebra I), ELA	10th	Standards-based	ELA (9th through 10th) math (6-7) and Algebra I	None
Florida	Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)	2003	Math and reading	10th	Standards-based	10th	High School Competency Test (HSCT)
Georgia	Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT)	1994	Math, ELA, writing, science, social studies	11th	Standards-based	11th	Basic Skills Test
Idaho	Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT)	2006	Math, reading language usage	10th	Standards-based	10th	None
Indiana	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)	2000	Math and ELA	10th	Standards-based	9th	None
Louisiana	Graduation Exit Examination for the 21st Century (GEE 21)	2003	Math, ELA, science, social studies	ELA and math in 10th; social studies and science in 11th	Standards-based	9th-12th	Graduation Exit Exam (GEE)
Maryland	Maryland High School Assessment (HSA)	2009	Algebra/data analysis, English I, biology, government	Varies	End-of-course	Course content	Maryland Functional Tests
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)	2003	Math and ELA	10th	Standards-based	10th	None
Minnesota	Basic Skills Test (BST)	2000	Math, reading, writing	Math, reading in 8th; writing in 10th	Minimum competency	None	None
Mississippi	Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)	2003	Algebra I, English II (with writing component), biology, U.S. history from 1877	Varies	End-of-course	Subject content alignment	Functional Literacy Examination (FLE)

**TABLE 7 MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF STATE EXIT EXAMS continued**

State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Graduating Class	Subjects Tested	Grade Level Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Prior High School Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Nevada	Nevada High School Proficiency Examination (HSPE)	2003	Math, reading, writing, science (2009)	10th	Standards-based	8th-12th	High School Proficiency Exam (based on 1994 state course of study)
New Jersey	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)	2003	Math, language arts, literacy, science (2006)	11th	Standards-based	11th	High School Proficiency Test-11
New Mexico	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)	1990	Math, reading, language arts, science, social studies, composition	10th	Minimum competency	None	None
New York	Regents Comprehensive Examinations	2000	Math, English, science, global history and geography, U.S. history and government	Varies	End-of-course	9th-12th	Regents Competency Test
North Carolina	North Carolina High School Competency Tests (NCHSCT)	1982	Math, reading comprehension, computer skills	Reading and math in 9th; computer skills in 8th	Standards-based	8th	None
Ohio	Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT)	2007	Math, reading, writing, social studies, science	10th	Standards-based	10th	9th Grade Proficiency Tests
South Carolina	High School Assessment Program (HSAP)	2006	Math, ELA	10th	Standards-based	Unknown	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)
Tennessee	Gateway Examinations	2005	Algebra I, Biology I, English II	Varies	Standards-based	10th	Tennessee Competency Test
Texas	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)	2005	Math, ELA, science, social studies	11th	Standards-based	High school subjects	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
Utah	Utah Basic Skills Competency Test (UBSCT)	2006	Math, reading, writing	10th	Minimum competency	6th-9th	None
Virginia	Standards of Learning End of Course Exams (SOL)	2004	1 math, English: writing, English: reading, 1 science, 1 history/social science, and 1 student selected test	Varies	End-of-course	Content aligned	Literacy Passport Test
Washington	Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)	2008	Math, reading, writing, science (2010)	10th	Standards-based	10th	None

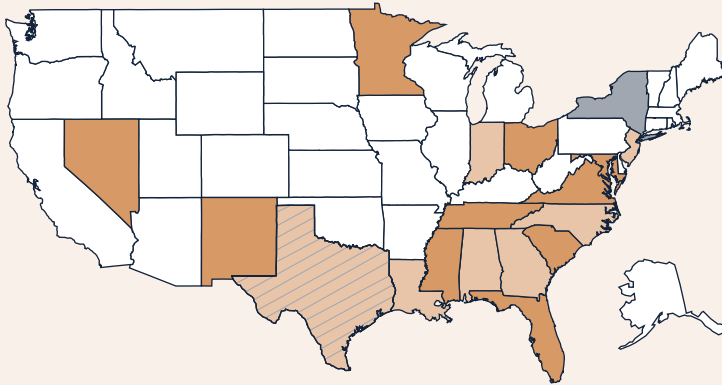
Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

**FIGURE 2: TYPES OF EXIT EXAMS STATES ARE USING OR PLAN TO USE**

**MCE – minimum competency exam**  
focused on basic skills below the high school level

**SBE – standards-based exam**  
aligned with state standards and targeted at the high school level

**EOC – end-of-course exam**  
tied to a specific course at the high school level



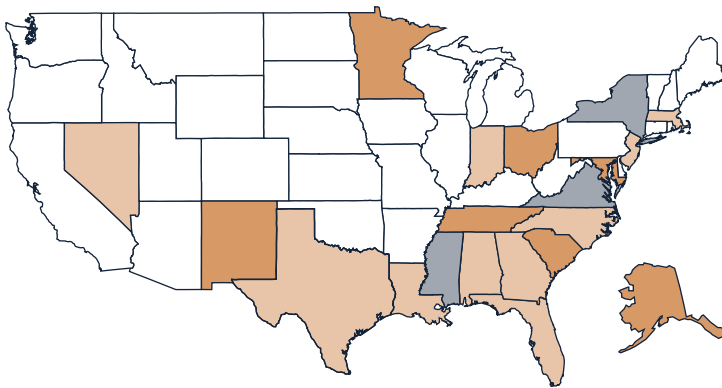
**In 2002** (out of 18 states)

**MCE:** FL, MD, MN, MS, NV, NM, OH, SC, TN, VA (10)

**SBE:** AL, GA, IN, LA, NJ, NC, TX (7)

**EOC:** NY, TX (2)

*Total for 2002 adds up to 19 because Texas gives students the option to pass either an SBE or an EOC.*

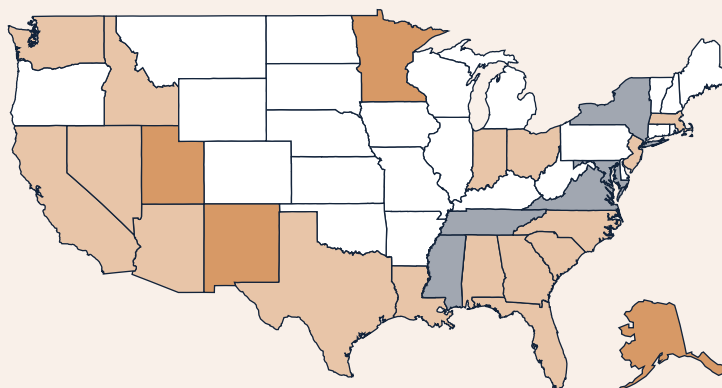


**In 2004** (out of 20 states)

**MCE:** AK, MD, MN, NM, OH, SC, TN (7)

**SBE:** AL, FL, GA, IN, LA, MA, NC, NJ, NV, TX (10)

**EOC:** MS, NY, VA (3)



**By 2009** (out of 25 states)

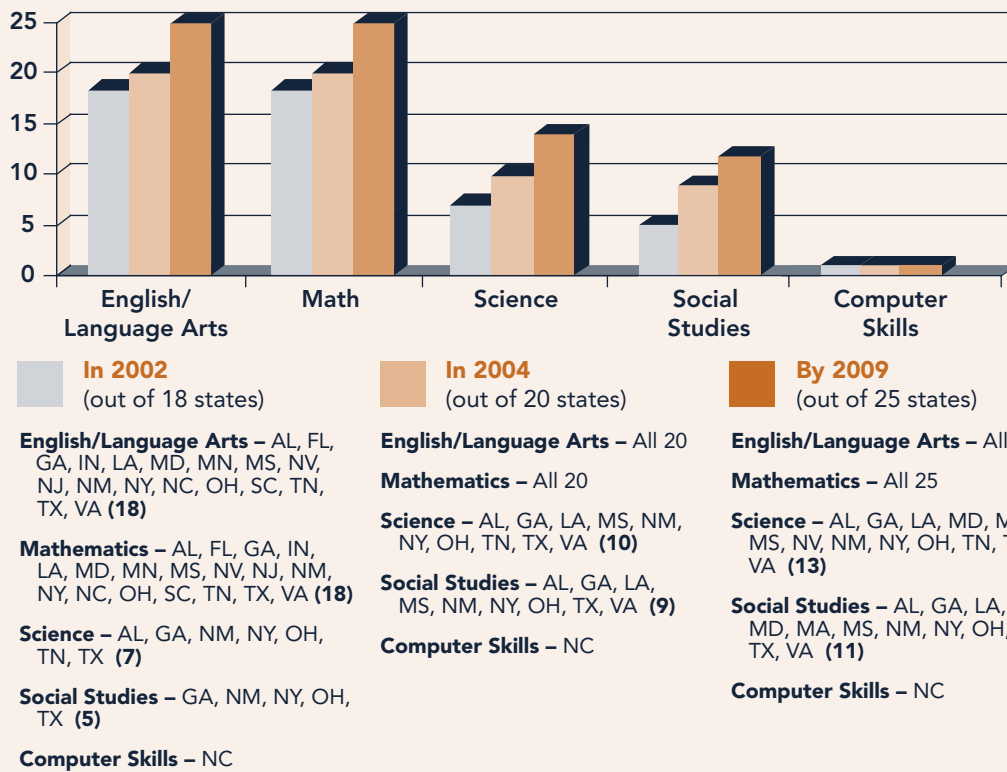
**MCE:** AK, MN, NM, UT (4)

**SBE:** AL, AZ, CA, FL, GA, ID, IN, LA, MA, NV, NJ, NC, OH, SC, TX, WA (16)

**EOC:** MD, MS, NY, TN, VA (5)

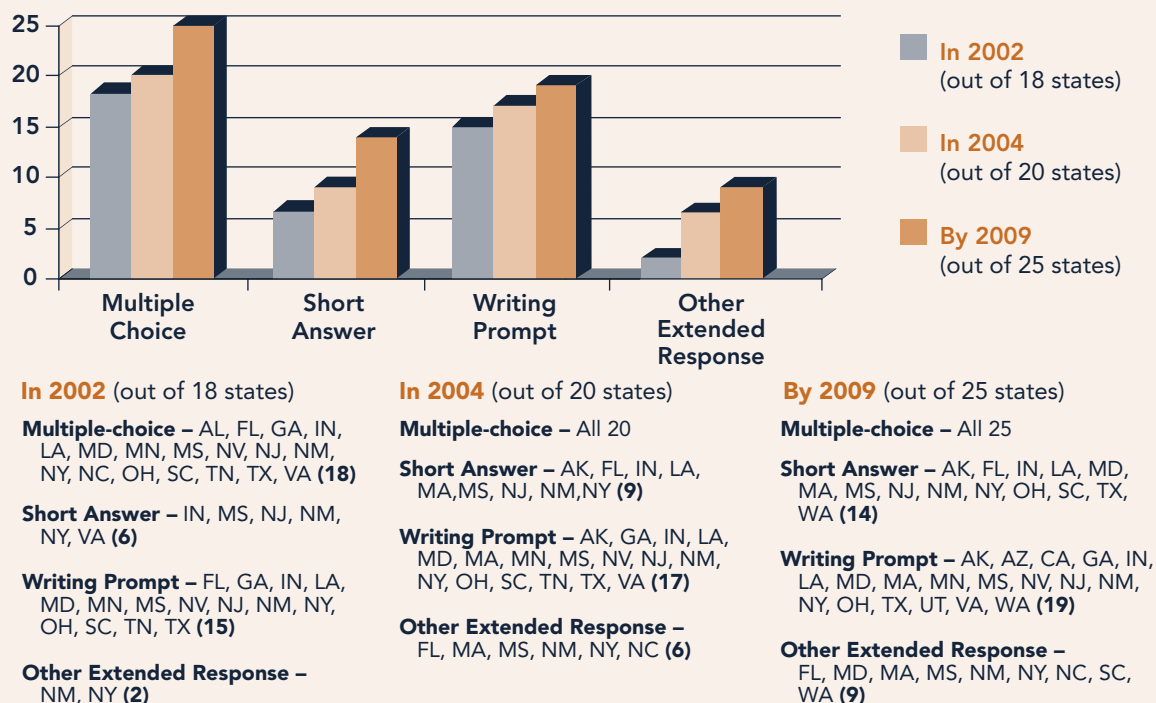
Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

**FIGURE 3: SUBJECT AREA TESTS THAT STUDENTS MUST PASS TO GRADUATE**



Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

**FIGURE 4: TYPES OF TEST QUESTIONS ON STATE EXIT EXAMS**



Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

fourteen states plan to use short-answer questions by 2009. Six states used extended-response tasks in 2004, compared with just two states in 2002; nine states plan to use them by 2009. For example, New York's earth science exam requires students to perform a hands-on science task. Although questions that require students to construct their own responses or perform extended tasks tend to require more testing time and resources to score, states apparently see the value in using these formats, in addition to multiple-choice, to assess students' depth of understanding.

An interesting wrinkle is that while Florida's exit exam includes short-answer and other extended-response questions on the version that students take the first time, the retake version consists of multiple-choice questions and gridded-response questions, with no written short-answer questions. The gridded-response format, used in math, requires students to compute their own numerical answers and record their answers by filling in the bubble for each digit on a grid. This difference in format between the test students take on their first try and the one they take when retesting has been the source of considerable controversy, as explained more in the discussion of retesting in chapter 4.

### Testing Time

Last year we reported that most exit exams are not designed to be what we typically think of as timed tests—in other words, the intention is to allow ample time for students to demonstrate what they know and can do, not how fast they can do it. This year we asked states for more information about time limits set for their tests. We found that 12 of the 25 states with exit exams put no limits on the amount of time students have to complete the exit exams. The other half of the states have set time limits for each section of their exit exams, largely for practical purposes, such as the need to facilitate scheduling on test days. Of the 13 states that do have time limits, two (North Carolina and Nevada) noted that individuals who need additional time are given it. Florida has set time limits for the initial administration of the exit exam, but retakes are untimed.

Most states with time limits typically reported total testing times of between five and seven hours, but several states' exit exams take significantly more time. New York, for example, requires students to take five end-of-course exams that add up to 18 hours of testing (though the tests are spread throughout the student's high school career). Georgia's five test sessions total 13.5 hours.

### Calculator Use

States' policies on use of calculators during testing have not changed much since last year. This year we again found that the large majority (21) of states with exit exams allow all students to use calculators on the mathematics tests. Three states (Alaska, California, and Nevada) reported that calculators are allowed only for students with disabilities whose prescribed testing accommodations specifically permit calculator use. Arizona is the only state that does not allow any students to use calculators on the exam.

Seven of the states that allow calculators (Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Washington, and Utah) noted that they can only be used on certain portions of the mathematics test. This represents a change in policy for Minnesota. This is the first year in the test's seven-year history that students must answer a section of computational questions by doing the math in their heads or on scratch paper, without the aid of a calculator. State officials are not sure how the no-calcula-

tor rule will affect passing rates, but the policy change represents a compromise in response to a bill proposed in 2001 that would have banned calculators from all the state tests, to ensure that students have basic computational skills (Welsh, 2004).

Calculator use introduces some administrative complexities. For instance, the state must specify what types of calculators are allowable. To help maintain test security, South Carolina requires that the memory of every calculator used during testing be cleared before and after testing, thus clearing all stored data and program information from the calculators. Students who are unwilling to have their calculators' memory cleared may not use their calculator during the test (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.).

### ALIGNMENT OF EXAMS TO STATE STANDARDS

For exit exams to be effective in improving educational practice, they must be closely aligned to the state's content standards. Improving alignment is essential to create fair assessments that match the content and rigor of state standards. Furthermore, tests that are well aligned with state standards should encourage teachers to offer more standards-based instruction—which, as discussed in chapter 4, is essential to ensuring that students have an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills being tested. But in actuality, alignment among standards, exams, and instruction is not always as close as it should be.

FIGURE 5: GRADE-LEVEL STANDARDS TO WHICH EXIT EXAMS ARE ALIGNED

Grade Level	STATES (Alphabetically)
6	CA
7	
8	CA, NC, UT
9	IN, LA, MD*, MA, MS*, NV, NY, NC, OH, TN, TX, VA*
10	AK, AZ, CA, FL, ID, LA, MD*, MA, MS*, NV, NY, OH, TN, TX, VA*, WA
11	AL, GA, LA, MD*, NJ, NY, VA*
12	LA, MD*, MS*, VA*

\*Maryland, Mississippi, and Virginia report that their exit exams are aligned to high school courses.

Note: Minnesota's and New Mexico's exams are not aligned to standards. Information for South Carolina was not available.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

## States Reporting Aligned Exams

On this year's survey we asked states whether their exit exams are aligned to state content standards. Minnesota and New Mexico were the only states that reported their exit exams are not aligned to state standards; both have minimum competency exams. All other states reported that their exit exams are aligned to state standards, but the grade levels to which these exams are aligned vary widely (see Figure 5). At the low end of the spectrum, California reported that its math test is aligned to standards for grades 6-8, and Utah reported that its exam is aligned to standards for grades 6-9. The majority of states said their exit exams are aligned to grade 10 or 11 standards. Others reported that their exit exams are aligned to a range of grades, such as 9-12, or that the grade level varies depending on the subject being tested, which is often the case with end-of-course systems. Two states, Maryland and Virginia, indicated that their exit exams, which are end-of-course tests, are not aligned to grade-level standards but rather to content standards for particular courses.

To achieve alignment with standards, states are using tests that have been developed specifically for their own states, as opposed to off-the-shelf, nationally normed tests sold by test publishers. Two states (North Carolina and New York) reported that their exit exams are developed by the states themselves. All other states reported that their exit exams are developed by either the state in collaboration with a test publishing company (17 states) or by a testing company that customizes the test to state standards and specifications (4 states). Some analyses, such as a review by the American Federation of Teachers (2001), consider the use of a customized test, as opposed to an off-the-shelf test, to be an indicator that the test is aligned to state standards.

## States Reporting Alignment Reviews

Almost all states are designing their tests with the aim of aligning them with state content standards. To establish the validity of a test, however, one must collect evidence after the test is created that it actually samples from the domain of knowledge and skills intended (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999). Those mandating an exit exam should build the case that the test is valid, or appropriate, for determining whether students have learned those standards judged essential for receiving a high school diploma.

This year, for the first time, we surveyed states about whether their exit exams have undergone reviews to determine if they are aligned to state standards. While some states have undertaken this type of review internally, others have sought reviews from outside independent agencies, which are often perceived as providing more objective reports. It should be noted, however, that some observers feel that outside evaluators bring their own biases, especially if they are generally associated with a certain set of reforms or testing materials.

On our 2004 survey, 19 out of 25 states with exit exams reported that these types of alignment studies have been done or are being done. Seven of these states (Alabama, Arizona, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Utah and Texas) reported having done both internal and external reviews. Four states (Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) have done internal studies only. Eight states (Alaska, California, Idaho, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Washington) have done external studies only. Six states (Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, and South Carolina) reported having done no such studies or did not respond to our question. Maryland's response may be due to the fact that the state has just



recently changed its exit exam. The exit exams in Minnesota and New Mexico were not intended to be aligned with state standards. Nevada has planned an alignment study to begin in summer 2004, and Ohio's test has undergone informal reviews only of its math assessment alignment by Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit organization that assists states with their systems of standards and assessment.

We were unable to obtain copies or outside verification of external studies in six states—Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, and Utah. Alaska's report was unavailable at the time of publication due to pending legal issues, Alabama's report was confidential, and several other states did not plan to make their reports public.

In addition to formal alignment studies, many states use state-level panels to analyze test items or review test content as part of the test development process. Typically, these analyses look at the match between test items and state standards. Although these analyses might not be classified by states as alignment studies, they are likely to be taking place in some states that reported no alignment study.

### Findings of Alignment Reviews

We reviewed the available external alignment reviews and found that they generally analyze a broad range of test attributes, including difficulty, student performance levels, sensitivity and fairness, and alignment with state standards. The reports vary widely in both the breadth of topics evaluated and the depth in which these topics are analyzed. Many of these efforts are meant to supplement internal state research, so the research questions posed to outside agencies vary widely. For some states, legislation establishing exit exams requires regular outside reviews, while other states have undertaken evaluations as a part of their efforts to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act. In seeking evaluation, states may be responding to political pressure or trying to ensure that low scores do not result from a poorly aligned test. The reports differ in the level of detail they provide, with some focusing on very quantitative technical analysis and others giving more general overviews. They primarily rely on expert panels with experience in testing and standards to make evaluations; some panels include state teachers. Most reports present findings and recommendations that states can use to revise their assessments to better measure students' mastery of state standards.

### Past Alignment Studies

There is evidence that several states have used the findings from past alignment studies to implement significant recent changes, as described in Box 3. Since 2000, Achieve, Inc. has done studies in numerous states to help them benchmark their state standards and assessments against those of other states and countries and to evaluate the alignment between a state's standards and tests. Several other states have sought evaluations from other external sources. Washington State contracted for an evaluation from SRI International, Idaho from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, New York from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and California from HumRRO. Both Louisiana and Nevada have contracted with WestEd to evaluate the alignment of their exit exams, but as of July 2004, these studies were not yet available. Results from the various studies differ dramatically but generally indicate that state assessments are aligned with state standards, although not always at targeted grade levels. See Box 3 for a further discussion of these previous alignment studies.

### BOX 3: FINDINGS AND IMPACT OF PREVIOUS ALIGNMENT STUDIES

In addition to the recent alignment work outlined later in this section, organizations have conducted several earlier alignment studies, which evaluated a different exam system or set of standards than the ones currently in place. Indiana, New Jersey, Maryland, Texas, and New York are among the states that participated in earlier studies by Achieve, Inc. We reviewed these previous studies because they helped to influence the states to make important changes to their standards and tests and to improve alignment. These significant changes in state policy illustrate the impact external reviews can have.

An Achieve, Inc. evaluation (2000a) of Indiana’s standards and their alignment with the state assessment concluded that although the standards were clear and specific, they lacked rigor overall in comparison with those of other states. The report also found that while nearly all items on Indiana’s assessment were aligned with state standards, the test was not sufficiently challenging and did not cover the full range of skills outlined in the standards. Moreover, the standards were unevenly assessed. Based in part on this report, Indiana revised its standards and will give students a new version of the Graduate Qualifying Exam in fall 2004.

In an evaluation of New Jersey’s standards and alignment, Achieve, Inc. found that although the state’s standards covered appropriate content as a whole, they lacked the clarity and specificity needed to provide helpful guidance to teachers and parents, and they targeted some skills at inappropriate grade levels. New Jersey’s assessments were challenging and accurately aligned with state standards, according to the review, but because the standards were vague, the tests overemphasized some standards and underemphasized others, causing a lack of balance in the treatment of important topics (Achieve, 2000b). Following this report, New Jersey revised its standards in 2001 and developed a new test in 2002, which first became a graduation requirement for the class of 2003. Achieve, Inc. is currently undertaking another external review of New Jersey’s new exam.

Achieve, Inc. also reviewed Texas’s standards and assessments in 2002, as the state was phasing out the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills and preparing for the new Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (Achieve, 2002b). The review noted that outside sources had praised the Texas standards as clear and challenging but observed that the older test, the TAAS, was generally thought to be relatively undemanding, measuring 8th grade skills. Although Achieve, Inc. was unable to evaluate TAKS because it was still in development, the organization recommended that the new test be made more rigorous to adequately test students’ mastery of high school standards. The TAKS that Texas ultimately developed is widely considered to be more difficult than the TAAS it replaced.

Achieve, Inc. found a different weakness in Maryland—the state’s learning outcomes were very general and did not provide the specific guidance that standards are intended to provide (Achieve, 2002a). Although the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program was considered a relatively good

### BOX 3 CONT'D

assessment, it was not aligned with state standards and did not provide individual scores. As a result of vague standards and an unaligned test, the assessment, rather than the standards, was guiding curriculum and instruction. The state responded by adopting more specific content standards and developing a new series of end-of-course exams, the High School Assessments, specifically related to the content standards in the subjects being assessed.

The Educational Testing Service worked with New York State to analyze the versions of the state's Regents exams that the state was developing for student retest opportunities. The goal of the analysis was to ensure that the retests measure the same standards-aligned material as the original versions (Hartanowicz, 2000). Using panels of teachers from the New York public schools, ETS evaluated the retest items to determine if they were culturally fair, aligned with the state's Learning Standards, and appropriate in their difficulty levels for the grade being targeted. Items that were rated less than 2.5 on an alignment scale of 0-4 were flagged for review by state officials. The New York experience illustrates the usefulness of detailed item reviews.

Achieve Inc.'s study of state standards and assessments in Massachusetts (2001) noted that the state's English standards were among the strongest in the country and its math standards were very good, too, although they needed to include additional conceptual skills. The study also judged the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System to be one of the most rigorous assessments in the country. The study found the tests to be well aligned with state standards, a good measure of competence in basic high school skills, and a useful instructional guide for teachers. The study report suggested minor revisions in the MCAS, including reducing the relative weight of algebra on the math portion of the test and focusing more on information reading passages to better align with state standards. Massachusetts still uses the standards and assessments evaluated at the time.

SRI International (2002) evaluated the Washington Assessment of Student Learning for difficulty, alignment, and balance of items on the math portion of the exam. The researchers relied exclusively on expert panels to analyze the test items. The evaluators generally felt that the Washington State exam was well aligned with state standards but noted that almost a quarter of test items fell below the 10th grade level—the target grade for the test. They also noted a lack of balance in testing the standards, in that some groups of standards were comparatively overrepresented, while the mathematical connections standard was not tested at all. Reviewers recommended that state officials review the distribution of questions across standards and examine the balance of grade-level items. Finally, they observed that students generally had more difficulty answering the items that did not match state standards well, which may be an indication that instruction is following standards. Following the release of the report, state officials announced their intention to update the WASL and began external reviews of the reading, writing, and science sections of the exam. Additional reviews are currently underway and are scheduled to be completed in November 2006.

## Recent Alignment Studies

The ongoing HumRRO evaluation of California’s exit exam did not specifically address alignment between standards and assessments but did provide some supporting evidence that the test measures knowledge and skills outlined in state standards. The study found that students in schools that had implemented the content standards earlier were passing at a significantly higher rate than students in schools that began covering the standards a few years later. While this is not a causal link, it does offer some evidence of alignment by concluding that schools which have focused instruction on content standards for a longer time have achieved greater success on the exam (Wise et al., 2004).

An external review of Idaho’s standards and high school exam by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2003) reinforces the value of doing a detailed analysis of individual test items to determine alignment. At the time of the study, the exam was not a graduation requirement, but it became one in early 2004. The laboratory evaluated the exam based on how well it matched the content, depth, range, and balance in state standards. To do this work, an expert panel used a very detailed set of criteria and quantitative measures to analyze alignment; every test item was mapped to a grade-level standard and its cognitive rigor was assessed. Due to the relatively small number of test items and the stringent analysis criteria, the test was not ranked as optimal on any of the four dimensions, but researchers gave the assessment particularly low marks in both depth of knowledge required and balance. The study authors recommended that the state begin to revise its exam by first ensuring that it covers all standards and by increasing its difficulty level—suggestions intended to increase the balance and range of the exam. While these recommendations should clearly be taken into consideration, it is extremely difficult to design tests of a reasonable length that cover the full range of grade-level standards in a state. Also, some standards better lend themselves to evaluation through multiple-choice questions, the only type of item used on Idaho’s exit exam, while other standards are more easily measured through performance tasks.

In 2004, Achieve, Inc. published an analysis of exit exams in six states—Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas (Achieve, 2004). While this study did not explicitly evaluate the alignment of tests to specific state standards, some states referred to it in our survey as an external alignment study of their exam systems. In actuality, the report focused more on the difficulty level of tests and whether they are fair requirements for graduation based on their content level. The report evaluated the difficulty of the exams based on the grade level of their content and the cognitive demands of test items. Although there was some variation among states, the study generally found that exit exams tested math skills at only an 8th grade level on an international scale developed for the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and that most math questions focused on lower-level skills of recall and routine procedures, as opposed to higher-level skills of strategizing and advanced reasoning. Both the content and difficulty of the tests varied somewhat across states. For example, Maryland targeted 34% of math questions at the highest two cognitive levels, while Florida targeted only 12% of math questions at these levels. Within algebra sections, some states focused more on pre-algebra skills while others emphasized more advanced skills. Massachusetts dedicated 65% of its algebra questions to pre-algebra, while New Jersey directed only 45% of its algebra questions to pre-algebra.

In language arts, Achieve, Inc. reported that most reading passages were aimed at the early high school reading level or below and that a majority of questions asked students to either recall or infer, instead of tapping the higher-level cognitive skills of explaining and analyzing. By evaluating reading exam questions on a 1–6 scale developed by ACT, Inc., Achieve, Inc. found that 31% of the questions on New Jersey’s reading test measured the top two levels, compared with only 12% of the questions on Florida’s exam. And although most state standards include informational passages as a component of reading comprehension, many state tests concentrated almost exclusively on literature passages, according to the report. For example, Texas used literature for 57% of its reading passages and included no informational passages. An exception to this trend was Florida, which used informational passages for 56% of its reading passages and literature for only 6%.

To pass the tests and meet state established cut scores, Achieve, Inc. found that students needed skills at the 7th through 9th grade levels. While suggesting that these exams provided a floor for student performance, Achieve, Inc. refuted claims by testing opponents that the exams are unreasonable expectations for high school graduation. The report noted, however, that because of the general lack of rigor in the exams, a passing score was an insufficient indicator that a student was prepared for higher education or success in the workplace. However, as we found in our analysis of states’ purposes for exit exams, these are not the stated goals for most exit exams. The study recommended, among other things, increasing the difficulty of exit exams through more advanced content and more cognitively challenging questions, and raising cutoff scores for passing. The organization also recommended additional tests aligned to 12th grade standards that could indicate preparation for further education but would not be required for graduation (Achieve, 2004).

In summary, many states have made efforts to ensure that their exit exams are aligned to state standards. State definitions of alignment and methods of measuring it vary widely, however, as shown by the diverse methods and research questions used in the alignment studies described above. These external reviews raise important questions about whether tests are aligned to standards at too low a grade level and expect too little from students. They also suggest that some states should consider revisions to better balance their tests. Acting on recommendations from outside alignment studies can be an important way for states to make constructive changes to improve the quality of their assessments and ensure they are accomplishing their goals.

This year, we also asked states whether any studies have been conducted to determine how well their exit exams are aligned to curriculum and instruction; those survey findings are discussed in chapter 4.

## SCORING AND REPORTING

In the past, a great deal of attention has gone toward developing sound assessments that can stand up to public scrutiny, with less attention focused on scoring and reporting test results. But when tests are used to make high-stakes decisions, such as whether a student will receive a high school diploma, states must ensure that scoring is done accurately and that students receive sufficient feedback about their test performance to improve their scores in the future. It is also important that information be reported back to schools and districts promptly, to give districts time to put in place appropriate support systems to address students’ weaknesses and increase

their level of proficiency. Finally, student test results should be reported in a way that gives parents and the public a clear understanding of what students have achieved and what their weaknesses are. Now that many states are using their exit exams to comply with NCLB, the demands will be even greater for quality test reporting and quick turnaround of test results.

Last year we surveyed states about their timetables for reporting test results, the kinds of written feedback they provide to students about their performance on the exit exams, and whether they release test questions each year. This year we asked additional questions about who grades the open-ended questions on state exit exams and what kinds of information are provided to students who fail the tests to help them prepare for future test administrations. Below we summarize this year's survey findings about issues of scoring and reporting. We also review research that points to some shortcomings of current state reporting practices and suggest possible areas for improvement. In addition, we highlight some controversies over scoring and reporting of exit exams that arose in states during the past year.

### Scoring Open-ended Questions

Multiple-choice test questions are easily scored by machine, but open-ended questions that ask students to write out a response must be scored by hand. Of the 25 states with exit exams, 21 use some open-ended questions on their exams. Of those 21 states, almost all reported that testing company employees score the open-ended questions, and all but one indicated that scorers must have a college degree. Only three states indicated that teachers were involved in scoring open-ended questions. California and Utah reported that scoring is done by both testing company employees and teachers. California explained that scorers are people retained by the testing contractor who must have at least a bachelor's degree and noted that teachers are encouraged to participate. In New York, teachers do all scoring of end-of-course exams locally, at their schools. Box 4 describes some of the special procedures that the New York State Education Department has implemented to ensure that scoring is done in a standardized way across teachers and schools.

States that involve teachers in scoring student tests are to be commended. Having teachers go through the process of training for and scoring students' high-stakes tests can serve as a valuable form of professional development by increasing teachers' understanding of what the state considers proficient student performance. Furthermore, having teachers do the scoring sends the signal that they are trusted and important to the testing process. At the same time, it is not surprising that most states opt to have a testing company do the scoring. Having all of the scoring conducted at a single, closely monitored site (the testing company) generally makes the process more efficient and standardized. Also, having students' tests scored by people with no connection to the students and their schools avoids potential problems that might arise—or at least be perceived—if teachers scored their own students' tests and had the opportunity, for instance, to give students higher scores than they deserve.

### Time Frame for Reporting Results

We asked states how long it takes after testing for results to be reported to districts, schools, students, parents, and the public. Turnaround time of results varies widely

#### BOX 4: TEACHER SCORING OF NEW YORK'S EXIT EXAMS

**T**he New York Regents exams, which include the end-of-course exams that students must pass to graduate, are the only state exit exams with open-ended questions that are scored locally by teachers in the students' schools. In the interest of standardizing the rating process, the state department of education has developed detailed guidelines that cover the entire rating process, from the time students hand in their answer papers to the time their scores are recorded on their permanent records.

After students hand in their answer papers, those papers must stay in the custody of teachers and cannot be removed from the school building until scoring is completed and test scores have been recorded on students' permanent records.

A scoring key accompanies each Regents exam. Teachers must rate the answers strictly according to the key provided by the state department of education. Teachers may give credit for other answers only if those answers are clearly equivalent to the key answer; that is, a teacher may not give credit for answers that the teacher considers merely "possible" or "reasonable." The school must obtain permission from the department of education before students can be given credit for any answers that are not clearly equivalent to the key answer. The teachers rating each answer paper must write their initials clearly on the paper.

To ensure that student tests are scored accurately, at least two teachers must rate each student's answer papers in all subjects except mathematics, in which at least three teachers must rate the answer papers. If the school uses machine-scorable answer sheets for the multiple-choice questions, the school must hand score a sample of the answer sheets after machine scoring is complete to ensure that the machine scoring was done accurately.

In addition to these general kinds of guidelines, the department of education provides much more detailed instructions for scoring each subject area test.

*Source: New York State Education Department, n.d.*

#### BOX 5: CAN COMPUTER SCORING OF STUDENT WRITING TESTS PROVIDE INSTANT RESULTS?

**I**n Florida, the Palm Beach County school district is experimenting with a new online testing and scoring system that uses a computer to grade student essays. The system, provided by Vantage Learning to Palm Beach County on a pilot basis and free of charge, works in the following way: As many as 300 student essays, scored by people, are collected and processed by Vantage computers. Based on that pool of essays, the system is designed to look at 50 features of an essay related to content and structure. It is capable of analyzing natural language, syntax, and semantics and looking at concepts. Within seconds, the computer generates a score and analytical feedback. If the computer is unable to process a particularly creative passage, a human scorer is brought in for a second opinion.

The new technology is controversial—some opponents doubt that a computer can recognize creative writing nuances as well as a human can and question whether the technology is really as good as advertised or worth the expense.

The Florida district is allowed to run the pilot program for a half year. But legislative approval is required before it can use online assessment in place of the FCAT. Other hurdles must be cleared before the online assessment can take hold, such as finding the money to pay for the service, getting community support, and handling the logistics of thousands of students logging on to computers at the same time.

The hope is that after the pilot phase, the district can use the online assessment in place of the writing portion of the FCAT at grades 4, 8, and 10 (which is the high school exit exam). In addition, supporters believe such a testing approach would be responsive to one of the most significant complaints against the FCAT—that the results come too slowly for teachers and schools to improve student achievement during the same year the test is given. The online test would be given to students several times throughout the school year, and scores would be produced within seconds, instead of the months it now takes to get writing results from the FCAT. Instant scoring is expected to help teachers, parents, and students rapidly improve their skills and test scores.

*Source: Freeman, 2003.*

across states. In New York, as described above, scoring is done locally at the students' own schools, allowing results to be available immediately. In Tennessee, where students take an entirely multiple-choice exit exam, the scoring is also done at the schools so that results can be available just a few days after testing. At the other end of the spectrum, in Massachusetts and New Jersey, student tests are sent to a testing company for scoring. In these two states, it takes three months for results to be reported to districts and schools, four months for results to go to students and parents, and four months for statewide results to be released to the public. More typically, many states reported that it takes about two months for results to be sent back to districts and schools, and usually some additional time for districts to send results to students and parents and report statewide results to the public.

Release of test results happens in stages, so that districts have a chance to review and make corrections to test results before they are finalized and released to the public. For instance, Virginia described a process whereby electronic results for students taking the paper version of the test are returned to school districts approximately two weeks after answer documents are received at the testing company that does the scoring. Scores for students taking the tests online are available within 24 hours. School districts are responsible for distributing score reports to parents. School districts are also asked to review each student's score report and make any necessary changes, such as corrections to demographic data. If changes are required, a "record change" request is submitted to the state department of education. Once any necessary record changes are made, the scoring contractor develops the school and district summaries. The state report is made public once all school summaries have been run; this is usually about three months after testing has occurred. In Florida, Palm Beach County is experimenting with a computerized scoring system that can generate results to the student instantaneously, but as Box 5 explains, this system is controversial.

When asked how often exit exams results are reported to the public, slightly more than half of the states with exit exams indicated that they release results to the public after each administration of their exams; the other states release results to the public annually. Releasing results after each administration of an exit exam can help to keep the public aware of the testing program and to build trust that the state department of education is being open with information. As discussed in the Center's 2003 report, however, annual reporting to the public is generally easier and less costly for states. In addition to the costs of generating score reports, states must also cover the costs of public relations activities each time results are released. Often, the public release of exit exam scores is accompanied by stepped-up media coverage and a burst of activity from opponents of high-stakes testing, especially when the average scores are lower than desired.

### Feedback to Students

We surveyed states about the kinds of written feedback they provide to students regarding their performance on exit exams. The quality of this feedback is critical because it can help students understand their strengths and weaknesses and study more effectively for retesting.

This year's findings are similar to last year's. All states with exit exams give students feedback on whether they passed or failed the exams (except Maryland, perhaps because the new exit exam is not yet a requirement for graduation). All states also give students subject area scores, as well as subscores for specific skills or content areas within each major subject tested. But only four states—Massachusetts, New



Mexico, Texas, and Virginia—give students feedback about their performance on specific test items. Detailed, question-level feedback is probably of interest to a great many students, teachers, and parents. Not all states see its value, however. One state survey respondent expressed the opinion that question-level feedback would be of limited usefulness: although it would cost the state more money, it would not give students useful information about their competency relative to key skill and content areas, which the respondent felt was more valuable for improving performance on future versions of the test.

This year, we also asked states about the kinds of information provided to students who fail an exit exam to help prepare them for future administrations of the test. More than half (14) of states with exit exams reported that either the state or the district is required to provide some special information to these students. Ten states indicated that when a student fails an exit exam, the state or district is required to notify them about future test dates. Nine states require that students be provided with information about remediation requirements, but only five states require that students be informed about voluntary remediation opportunities. Only six states reported that students must be given information about the implications of failing the tests for future course-taking. A few states listed other types of information provided. In Texas, a comprehensive study guide is provided by the testing contractor free of charge to any student who fails one or more of the exit exams. In Ohio, students who fail a test are given a graduation checklist that clearly lays out all of the state's graduation requirements.

Providing students who fail exit exams with specific information about how they can improve is particularly important. Students may not know what kinds of remediation opportunities are available to them or even understand the importance of passing the test, especially if it is a new graduation requirement. A study in Washington State found that while 94% of 11th graders took the WASL the previous spring, only 69% knew that the test would eventually be a requirement for graduation. The study asked students, “Have you been told about your progress towards understanding the knowledge and skills tested on the WASL?” In response, 31% of students said, “Yes, based on classroom work and tests”; another 31% responded, “Yes, but only after I took the WASL in the tenth grade”; and 37% responded, “No, I haven't been told” (Educational Service District 101, 2003).

In a more in-depth study of the types of feedback students receive about their test performance, researchers Dean Goodman and Ronald Hambleton (2003) examined student score reports at the high school level from 11 states. Some, but not all, of those score reports were for high school exit exams. The researchers found tremendous variety in the ways that student-level assessment results are currently being reported across the states.

The researchers had some encouraging findings. For instance, most states report student results in relation to state performance levels and provide some form of diagnostic information—that is, more detailed information than a single general score for a subject area like mathematics, such as subscores for more specific skills within mathematics. Score reports are usually accompanied by some form of interpretive guide that adds meaning to the results and gives insight into the assessment. Even better, some states integrate interpretive material and score reports into a cohesive, informative package. Often results are reported in multiple ways; for instance, key results might be summarized with easy-to-read narrative text and with simple graphics to enhance data provided in number form. The researchers commended efforts to

personalize the documents by embedding the student's name throughout the score report, or by including informative letters to parents signed by a state official. They also liked the use of illustrative graphics, such as sample test questions, to enhance the meaning of the results and make the reports and guides more visually appealing.

Goodman and Hambleton also found areas of weakness in states' reporting of student test results. Excessive amounts of information were included in some states' reports, while essential pieces of information—such as the purpose of the test and how the results would and should be used—were omitted in other reports. In many cases, states did not provide information about the precision of the test scores, making the results appear more accurate than they are. Statistical jargon, such as “standard errors” and “NCE,” were present in more than a few reports without sufficient explanation. Key terms, including performance levels, were not always defined in the reports or interpretive guides. Finally, efforts to report a large amount of information in a small physical space, often using a small type font, resulted in reports and interpretive guides that looked dense and cluttered. Box 6 summarizes the researchers' recommendations for enhancing student score reports in the future.

### Release of Test Questions and Answers

According to our 2004 survey, 15 of the 25 states with exit exams release at least some of the questions and answers on their exit exams after the tests are given, to help students and teachers prepare for future tests. As shown in Figure 6, the majority of states reported that they released some test questions and answers in 2004. Only five states (Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, and Texas) reported that they released all test questions and answers. Nine states did not release any test questions or answers in 2004. These results mirror those from our 2003 survey; state policies for releasing test questions do not seem to have changed much in the past year.

It is not surprising that few states release all of their test questions because such a policy is costly. Once test questions are released, they can no longer be used on future tests, so a state that releases all of its test questions each year must develop completely new sets of questions for each test administration. There are further tradeoffs to consider when deciding whether to release some test questions and answers, or none at all. On one hand, releasing past test questions and answers to students, teachers, schools, and the public can be a valuable strategy to help prepare students for future exams and gain public support for exit exams. From real test questions that have been used in the past, everyone can get a sense of how a test is structured and how difficult it is, and can judge for themselves whether the expectations for students seem reasonable. On the other hand, the release of specific test questions can lead teachers and students to focus too closely on the specific questions used on past tests to prepare for future ones. Beyond familiarizing students with the testing format, focusing instruction too closely on past test items is not a good use of instructional time—not only because of the practical fact that questions used in the past will not appear on future tests, but more importantly, because past test questions only represent a small sample of the broader curriculum of content and skills that students should be learning in school.

This year we also asked states about how they distribute released test questions. Most frequently, states reported posting released test questions and answers on the internet. Some states also distribute released test questions and answers directly to schools, and a few states reported that they distribute them directly to teachers or students. Florida was the only state that said that it mailed released questions and an-

## BOX 6: BEST PRACTICES FOR REPORTING STUDENT TEST RESULTS

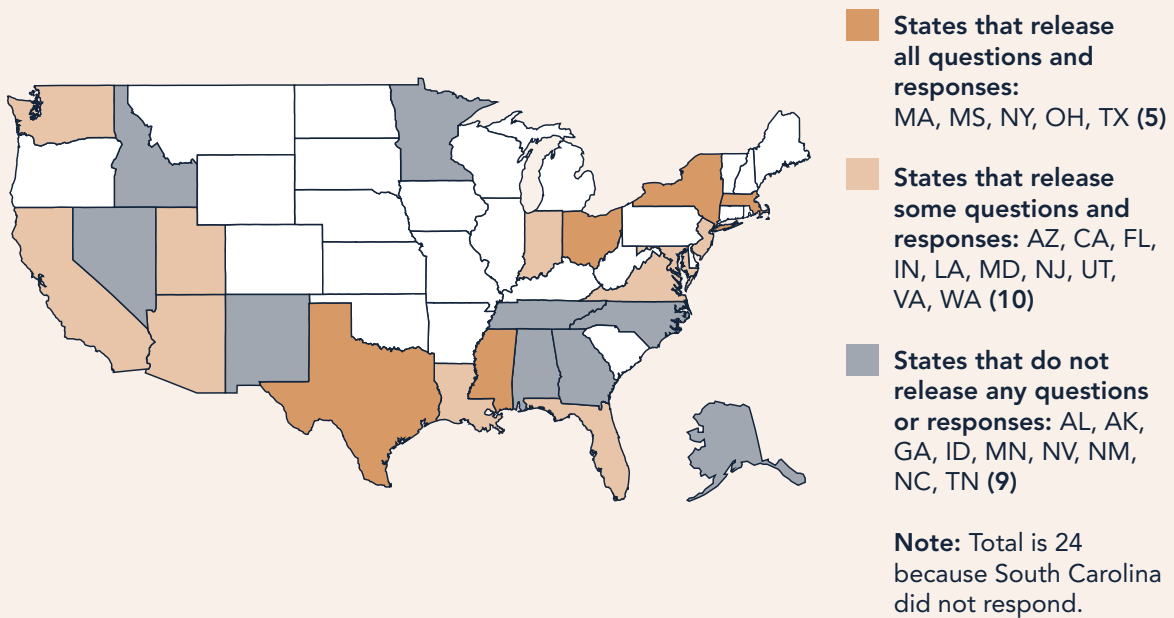
**A**fter closely reviewing a sample of high-school-level student score reports from 11 states, researchers Dean Goodman and Ronald Hambleton from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst offered the following recommendations for making score reports more understandable and informative.

1. Student score reports should be clear, concise, and visually attractive.
2. They should include easy-to-read text that supports and improves the interpretation of charts and tables.
3. Data displays should not try to accomplish too much; they should be designed to satisfy a small number of pre-established purposes.
4. Devices such as boxes and graphics should be used to highlight main findings.
5. Data should be grouped in meaningful ways.
6. Small font, footnotes, and statistical jargon should be avoided.
7. Key terms should be defined, preferably within a glossary.
8. Reports should be piloted with members of the intended audience.
9. Consideration should be given to the creation of specially-designed reports that cater to the particular needs of different users (such as a more detailed report for teachers than for parents).
10. All information essential to proper interpretation of assessment results should be included in the score report, including the purposes of the assessment, how the results will and should be used, a description of the performance levels and test scores, and examples of how to interpret confidence bands.
11. More detailed information should be included about the assessment and score results in a separate interpretive guide, ideally one in which the student score report can be inserted.
12. Score reports should be personalized, for instance, by embedding the student's first name throughout.
13. An easy-to-read narrative summary of the student's results should be included at the beginning of the score report, highlighting overall results, diagnostic information, and pertinent implications of each.
14. Some things parents can do to help their child improve should be identified, ideally in a separate section near the end of the score report.
15. Sample test questions should be included in the interpretive guides that illustrate the types of achievement represented by each performance level.
16. A reproduction of a student score report should be included in the interpretive guide to clearly explain the various elements of the reports.

Further guidance for reporting assessment results can be found in the following three resources: *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA & NCME, 1999); the *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* (Joint Committee on Testing Practices, 2004), and *Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement* (National Council on Measurement in Education, 1995).

Source: Goodman & Hambleton, 2003.

**FIGURE 6: STATE POLICIES FOR ANNUALLY RELEASING EXIT EXAM QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES AFTER THE EXAM IS GIVEN**



Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

swers home to parents, in addition to distributing the materials in all the other ways described above.

In some states, community organizations and businesses are helping states provide information to the public about state exit exams. In Washington, the Seattle-based Partnership for Learning, a nonprofit education advocacy group, is leading a campaign to help prepare students and families for the state's graduation exams that will be required for the first time in 2008. The organization mailed 90,000 information packets, most of which went to the families of students in the class of 2008. Information packets were also sent to teachers, state officials, and business leaders. In all, 16 organizations are contributing money, resources, or other support to the effort. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contributed \$160,000 for the mailing, while the Boeing Company published brochures, and the state department of education paid to have the material translated into Spanish, Russian, Korean, and Vietnamese (Johnston, 2003).

### State Issues

During the past year, specific controversies about exit exam scoring and reporting arose in Florida and New York.

#### Florida

In the winter of 2003, Florida was in the news because of concerns that the state was not forthcoming enough in sharing FCAT test questions and scoring procedures with the public. A Florida father went to court because he wanted to see the

test and all of his son's answers after his son, a high school senior, failed the exams. However, a state court ruled that the exit exam will remain confidential and that test questions do not have to be released (Dunkelberger, 2003).

The father argued that without seeing the actual test, it is difficult for a parent to evaluate a child's learning problems. State officials responded that although the test booklets are not released, parents get reports indicating general skill sections that need work, and their children are offered remedial help if they struggle. The court also determined that the FCAT was no different from other academic tests, such as the SAT or ACT, where only test scores and not the tests themselves are released. The judge ruled that the test booklet and questions should not be considered part of a student's record as defined by Florida law. The law dealing with student records specifically mentions scores for standardized achievement tests but does not mention the test instruments themselves.

Some Florida educators have also urged the state to release Florida's exit exam questions, arguing that students would have a better chance of performing well during retesting if they knew what they got wrong. Some teachers have argued that without seeing the test questions and students' answers, they have a hard time helping students improve because they have to start over with every skill (Crouse, 2004).

### New York

When an unusually large number of students failed the "Math A" Regents exit exam in 2003, an independent panel of math experts was appointed by the state to review the test questions. The panel found that the 2003 statewide test was too hard and that students were held to a higher standard than their counterparts a year earlier (Rubin, 2003b). Moreover, one section of the test had several tough problems in a row, which may have caused some students to become frustrated and give up, the report said. The exam's content was also spotty, the panel found. For example, three questions dealt with the Pythagorean theorem, which would dramatically lower the score of a student with a weakness in that area. At the same time, there were no trigonometry questions, which was a source of frustration because previous Regents Math A exams contained trigonometry items, and many teachers spent substantial time teaching this subject. Even before the exam was given, a preliminary field test predicted that the average score for the June 2003 assessment would be lower, at 46 points, than the average score of 51 points predicted by a field test for the June 2002 exam.

The state responded in the spring of 2003 by allowing seniors who had failed that particular exit exam to graduate, as long as they had passed the course that covered the content tested on the exam. In the fall of 2003, New York Commissioner of Education Richard Mills announced there was an "anomaly" in the test and introduced a new scoring system to fix the problem (Williams, 2003). Students' scores were statistically adjusted to make them comparable to what they would have scored on the 2002 Math A exam. Under the new scoring system, a student who scored a 39 would have a revised score of 55, which is a passing grade. This resulted in almost twice as many students passing the Math A exams in 2003 as originally reported (Hoff, 2003a). This incident and other flaws recently exposed on the New York Regents exams have fueled a growing backlash against the Regents testing program (Hoff, 2003b).

## Conclusion

In summary, states have sought to improve their procedures for scoring exit exams and reporting results, and some are trying interesting variations of traditional practices, such as involving teachers in scoring open-ended test questions or using computerized test administration and scoring to provide instantaneous results to students. States generally appear responsive to the need to publicly report exit exam results and provide students with detailed feedback on their performance. Most states provide students with information to help them understand their strengths and weaknesses and familiarize them with their options if they fail the exam. But several states are more reluctant when it comes to making available information that entails significant costs, such as releasing all the test items after each test administration or giving students and parents feedback about specific questions the student missed.

Together these findings suggest that states have a solid foundation of practices for scoring exams and releasing test information that they can refine by drawing on interesting ideas that are working in other places.

# 4 Chapter

## What Kinds of Exit Exam Supports and Options Are States Providing for Students?

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### Opportunity to Learn

- States appear to be paying more attention to ways to improve students' opportunity to learn what they need to know to pass exit exams. More states indicate this year that they are offering teacher and student supports to improve opportunity to learn, including professional development, materials for teachers, and remediation for students.
- The majority of states with exit exams have not commissioned external alignment reviews to determine whether schools are actually teaching the knowledge and skills being assessed by state exams—an important step in ensuring the exams are fair. In the several states that have commissioned these reviews, evaluators have generally concluded that curriculum and instruction is aligned with assessments, but have also made helpful recommendations for improving alignment, such as suggestions that states revise curriculum or provide teachers with specific kinds of professional development.
- While some states create and fund remediation at the state level, others require districts to implement these programs on their own and support them by transferring funding from other areas. Evidence continues to accumulate that remediation and prevention services can be effective in helping students pass exams, but these programs may be in jeopardy as districts and states face difficult financial situations.
- The full extra costs of remediation, professional development, and prevention services to help students pass exit exams are considerable. To simply maintain the state's current level of exit exam performance costs an estimated \$171 per

student per year in Minnesota, which has an 8th grade level exam; \$385 per student in Massachusetts, which has a more rigorous 10th grade exam; and \$557 in Indiana, which has a 10th grade exam of average difficulty. The costs rise tremendously when the goal is to increase pass rates on exams, make the exams more difficult, or raise passing scores. In Massachusetts, raising the passing cut score would cost an estimated additional \$575 per student per year. And in Indiana, increasing pass rates would escalate exam-related costs by about 150%.

### Options for Struggling Students

- Providing retesting opportunities and other paths for earning a diploma not only helps students who fail exit exams, but can also help states maintain political support for exit exams. However, these options must be similar in rigor to the exit exams, so they are not seen as an “easy way out” for poorly performing students.
- While all states allow retesting, other options to help students who cannot pass exit exams vary by state and include waivers and exemptions, alternate and substitute tests, and alternate diplomas. The strictness of these policies also differs by state.
- In general, states are increasing the options available to general education students who are having trouble passing exit exams. But data on how many students actually take advantage of these options and receive approval for them indicate that these alternatives appear to have little impact on the numbers of students receiving diplomas.

### Supports for Special Populations

- At least 19 of the 25 states with exit exams offer special waivers or exemptions, alternate assessments, or alternate graduation criteria aimed at helping students with disabilities who fail an exit exam after multiple tries to graduate with a diploma. In addition, 16 states award special diplomas or certificates of attendance to students with disabilities who cannot pass exit exams nor meet other criteria for a regular diploma.
- In general, states have not developed as many special exemptions, supports, or alternative routes to a diploma for English language learners as they have for students with disabilities. In most states, testing accommodations are the main form of special testing support available for English language learners.



**B**ecause the consequences of failing an exit exam can be so serious for students, states have a responsibility to ensure that students have an opportunity to learn what they need to know to pass the exams. Similarly, an exit exam system will not be viewed as fair unless states provide supports to help students who fail the exam improve their knowledge and skills so they can pass the next time. Yet another aspect of fairness involves creating alternative paths to a diploma for students who are making an effort but for various reasons cannot pass the exam after multiple tries.

Exit exams also present unique challenges for students with disabilities and English language learners, who score lower on average than other groups taking exit exams. Students in these subgroups often require accommodations (changes in the testing situation) and other special supports to be able to take the tests and have a fair chance of passing.

This chapter addresses the various kinds of supports states offer to help students pass exit exams. It is organized into three main sections:

- Opportunity to learn
- Options for struggling students
- Supports for special populations

## **OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN**

A central issue policymakers face when implementing any high-stakes test is whether students have been given an adequate opportunity to learn the content and skills being tested. When the test is an exit exam, opportunity-to-learn (OTL) issues become even more crucial, and states are under considerable pressure to ensure that students are not held accountable for learning material they have not been taught.

Despite its importance, opportunity to learn is not easy to measure. To determine whether students have an opportunity to learn what they need to know to pass exit exams, analysts often look at such issues as whether teachers are adequately prepared and qualified, whether sufficient remediation is available for struggling students, and whether curriculum and instruction are aligned with exit exams (as well as with state standards). Although these are not the only factors that influence opportunity to learn, as noted in the discussion below, they are certainly factors that can have a beneficial impact.

To determine how states are responding to opportunity-to-learn issues and what trends are emerging in this area, our survey asked states about the kinds of professional development, teacher materials, and student supports they were providing. We also asked states about their remediation policies and about actions they have taken to ensure curriculum and instruction are aligned with exit exams. In all of these areas, states have grappled with the question of how much assistance and direction to provide from the state level and how much to leave under the control of local school districts.

Our discussion of opportunity to learn begins with a quick review of some reasons why this issue is so critical. We also review major events and state actions of the past year relating to OTL and exit exams. Next, we describe our survey findings about state efforts to ensure teachers are qualified to implement exit exams, provide student remediation and other supports, and align curriculum and instruction with

exams. We end the analysis of OTL with a discussion of the costs of remediation and other services necessary to prepare students to pass exit exams.

### The Importance of OTL

To many citizens, ensuring opportunity to learn is a matter of fundamental fairness and has been a rallying point around which they have organized to oppose exit exams. In fact, the movement among states to adopt more challenging, standards-based exit exams has intensified concerns about OTL, because students need to learn more to pass these exams than they did to pass minimum competency exams.

### Disparities in OTL

The wide disparities in educational performance among racial, ethnic, and income groups, among different school districts, and among different schools within the same district suggest that at least some students are not being provided with an adequate opportunity to learn what they need to know to pass exit exams. Our own data on pass rates, described in chapter 2, document the serious performance gaps by race, ethnicity, and income that exist in most states with exit exams. Other data show the wide disparities in exit exam performance that exist among different districts and schools. In Massachusetts, for example, the percentage of students who pass the state exit exam on the first try varies from 50% in some low-income communities to 100% in a few wealthy neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2003d). For students who entered high school in New York in 1999, almost 94% of students in the average district in the state passed the English Regents exam, while only 76% of students in New York City's high schools passed (Lewin, 2004).

Often, the schools with the lowest passing rates on exit exams are those that lack other elements associated with an adequate opportunity to learn, such as well-qualified and experienced teachers, stable and effective leadership, up-to-date learning materials, and a safe, well-maintained school environment. For example, a report by the Education Trust showed that in high-poverty middle schools, which often have low-performing students, over one-third of classes were taught by teachers who lacked certification in that subject (Jerald, 2002). Furthermore, some research suggests that teachers placed outside of their field may be less effective. Middle school math students whose teachers were math majors scored higher on NAEP tests than students whose teachers were not (Education Trust, 1998).

### Legal Challenges

Opportunity-to-learn issues are also critical because they sometimes form the basis of lawsuits challenging high-stakes testing policies. In fact, the movement toward standards-based exit exams has fueled these lawsuits because some state courts have viewed state content standards as an explicit declaration of what students should be learning and have used them to determine whether schools are providing students with an adequate education.

Our previous reports have highlighted several lawsuits contending that state departments and boards of educations have not provided certain students with an adequate opportunity to learn tested material. Many of these lawsuits were filed on behalf of specific student groups, such as students with disabilities or racial-ethnic

## BOX 7: PROJECT GRADUATION IN VIRGINIA

In June 2003, Virginia Governor Mark Warner (D) announced a set of pilot programs called Project Graduation that were designed to help the class of 2004 meet the new state requirement to pass end-of-course exit exams. To provide supplemental assistance to this group of students, Governor Warner created three pilot programs for students and one project to demonstrate best practices in tracking student progress toward graduation. By testing these programs, the state hoped to find approaches that are particularly successful in boosting graduation. Project Graduation included:

- A three-week intensive summer academy in four state regions that provided tailored instruction in reading, writing, and algebra for seniors who had passed required courses but not state exams. These classes featured small student-teacher ratios.
- Online tutorials in English, math, science, and social studies that were developed by a local school system. These tutorials allowed students who had not passed exams to learn and prepare at their own pace.
- Scholarships for rising seniors to take online distance learning courses in English. Local school districts designed these scholarships for students who needed to earn English credits and prepare for state exams. The program also made available additional, low-cost, online courses in math, science, and history.
- A grant for one county to share best practices from a “case manager” approach to help students meet graduation requirements. Under this approach, each junior who has passed fewer than four of the six required tests is assigned a case manager, who works with the student and his or her parents on attendance and other issues affecting achievement. Rising seniors who still have not passed tests are placed in remedial classes instead of electives. The county will develop a website and training materials on its approach for other school systems.

In addition to initiating the pilot programs, the state distributed more than 200,000 brochures to schools in January 2003 to help students and parents learn more about new graduation requirements (Virginia Department of Education, 2003a). Also, the state established a toll-free hotline in October 2003 to provide parents, teachers, and students with information about requirements and available resources.

After the remedial academies succeeded in helping over 75% of participating students pass exams, the state made plans to expand the program to other sites around the state. The department of education also plans to offer online tutorials for all students who have failed the English Standards of Learning test (Virginia Department of Education, 2003b; Virginia Department of Education, 2004).

minority groups with consistently lower average passing rates than other students. For example, in 2003, the Council for Fair School Finance sued Massachusetts seeking more education resources for low-income communities (Rothstein, 2003d). The State Superior Court agreed with the claim, and the ruling was sent to the Supreme Judicial Court, which will review the case in October 2004 (Rothstein, 2004b). Another pending case in Massachusetts was filed on behalf of students who failed the MCAS exam. This suit claims that the exam unfairly discriminates against minority and special education students who are not adequately prepared to pass it (Tench, 2004). Although the outcomes of these types of lawsuits have varied, the threat of litigation may be influencing some states to change their policies.

### State Actions Related to OTL

Motivated by public concerns about fairness, lawsuits, and other factors, several state legislatures have revisited their original exit exam policies and are making changes to give students a better opportunity to learn.

The Virginia legislature passed a bill in 2004 to provide additional funds for services to low-income students at risk of failing the state exit exam (Ryan, 2004). In addition, the governor of Virginia created a pilot program in 2003 called Project Graduation, which combined summer academies, online tutorials, distance learning, and increased testing information to help students in the class of 2004 meet the new requirement to pass end-of-course exams before receiving a diploma (Warner, 2003). Box 7 describes this state effort.

In an effort to improve learning supports for students, the Nevada legislature instructed the state board of education to develop an elective course for students having trouble with the state exam. The state sought to preserve local control by allowing districts to choose whether to offer the course (Ryan, 2003). In Washington, the state board of education has encouraged the legislature to address OTL concerns and warned lawmakers that if they fail to provide funding for remediation, the state could face a legal challenge (Shaw, 2004f).

Some states, including Maryland, California, and Washington, have responded to perceived deficits in OTL by delaying implementation of their exit exams or providing relatively long implementation timelines for the tests. This approach is intended to give students more time to learn tested material and the state more time to enact mechanisms to ensure that students are adequately prepared and that tests are aligned with curriculum and instruction. When voting on whether to proceed with new exit exams in June 2004, the Maryland Board of Education was very attentive to OTL issues, a major reason why the tests had been previously delayed. In responding to critics who opposed the exams because of OTL concerns, the board members noted that the exams were aligned with standards that had been implemented by 1997 and that the timeline had previously been adjusted to allow districts to update instruction. In addition, the board stressed that money had been allocated for academic intervention to improve performance on the exit exams and that teachers would be highly qualified to teach tested material (Grasmick, 2004). Box 8 presents a more detailed description of how Maryland has proposed to address OTL.

Washington and California have also considered OTL issues in implementing their exit exams. Both states have also asked the organizations that are doing independent evaluations of their exam systems to address OTL.

## BOX 8: OTL COMPONENTS OF THE HSA PROGRAM IN MARYLAND

**M**aryland was cognizant of opportunity-to-learn issues in implementing its new end-of-course exit exams. The state board of education implemented numerous components of its High School Assessments program before voting in 2004 to make the exams a graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2009. In addition to outlining steps the state has taken to prepare students for exit exams, the board provided written responses to public testimony offered at earlier meetings. The state has worked hard to ensure that students and teachers have clear and rigorous standards and adequate support and assistance from the state to reach those goals. To ensure that Maryland students have an adequate opportunity to learn, the state has taken the following measures:

- Ensured alignment between tests and state standards and curriculum. The state has also worked to align the HSA tests with the Maryland State Assessments, tests students take at lower grade levels.
- Reported student subscores to help teachers identify which standards students are struggling with. In addition, the state plans to develop a skills analysis for each exam to provide even more detailed information about student performance.
- Begun developing diagnostic assessments in tested subjects to help teachers monitor student learning and adjust instruction well before exams are given
- Initiated development of online courses to be used for remediation or review
- Mandated a final data review in 2008 before the exam formally becomes a graduation requirement to ensure the exam has not adversely affected certain groups of students or increased the dropout rate
- Convened a task force to investigate options for alternative assessments for students with special needs
- Provided extensive additional funding to school systems, including funds specifically targeted for at-risk students
- Created reasonable state standards that clearly outline skills students should acquire in high school and that have been independently evaluated
- Set reasonable exam passing scores that are attainable and fair for all students
- Allowed students to pass with a combined score on all four required exit tests, even if they fail one of the tests; a minimum score on each subtest will be required, however.

*Source: Grasmick, 2004*

In 2003, Washington contracted with Educational Service District 101 to analyze how well the state was meeting legal requirements, addressing fairness issues, and implementing best practices to enhance students' opportunity to learn. Drawing from surveys of students, parents, teachers, and administrators, the study showed that most teachers were familiar with state standards and that instructional alignment was improving. Sixty-three percent of high school teachers said they agreed mostly or completely with the statement that teachers in their schools have had the opportunity to learn the skills they need to teach the standards effectively. In addition, the researchers found that some extra supports were available for students, although the study recommended increasing supplemental services for students with emotional and physical problems and providing more extensive general remedial classes. While 61% of high school teachers agreed mostly or completely with the statement that resources were sufficient for regular education students to reach the standards, only 39% agreed mostly or completely that there were enough resources available to provide an adequate level of support services to address students' social, emotional, and physical problems that interfere with their opportunity to learn. Forty-two percent of these same teachers said that 10% or fewer of the students who need extra help to meet the state standards were being adequately served. The researchers also recommended providing greater support for teachers and staff and additional resources to complete curricular alignment (Educational Service District 101, 2003).

In California, when early results from the CAHSEE studies indicated that up to 20% of students might fail the math exam, legislators were persuaded to vote in 2003 to postpone the exam for two years (Coleman, 2003). State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell noted that the delay was enacted because not all students had been provided with a fair opportunity to learn (Bowler, 2003a). More recent reports of the CAHSEE study (Wise et al., 2004) found that although curriculum was becoming better aligned with state standards, many students lacked the preparation to succeed in high school classes and required remediation. Those who were inadequately prepared were disproportionately special needs students; the study found that 62% of high school English language arts teachers felt that few special education students were well prepared for their course, and 42% felt that few ELL students were well prepared. In response to these statistics, however, the researchers cited evidence that the state was beginning to develop more programs and supports for struggling students. The study also found that not all subgroups of students were receiving equal access to standards-based instruction, with special education students lagging furthest behind. Over 50% of principals estimated that fewer than half the students with disabilities in Special Day Classes (SDC) were receiving instruction based on content standards. The findings and recommendations from these reports are providing states with valuable information and ideas for targeting resources to help support teachers and students and may provide a model for other states struggling with OTL issues.

### Ensuring That Teachers Are Qualified and Prepared

This year's survey by the Center on Education Policy asked states for more extensive information about state policies and supports for teachers and students. Most research on opportunity to learn in a high-stakes testing environment focuses on a set of key factors, including highly qualified and well-prepared teachers, adequate supports and remediation for students, and good alignment between exams and cur-

**TABLE 8: TEACHER SUPPORTS PROVIDED BY STATES**

State	Information Guides	Lesson Plans	Curriculum Guides	Other Supports	None	Did Not Respond
Alabama	✓	✓				
Alaska	✓					
Arizona	✓					
California	✓			✓		
Florida						✓
Georgia	✓	✓	✓			
Idaho					✓	
Indiana	✓					
Louisiana	✓	✓	✓			
Maryland					✓	
Massachusetts	✓					
Minnesota	✓					
Mississippi	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Nevada					✓	
New Jersey	✓					
New Mexico						✓
New York	✓		✓			
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓			
Ohio	✓	✓	✓			
South Carolina						✓
Tennessee	✓	✓	✓			
Texas	✓					
Utah	✓		✓			
Virginia		✓	✓	✓		
Washington	✓					

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

riculum and instruction. While all states have taken measures to address OTL issues, they differ greatly in their approach and where they choose to centralize control.

Meeting the goal of well-trained and highly qualified teachers entails assigning teachers to subjects they are certified to teach, providing appropriate professional development, and training teachers how to use feedback from tests to guide instruction. Our survey results indicate that states are using a variety of methods to help ensure that teachers are adequately prepared and receive ongoing training and support.

Many states indicated on their surveys that they have specific professional development programs to help teachers better prepare students for exit exams. We asked states whether they had programs that provided teachers with instruction in how to teach test-taking skills, training on how to interpret test results, and information on the content of the state exit exams. Seven states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia) responded that they train teachers in all three areas. Five states (California, Indiana, New York, North Carolina, and Washington) train teachers in two of the areas noted, while Maryland and New Jersey report offering training in one area. Eleven states said that they have not established these types of professional development programs or did not respond; these include Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Texas. Texas noted, however, that the state has a Teacher Quality Grant Program to help teachers increase their content knowledge of tested material. These surveys may not fully reflect all professional development opportunities because in many states these could be administered on a district or local level. In addition, a few states are in the very early stages of test implementation and may still be developing related programs. Several states noted they offered other types of professional development including having teachers grade practice exams, assisting teachers in aligning instruction, helping teachers in how to prepare special populations, and offering specific guidance on instructional strategies for remediation.

The survey data also show that 19 of 25 states with exit exams have developed materials about the exams at the state level to help teachers, as shown in Table 8. Idaho, Maryland, and Nevada responded that they had not developed these materials, and Florida, New Mexico, and South Carolina did not respond. The most common exam material given to teachers was an information guide about the test, provided by 18 states. Nine states gave teachers curriculum guides based on exams, and eight provided lesson plans to assist in test preparation. Many states provided teachers with several of these resources. It should be noted, too, that in some states, local school districts may be creating their own exam-related materials for teachers or supplementing the materials from the state. Although we surveyed states specifically about curriculum guides, lesson plans, and informational guides about tests, some states reported that they use additional materials to help teachers, such as copies of prior exams and instructional notebooks for remediation. Also, Maryland reported that it is developing online instructional courseware to assist teachers in alignment of curriculum.

States are clearly recognizing that professional development and access to test-related materials are essential for teachers to perform at high levels and afford their students an opportunity to learn. Whether this assistance is best provided at the state level or implemented locally, professional development and access to testing resources can help teachers tailor their instruction to student needs and align it to the standards being assessed—another element of opportunity to learn.



**TABLE 9: STUDENT SUPPORTS PROVIDED BY STATES**

State	After-school Tutorial Program	Weekend Tutorial Program	Computer-based Program	Study Guide	Summer School	Other	None	Did Not Respond
Alabama							✓	
Alaska							✓	
Arizona							✓	
California				✓				
Florida								✓
Georgia				✓				
Idaho							✓	
Indiana							✓	
Louisiana			✓		✓			
Maryland							✓	
Massachusetts			✓			✓		
Minnesota							✓	
Mississippi			✓	✓		✓		
Nevada				✓				
New Jersey							✓	
New Mexico							✓	
New York							✓	
North Carolina						✓		
Ohio							✓	
South Carolina								✓
Tennessee							✓	
Texas			✓	✓				
Utah			✓					
Virginia	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Washington						✓		

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

## Ensuring That Students Are Prepared for Exit Exams

Students need various kinds of support to help prepare them to pass exit exams. These include materials about the exam, remedial opportunities, and diagnostic assessments of their learning strengths and weaknesses.

### Test-related Materials, Preparation, and Remediation

According to our survey, some states have developed preparation and remediation materials for students at the state level while others have not. States were asked whether they have developed after-school tutorial programs, weekend tutorial programs, computer-based programs, study guides for students, summer school programs, or any other programs or materials to help students prepare for or retake the test. As shown in Table 9, states are using a variety of approaches. Virginia was the only state that indicated it has after-school and weekend tutorial programs, although school districts in other states may offer these programs at their own discretion. Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Texas, Utah, and Virginia responded that they have computer-based programs, while California, Georgia, Mississippi, Nevada, and Texas indicated that they have study guides for students. Both Louisiana and Virginia said they have summer school programs related to their tests, while Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Washington have developed other student remediation materials, including sample student work, web tutorials, student handbooks, and practice tests. Virginia also offers an electronic practice test on the state department of education website with items from past exams.

The remaining 14 states indicated that they had not developed these types of materials or did not respond to the question. Arizona and Tennessee noted that this is the school districts' responsibility, which is likely true in other states. Although we did not ask this in our survey, we assume that local districts may have developed remediation and preparation materials in states that have not done this at the state level.

For students who are struggling, remediation is essential to help them pass demanding exit exams. Evidence from some states suggests that students are taking advantage of remedial assistance, and that remediation can improve their test performance. A 2003 study in Massachusetts by the Mass Education and Insight Research Institute (2003b) found that nearly 82% of students who did not pass the MCAS on their first attempt reported having participated in opportunities for extra help in 2002–03. Among students who participated in state-funded remedial programs, more than 75% of those who participated in ELA remediation and 67% of those in math remediation went on to pass MCAS retests. A continuing problem, however, was that the students who had the most significant needs were often not involved. Another study conducted in 2003 by the same group also found that students were generally satisfied with the assistance they were receiving and gave the teachers and program high marks (Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2003a). The most recent research from this organization indicated that students participating in state-funded remediation had subsequent retest passing rates of 25 to 30 percentage points higher than their peers who did not participate. In addition, 65% of those who passed cited participating in remediation programs as the reason they were able to pass the retest (Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2004b).

In California, the CAHSEE evaluation by HumRRO found that the number of remedial programs in the state designed to help students who do not initially

**TABLE 10: STATE REMEDIATION POLICIES**

State	Requires Districts to Provide Remediation	Requires Students to Attend Remediation
Alabama	✓	
Alaska		
Arizona		
California	✓	
Florida	✓	
Georgia		
Idaho		
Indiana	✓	
Louisiana	✓	
Maryland*	✓	✓
Massachusetts		
Minnesota	✓	
Mississippi		
Nevada	✓	
New Jersey	✓	✓
New Mexico		
New York	✓	✓
North Carolina	✓	
Ohio	✓	
South Carolina	✓	NA
Tennessee	✓	✓
Texas	✓	
Utah	✓	
Virginia	✓	
Washington	✓	

NA = not available

\* Students in Maryland are required to attend remediation before they can retest.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

master relevant content standards has recently increased dramatically. The study also reported that many teachers and principals feel that the requirement for remediation should be continued (Wise et al., 2004).

Our survey asked states whether they require school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the state exam. As shown, in Table 10, 18 states responded that they require school districts to provide these services, but only 3 states (Tennessee, New York, and New Jersey) require students who fail exit exams to attend the district's remedial program. Maryland students must attend if they want to retake the exam, and in some states, participating in remediation is often a condition of being granted a waiver or appeal. Seven states (Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New Mexico) do not require school districts to provide remedial services, although Mississippi recommends that all districts provide remediation and has sent them guidelines on how to do this. Georgia noted that although the state does not require districts to offer remediation, all systems offer some form of assistance for struggling students. Information about some of South Carolina's policies was not available. As a part of remediation, some states, including Minnesota and Washington, require schools to develop individual plans for students who have failed initial exam administrations. Since last year there have been few changes in remediation policies. Utah now requires districts to offer remediation, and Washington will add this requirement in 2005, while Massachusetts dropped its requirement after funding was cut.

State policies for funding remediation and related supports for students are described later in this section.

### **Diagnostic and Formative Evaluations**

Although identifying struggling students early could give states more time to prepare students for exit exams and conduct remediation, very few states report developing or using diagnostic or formative evaluations to identify students at risk of failing exit exams. This may be due to a desire to minimize the testing load for students and schools. However, as CEP's cost studies have suggested, earlier interventions can sometimes reduce or eliminate the need for later, more costly remediation. Although there are other means of identifying students at risk of failure besides formative assessments, only four states currently use formative assessments to place students in preventive programs or help teachers modify instruction before students fail the actual exam. Alabama administers its exit exam to 10th graders the year before they take the high school exit exam as a requirement for graduation—the only state to offer a comprehensive practice test to all students. Georgia administers end-of-course exams to students as part of other state assessment requirements, and teachers can use the diagnostic data from these tests to address weaknesses in content areas tested on the GHSGT.

Virginia uses an Algebra Readiness Diagnostic test before students take the required Algebra I portion of the exit exam and provides intervention for those who score poorly. The state did not indicate whether it intends to create additional readiness tests in other subjects. Ohio also has a practice test that is aligned to the graduation test but is only required in low-performing districts. Results from the tests are used to provide assistance for students who are not making sufficient progress toward meeting the standards. Finally, Maryland responded that it is developing formative assessments that will provide diagnostic and instructional help for teachers

and students related to its High School Assessments. The Maryland algebra and biology tests will be ready for the 2004–05 school year and the English assessment will be ready by September 2005. All other states indicated that they had not developed specific diagnostic assessments to prepare for exit exams, although Florida, South Carolina, and Utah did not respond. However, many districts and schools likely use other standards-based tests for diagnostic purposes that are part of their state’s existing assessment system.

### Aligning Exit Exams with Curriculum and Instruction

The alignment between teaching and testing is another crucial element of opportunity to learn. In addition to ensuring that exit exams are aligned with state standards, as discussed in chapter 3, states are also struggling to align curriculum and instruction with exit exams to guarantee that students are being taught the material they are tested on. While a handful of states have done either internal or external reviews to evaluate this alignment, many states have not performed this analysis.

On the Center’s state survey, only 10 of the 25 states with exit exams reported having undertaken studies of alignment between exit exams and curriculum and instruction. Six states reported having conducted external reviews—California, Georgia, Mississippi, New Jersey, Texas, and Washington. Of these, the Center was only able to obtain copies of the California, Texas, and Washington studies for a variety of reasons. Georgia’s study is preliminary and needs approval from the state board of education before it can be disseminated. An external review by Achieve, Inc. is underway for New Jersey but was not complete as of June 2004, and Mississippi indicated that copies of its review were not available to the public. Another four states reported conducting internal studies, although only New York’s report was available.

Twelve states responded that they had not undertaken any studies of curriculum and exam alignment, although Nevada noted that it planned to do this type of study in the summer of 2004, and Idaho indicated that it is planning a review to begin in August 2004. Virginia reported that although it has not undertaken a formal study, its exit exam is aligned to state standards, and district superintendents must verify that local instruction is following standards. Similar procedures may also be in place in others states to ensure alignment. Finally, three states—Florida, South Carolina, and Tennessee—did not respond to this question.

Some states consider their standards to be curriculum frameworks, so if they have conducted an evaluation of the alignment of their standards with the exit exam, they may generalize the results as applicable to curriculum. In answering the survey question about curriculum and exam alignment, Texas and New Jersey referred us to the Achieve, Inc. studies of standards and exam alignment that had been completed or were underway. While these studies may provide some useful information if states consider their standards and instruction fully aligned, separate studies may still be helpful to understand more fully whether instruction and exams are aligned.

An internal state study in New York assessed how well instruction is aligned with the state standards and the state Regents testing system. Through a survey of parents, teachers, administrators, and high school students, the research committee found that alignment activities were in place across the state but were not occurring evenly throughout the state. More teachers from low-need and high-resource areas reported

district and school alignment activities than their colleagues in high-need and low-resource areas. The teachers surveyed also felt that instruction in English language arts was better aligned with state assessments than math instruction. The report further noted that districts reporting a greater number of curriculum alignment activities had higher scores on English language arts exams. Additionally, the study found that districts with fewer barriers in implementing state standards, such as inadequate resources or planning time, had higher math scores. These results underscore the benefits of aligning instruction with exams (New York State Education Department, 2003).

The Washington State study mentioned earlier concluded that the state's teachers had a good level of familiarity with state standards and that the curriculum was largely aligned at the elementary level and becoming more so at the secondary level. The researchers also found that results of assessments were guiding instruction. Those surveyed suggested, however, that to help students master tested material, teachers needed more professional development and access to aligned materials, and students needed more support services and information about curriculum alignment. These recommendations highlight the importance of providing both teachers and students with clear information about the coordination between instructional expectations and exit exams (Educational Service District 101, 2003).

The 2003 report of the HumRRO study of California's exam concluded that schools in that state were continuing to expand standards-based instruction and provide help to struggling students. But according to the study, professional development in aligned instruction was lacking. Even with positive signs of instructional alignment at both the middle and high school levels, the study recommended that the state continue to monitor instruction. One problem identified through the research was that students were sometimes enrolled in standards-based classes that covered material tested on CAHSEE without sufficient previous preparation and were therefore unable to succeed, even though they were receiving exam-aligned instruction. As a result, the researchers recommended additional professional development to make existing instruction more effective (Wise et al., 2003).

As states seek to ensure fairness in their exams and improve student performance, more states may turn to external reviews to guarantee that curriculum and instruction are closely matched. These reviews have generally concluded that instruction is aligned to assessments, but often they also provide states with helpful recommendations for improvement. These types of analyses are important because they close the loop begun with the studies of alignment between exams and standards described in chapter 3. Based on recommendations from the exam and curriculum alignment studies, some states may find that they need to revise their curriculum to better prepare students for tests that require more advanced knowledge. When curriculum and instruction more closely match tests, student performance should improve.

### Other Factors Affecting OTL

Although teacher qualifications, opportunities for remediation, and alignment between exams and curriculum and instruction have a strong impact on students' opportunity to learn, they are not the only factors influencing OTL. The Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy at MassINC, an independent policy

organization dedicated to improving public education in Massachusetts, conducted an evaluation of Massachusetts student supports in 2004 and made a variety of recommendations to the state about how to improve opportunity to learn (Reville, Candon & Coggins, 2004). The group recommended that the state clarify the district and state roles in remediation, evaluate the effectiveness of various programs to help students pass exams, analyze students' access to resources, and do a better job of tracking failing students. Some groups concerned with OTL have suggested much broader supports, including reduced class sizes and improved student preparation as early as elementary school.

## Funding for and Costs of Opportunity to Learn

Addressing opportunity-to-learn issues is expensive. Many states are facing serious budget crises that compromise their ability to support remediation and other necessary services to help students pass exit exams.

## Costs of Implementing Exit Exam Policies

Research commissioned by the Center on Education Policy has found that the costs of exit exams—and particularly the costs of helping students meet the standards set by these exams—are considerable. Two studies commissioned by the Center and conducted by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA)<sup>1</sup> suggest that the bulk of costs associated with implementing exit exams are attributable to professional development for teachers, remediation for students who have failed the exams, and services to prevent students from failing—essentially the same factors that are critical to opportunity to learn. Box 9 summarizes the findings of the Center's recent work on exit exam costs. A more in-depth discussion of findings and policy recommendations appears in the Center's publication, *Pay Now or Pay Later: The Hidden Costs of High School Exit Exams* (available at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)).

## Funding for and Costs of Remediation

Remediation is only one cost of exit exams, but for states with lower passing rates, it can bear a heavy price tag. Some states provide funding for districts to establish remediation programs for failing students, while others expect districts to pay for these programs. Our survey indicates that many states have chosen to administer at least some level of support at the state level, though how extensively districts are supplementing these programs remains unclear.

This year our survey asked states how much targeted funding they commit to remediation for students who fail the exam. The figures ranged from zero in Alaska, Tennessee, and Washington to millions in states like Louisiana, Ohio, Indiana, and Massachusetts. This wide span is largely because some states administer these programs at the state level and others expect school districts to use general state funds for remediation or transfer district funds from other areas to pay for remediation. Many states did not respond to our question, perhaps because they expect districts to pay for remediation. Several states, including California, Georgia, Maryland, New

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly Augenblick and Meyers

## BOX 9: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF CEP STUDY OF EXIT EXAM COSTS

In 2002 and 2003, the Center on Education Policy commissioned two studies by Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA) to examine the costs of exit exams in Indiana, Minnesota, and Massachusetts and make comparisons among the states. To determine costs, the studies relied largely on the professional expertise and judgment of panels of veteran service providers, including teachers, principals, curriculum and assessment specialists, special education professionals, and finance directors. The research team used price estimates from state educational cost data to calculate the estimated costs per pupil of the services and activities that the panels deemed necessary to enable students to meet the exam requirement.

The studies specifically evaluated the costs of using the exam as a graduation requirement. This meant omitting the costs of designing a high school exam (which states would have to do anyway under the No Child Left Behind Act) but including the costs of retests, which generally are necessary only when the high school test is a diploma requirement. In a similar vein, the costs of preventing general academic failure were not included, but the costs of special remediation programs for students who fail exams were. Based on this methodology, the two studies reached several important conclusions:

- Exit exams are not cheap solutions for states to bring students to proficiency. The costs of maintaining the current level of student achievement on exit exams range greatly, from \$171 per student per year in Minnesota to \$557 per student per year in Indiana. In the middle, it cost \$385 per student per year to maintain current performance on Massachusetts' exit exam.
- The variations in costs among states result from differences in test difficulty, baseline student performance, the degree of alignment of exams with state standards, and other factors.
- If exams are well integrated into a comprehensive system of reforms, as in Massachusetts, they may not be as costly, even when the exams are difficult. This is probably because early efforts to assess and track student performance and address problems quickly can prevent later problems that require more costly and widespread interventions.
- The direct costs of testing, such as administering tests and providing score reports, are only a small percentage of the total costs associated with exit exams. The bulk of the costs are for "hidden" expenses such as remediation for students who fail the exams, professional development for teachers, and programs to prevent student failure. In Massachusetts and Indiana, costs are split relatively evenly among remediation, teacher professional development, and prevention efforts, with these activities together totaling over 80% of costs. In Minnesota, where the exam has been a requirement for several years, prevention efforts account for a majority of costs, with comparatively smaller costs for remediation and very few professional development expenses.
- In all three states, the vast majority of costs were borne at the local level. Even though states may provide funding for remediation, these funds do not cover all the costs related to exit exams that school districts incur. Districts frequently meet these financial obligations by shifting existing resources, which are often insufficient to move students beyond current performance levels.
- The costs of providing support for English language learners and students with disabilities are significant but often disregarded. Panels of experts estimating costs in Indiana initially did not consider these additional costs. The additional costs of preparing special needs students for exams is likely to be higher in states where the exams are targeted to higher grade-level standards. In Massachusetts, the extra costs of preparing English language learners add about \$101 per pupil per year, or about one-third, to the total costs associated with exit exams for both ELL and non-ELL students.
- It takes a large amount of extra funding to increase pass rates on exams, make the exams more difficult, or raise passing scores. In Minnesota, panels estimated that aligning the state's exit exam to 10th grade standards instead of 8th grade standards, as it is now, would triple the total exam-related costs. In Massachusetts, to raise the passing cut score would cost an estimated additional \$575 per student per year. And in Indiana, increasing pass rates would raise testing costs by about 150%.



York, North Carolina, and Texas, noted that state funds were available that could be used for remediation by districts but were not specifically targeted for this purpose.

States also chose different ways to allocate funds for remediation. Indiana chose to provide funds to districts using a three-tiered method based on student and district performance: specifically, funds are allocated to districts based on how far below the passing score the district's average test scores fall, so the worse students perform, the more money a district receives. Using this process, the state targeted \$11 million of assistance to grades 10–12 in 2002–03. Louisiana used a different strategy and in 2003–04 allocated \$2.7 million in remediation funding to districts on a per pupil basis for grades 10–11. Massachusetts decided to target assistance more broadly. In 2002–03, this state provided \$50 million in remediation funding for students in grades 4–12; districts were required to submit applications for these grants. Virginia also used a grants system to allocate funds for remediation, but on a much smaller scale. In 2003–04, the first year the Virginia exam was a graduation requirement, the state provided a \$75,000 grant to each of the eight regions in the state to provide remediation for high school seniors.

Ohio has also provided districts with state funds to develop and implement remediation programs. In 2004, the state allocated \$3.7 million to be used for remediation for 9th grade students who are at risk of failing in the upcoming year. In 2005, \$5.9 million will be available to districts for salaries, materials, and training to provide supplemental services to students in after-school, weekend, or summer programs. For a handful of states in which graduation exams have consequences only in the future, the question of how to pay for remedial services is currently less relevant. Idaho noted on its survey that since the state exam is new, the state has not developed remediation programs at this time.

Sustaining state funding for remediation has been a challenge in some states. Faced with serious budget problems, Massachusetts dramatically scaled back funding for its remediation programs from \$50 million in 2002–03 to only \$10 million in 2003–04, leading to the elimination of many after-school classes and reductions in the number of students being served. In addition, the state restricted its funded services to juniors and seniors only and eliminated the broader K–10 supports it had initially created. Despite the pleas of educators and administrators and positive evaluation findings about the value of remediation in Massachusetts, state officials did not reinstate the cut funds (Vaishnav, 2004a).

Some states provide no funding for remediation and expect districts to reallocate funding from existing programs. The benefit to state-level programs is that they are standardized and can provide assistance to districts that lack capacity to create their own programs, while local-level programs allow for greater flexibility and innovation and, at times, lower costs.

## Concluding Observations

Most states have addressed the critical issue of opportunity to learn by providing a mix of teacher and student supports and seeking to better align instruction with standards and exams. Our survey data indicate, however, that some states may be leaving much of this responsibility to districts. As states continue to implement exit exams, we suggest they conduct studies to assess OTL, like those commissioned by Washington and California. This research will help shed light on whether students

are receiving the services and supports they need to master essential knowledge and skills and how states can improve student performance on exams.

## OPTIONS FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

As we noted last year, testing programs in most states include a variety of options to help students struggling to pass exit exams earn a diploma. Providing retesting opportunities and alternate means to earn a diploma not only helps students, but also helps states maintain political support for exit exams amid anti-testing sentiments, opposition groups, and widespread press reports about competent students who for one reason or another cannot pass an exit exam. This section focuses on options for general education students to earn a regular diploma; the last section of this chapter discusses special options for students with disabilities and English language learners.

Retesting is a universal method used by the states to give students multiple opportunities to pass exit exams and to identify problem areas for students who fail. However, the range of other policies to deal with students who for a variety of reasons cannot pass an exit exam is quite wide. States have not reached consensus about a particular set of policies. Some states offer numerous opportunities for students to retake exams, others very few. Some states have alternate diplomas or certificates for students who attended high school but did not pass the exam, while others do not. A handful of states have alternate or substitute assessments, but most do not. Waiver policies can be lenient or stringent, where they exist at all.

States are continuing to address problems related to alternate paths to a diploma, such as when to permit waivers of exam requirements, what kinds of appeals process to establish for granting these waivers, and whether and how to institute alternate tests or different types of diplomas. In general, there is a trend toward increasing, rather than limiting student options.

Several issues received increased attention during the 2003-04 school year. One interesting development is how students and parents are finding alternate means to a diploma on their own. For instance, some reports indicated an increase in GED enrollments, and some Florida students are earning diplomas from online schools. During the past year, concerns have also persisted about alternate assessments being used as an “easy way out” for general education students. Finally, some parents, educators, and advocacy groups have shown resistance to the introduction of tiered diplomas.

Table 11 summarizes the options for obtaining a diploma that states provide to students who have trouble passing exit exams and some of the controversies surrounding them. Table 12, on pages 110-111, shows the advantages and drawbacks of each of these policy options for ensuring that students have alternate routes to a diploma. The state profiles at the end of this report provide more details about each state’s policies.

### Retesting Opportunities

Most states are fairly generous in the number of times they allow students to retake exit exams, in order to give all students a fair chance at passing and to help identify individuals who need remediation. States’ retesting policies have not changed much

**TABLE 11: STUDENT OPTIONS FOR OBTAINING A DIPLOMA**

State	Retesting	Retesting after 12th Grade	Reciprocity with Other States	Alternate Assessment	Substitute Assessment	Waivers	Alternate Diploma
Alabama	✓	✓			✓		
Alaska	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Arizona	✓	✓					
California	✓	✓					✓
Florida	✓	✓			✓		✓
Georgia	✓	✓				✓	✓
Idaho	✓	TBD	✓		✓	✓	
Indiana	✓	✓				✓	
Louisiana	✓	✓					
Maryland	✓	✓			✓		
Massachusetts	✓	✓				✓	✓
Minnesota	✓						
Mississippi	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Nevada	✓	✓					✓
New Jersey	✓	✓		✓			
New Mexico	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
New York	✓	✓			✓		
North Carolina	✓	✓			✓		✓
Ohio	✓	✓				✓	
South Carolina	✓	✓	NA	NA	NA	NA	✓
Tennessee	✓	✓					✓
Texas	✓	✓					
Utah	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Virginia	✓	✓			✓		✓
Washington	✓			✓		TBD	

NA = information not available  
 TBD = to be determined

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004

since last year. Typically, students take their first exit exam in 10th grade, and then most have a full two years to pass before the end of 12th grade. So, in the final two to three years of high school, students have a number of opportunities to pass—most typically four to seven opportunities. The full range is from two opportunities in New Jersey (more if a student is retained) to eleven opportunities in Minnesota.

In addition, almost all states allow students numerous opportunities to take the exam even after they have finished high school. In New Mexico, if a student finishes high school and has not passed the exit exam, he or she can try twice a year for the next five years. New York, North Carolina, and Maryland have an age limit of 21. Fourteen states—Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia—allow unlimited opportunities to take the exam after high school, while California allows only one. Students in South Carolina can have several opportunities depending on whether they are enrolled in an adult education program or stay actively enrolled in high school.

Retesting is not a controversial policy; it is advantageous in that it gives students multiple opportunities to succeed. It also identifies students for remediation, helping them focus on areas where their skills may fall short. Since most testing begins in the 10th grade, there is usually ample opportunity for shortcomings to be addressed. In addition, most testing experts generally agree that high-stakes decisions, such as high school graduation, should not be made on the basis of a single test, and multiple retesting opportunities are one way to address this concern. As states move to high-stakes testing programs, they generally add testing opportunities. For example, Washington State took steps to strengthen its testing program this past year. Its exams were previously administered as evaluative tools with no retests, but withholding diplomas based on the exam begins in 2008, so Governor Gary Locke signed a law allowing students four attempts to pass the exam.

One issue in retesting that has arisen this year relates to the need to provide adequate time between retests for students to receive their scores and, if they did not pass the exam, to sign up for and complete remediation opportunities by the next round of testing. Massachusetts and Florida have confronted problems in this area.

In Massachusetts, some critics feared that some students had “fallen through the cracks” between testing opportunities. Massachusetts’ students are given six tries to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The class of 2003 was the first class to have the exam as a graduation requirement, and students in this class first took the MCAS as sophomores in 2001, when 68% passed. Those who failed had five more chances to pass by July 2003, the summer after their scheduled graduation. By that time, 95% of the class had passed (Vaishnav, 2003c). The problems arose between the fifth retake opportunity in May and the sixth opportunity in July, because the dates were fairly close together, and students who needed to take the exam in the summer after their graduation seemed to scatter. Only one-third of the students who registered to retake the MCAS in order to graduate actually did so in July 2003 (Rothstein, 2003b). Of the 4,200 who had not passed by the end of the school year, 1,550 signed up for the opportunity to retake the exam in July, but only 468 actually showed up for the math portion. (Rubin, 2003a)

Jeffrey Nellhaus, associate commissioner for the Massachusetts education department, attributed the low turnout to the fact that school principals automatically

signed up all seniors who failed their previous exam, and many students were waiting for results of the previous round of retesting in May. In short, many of the students who had signed up for the July retest had passed the exam in May but did not have their scores, so their principals had apparently signed them up. Another round of MCAS retesting took place in the fall of 2003 to alleviate any confusion. In 2004 the state moved the May exam to March, so students would have their scores before their scheduled graduation and only those who actually failed would be signed up for the July 2004 exam (Vaishnav, 2003a).

The superintendent of schools for Boston had to institute a program to aggressively reach out to students who did not pass the MCAS during the summer after their senior year to make them aware of retesting opportunities. A special fall graduation ceremony was held for students who passed the July 2003 exam. Boston officials also reported having trouble identifying students who did not pass the MCAS because the city has a different method of recordkeeping than the state of Massachusetts, which administers the exam (Tench, 2003).

Florida actually made changes to its exit exam to facilitate retests; it now has one version of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test given to students on the first try and another version, which can be scored more rapidly, for retests. Florida instituted this new policy on retesting in the fall of 2003, when it eliminated open-ended questions on the math and reading portions of the exam given to students who fail the first round of the FCAT. Critics of the retest version charged that the state had “dumbed down” the exam and that the multiple-choice version was easier (Hirschman, 2003). State officials explained that the essay portions had been eliminated because scores from multiple-choice questions could be tallied more quickly by machine, allowing the state more time to identify students who needed further remediation and retesting. State officials also insisted that the questions were adjusted so their level of difficulty was equal to that of the main version FCAT, despite the lack of open-ended questions. The state also did not have to hire teams of test readers, which saved time and money (Pinzur, 2003b). However, many testing experts would argue that two exams of this nature are not equivalent in terms of the skills and content being tested, even though they may be equally difficult (Feuer et al., 1999). The two exams probably measure different sets of skills, which raises validity and fairness issues.

### Alternate Assessments

Some states use alternate or substitute assessments to address the needs of general education students who are fulfilling or have fulfilled their high school course requirements but cannot pass the exit exam. States either administer an alternate test of their own design or use an existing test as a substitute, such as the SAT.

States that allow or are considering allowing existing assessments as substitutes for their exit exams should be aware of potential validity issues associated with this practice. First, although multiple measures of students’ competence are desirable, many testing experts would argue that a test like the SAT was designed to predict success in college, not to determine whether a student has earned a high school diploma. If the SAT is used as a substitute for an exit exam, problems arise because it is not aligned with the content taught in high school. Second, states face the dilemma of where to set an appropriate cut score on the substitute test that is

equivalent to an exit exam passing score. Third, widespread use of substitute exams may undermine support for the existing exit exam, as parents or the media may ask why the state is spending money on an exit exam when an existing test like the SAT serves the same purpose, which of course it does not. If substitute tests are used, they should be aligned as closely as possible to what students are actually taught in high school, and should be similar in rigor to the state standards.

Our survey indicated that states are divided on whether to provide substitute or alternate assessments. Of the 25 states with exit exams, 14 reported that they do not allow any alternate or substitute assessments. Five states (Florida, Idaho, North Carolina, New York, and Virginia) allow nationally normed, standardized tests, such as the GED, PSAT, SAT, or ACT, to be used as a substitute test in some cases. Florida allowed the SAT and ACT to serve as a temporary substitute assessment in 2003, although only 125 students used this option. The state determined that in reading, a score of 370 on the SAT or 14 on the ACT was equivalent to passing the state exit exam; in mathematics, a passing score was 350 on the SAT or 15 on the ACT. In May 2004 the Florida legislature made the policy permanent but raised the passing scores to 370 on the SAT reading test and 410 on the math portion and 15 each on the ACT (Thomas, 2004; High school graduation, 2004). North Carolina allows students who transfer to the state to graduate if they score in the 50th percentile on a nationally-normed test or earn scores of 480 on the SAT reading and 450 on the SAT math. In Idaho, students in the class of 2006, the first class required to pass the state's exit exam, will be able to substitute scores of 17 on the ACT or 200 on the SAT for the English section of the test and a score of 19 on the ACT or 400 on the SAT in math. Maryland is in the process of developing a substitute assessment policy.

Of all the states, New York and Virginia probably have the most extensive systems of substitute testing. This is most likely because both states have end-of-course exit exams, so they have allowed specific tests on narrow topics to substitute for their own tests on those topics. Virginia allows a variety of exams to substitute for specific topics in its Standards of Learning end-of-course exams; these substitutes include the SAT, ACT, Test of English as a Foreign Language, and Advanced Placement tests, along with a variety of professional certification tests in areas ranging from information technology to hotels and hospitality. The state has set the following criteria, all of which must be met, to determine which tests are valid substitutes for its end-of-course exams:

1. The test must be standardized and graded independently of the school or school district in which the test is given.
2. The test must be knowledge-based.
3. The test must be administered on a multi-state or international basis.
4. To be counted in a specific academic area, the test must measure content that incorporates or exceeds the SOL content in the course for which credit is given.

New York primarily uses Advanced Placement and SAT II tests in specific topics. The number of students taking the substitute tests in both states is very small—0.1% of students in New York and 0.08% of students in Virginia.

State-developed alternate assessments for general education students are rare and have not been without controversy. Only three states—Mississippi, New Jersey, and Washington—have their own alternate assessments. In addition, the Maryland

State Board of Education appointed a task force to investigate whether an assessment that is comparable to the state's exit exam in difficulty and content but is not a traditional pencil-and-paper test could be designed for potential use by all students (Bowler, 2004c). The task force will have three years to determine the feasibility of such a plan (Sack, 2004).

In Mississippi, only two students were given the state's alternate evaluation in 2003. Washington has yet to develop its alternate assessment, as legislation allowing for its creation was enacted just this past year. But in New Jersey, over 14,000 students took the alternate assessment, leading officials to consider doing away with it altogether.

New Jersey instituted the Special Review Assessment (SRA) in 1985 as an alternative to the regular High School Proficiency Assessment for very small numbers of general education students who had test-taking anxieties. Students who fail the regular exit exam are put into remediation classes; if they continue to fail they are given the alternate SRA. The SRA is administered and graded by the student's own teachers and contains a number of untimed questions. The SRA can also be given in several languages.

The New Jersey State Board of Education noticed a dramatic spike in the numbers of students taking the SRA over the past few years, leading some officials to believe that students saw the test as an easy way to get a diploma. In 2003, 14,651 students, accounting for 15% of New Jersey's graduates, received a diploma through the SRA; in 2002, the number taking the SRA was only 9,500. For 2004, officials believe the number may top 20,000 (Mooney, 2004). When special education students, already exempt from the exit exam requirement, are factored in, nearly a quarter of New Jersey high school students received a diploma in 2003 without taking the regular exit exam (Davis, 2004). Board members suspected the rise in the number of general education students taking the SRA was due to an increase in the difficulty of the HSPA, while some educators suspected it was due to a rising immigrant population. However, the number of English language learners taking the exam fell from 1,670 in 2002 to 1,616 in 2003. The biggest rise was in the number of general education students—from 7,600 in 2002 to 12,500 in 2003. In some urban districts, half of all students received their diploma through the SRA: in Newark the figure was more than 60%, and at Camden High School in Camden, the figure was more than 80%.

Press reports indicated that teachers were coaching their students on the SRA and in some cases allowing students several days to answer a single question. There was no uniformity in the way the test was administered. This led Education Commissioner William L. Librera to recommend doing away with the SRA altogether and changing to a system like that of Massachusetts, where students get five tries to pass the MCAS, supplemented by tutoring (Mooney, 2004). Meanwhile the New Jersey Board of Education decided to hold off and investigate ways to tighten the criteria governing who can take the SRA and to revamp the exam itself (McCarron, 2003).

In our survey, we also asked for the percentages of students who take alternate or substitute tests. Other than New Jersey (for which numbers were provided in press reports, not from our survey), only Mississippi, New York, and Virginia were able to provide numbers, given above, of students who took their substitute evaluation. Apparently the rest of the states do not keep track. This is most likely because

alternate or substitute tests are administered by districts, so the state would have to make a special effort to collect these data from all of its districts. Collecting these data would be very useful, however, to see the extent to which alternate assessments are being used as an easier or more convenient way to get a diploma. State officials could also see which districts are more likely to allow alternate assessments, in order to determine if the tests are being used in a uniform manner statewide.

### Waivers and Appeals

Waivers and appeals processes are typically designed for students who have performed adequately in high school but have trouble passing exit exams for a variety of reasons, such as illness. Waivers and appeals excuse students, on a case-by-case basis, from having to pass or take a regular exit exam. In contrast, exemptions excuse entire groups of students automatically—such as English language learners who have not been in U.S. schools for more than a couple of years or home-schooled students—from having to take the test. The key to a successful waiver policy is to be able to separate adequate students who have performed well in high school but cannot pass the exit exam from students who cannot pass the exam because they have not made an effort to learn—for example, because they have not been attending classes. A successful policy would accommodate the former group but not the latter. It would also probably result in fewer applications for waivers, saving the state administrative costs, and could be viewed as more fair.

#### BOX 10: LENIENT AND STRINGENT WAIVER POLICIES

According to the Center's survey, Ohio has a fairly stringent waiver policy. For the state's exit exam, which is scheduled to begin in 2006, a student cannot apply for a waiver unless he or she:

- Is in the last semester of school;
- Has taken remediation classes;
- Has at least a 2.5 grade point average;
- Has passed at least four of the five sections of the test;
- Has missed the cut score by 10 points or less;
- Has a 97% attendance record; and
- Has letters from teachers in the subjects he/she did not pass.

By contrast, Mississippi does not explicitly require a specific GPA or attendance record but requires only that:

- The student received a passing grade in the high school course related to the subject area failed on the exit exam; and
- The student has obtained a letter from his or her teacher in that subject area with a description of the student's performance and attendance record and examples of classroom tests he or she passed.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.*



The Center’s survey results indicate that 14 of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams—Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia—do not allow waivers or appeals of exit exam requirements for general education students. Just because states do not have waiver policies, however, does not necessarily mean that their overall testing policies are somehow more stringent than those of other states that allow waivers. As noted elsewhere in this section, Florida and North Carolina allow “certificates of completion” or “certificates of achievement” instead of full diplomas; Maryland is in the process of developing a substitute test policy; New Jersey makes it relatively simple for students to take an easier alternate assessment; and Minnesota gives its students 11 chances to pass the regular exam.

The other states with exit exams have waiver policies of varying degrees of stringency. A more stringent waiver policy is not necessarily a better or more desirable one. By stringency, we simply mean the strictness of the explicit requirements to initiate a waiver or appeals process, such as requirements for grades, attendance, and documentation. Box 10 gives illustrations of Ohio’s stringent waiver policy and Mississippi’s more lenient one.

Because most states with waiver policies did not indicate on our survey how many waivers were granted in a given year, it is impossible to say that a stringent waiver policy leads to fewer waivers or that a lenient policy leads to more. Alaska, Utah, and Washington have programs that will be starting in the next few years, so the policy has not gone into effect. Other states were unable to provide data on how often waivers and appeals are granted, with the exception of Massachusetts, which handled 2,500 requests for waivers in 2003; and Indiana, which reports that 4% of students who took the test in 2003 applied for waivers.

While waiver policies may differ in terms of stringency, the basic processes are similar. First, a student must fail an exam a certain number of times or be unable to take it. Then the student must initiate an appeal and document his or her academic performance. Finally, the school district—or the state board or state department of education or both—must decide on the merits of the appeal and grant or deny a waiver. As explained below, states handle these steps in different ways.

Typically, students apply for waivers only after they have failed on a certain number of attempts to pass the state exit exam, while maintaining a good attendance record and exhibiting adequate academic performance. In Indiana, the student must fail the test at least once, in Mississippi at least twice, and in Massachusetts three times. Many states require remedial classes before an appeal can be initiated. Once these are completed and the student fails again, then the student, his or her parents, or a school district can initiate the appeals process. The question of who can initiate an appeal is partly a function of the extent to which the state’s education system is centralized or decentralized under state law, and partly a function of what states have decided in the course of forming an appeals policy. Whether the appeal is initiated by parents, teachers, or a principal does not seem to be a salient issue as much as what the criteria are for starting the waiver or appeals process.

All states’ waiver and appeals policies demand some sort of documentation that a student has mastered basic competencies that he or she did not demonstrate on the exam. In the appeal, it typically must be shown that the student has received adequate grades (usually above a C average) and attended school (for example, a 95%

attendance rate). Backup documentation is required from the student's teachers and principal affirming that the student deserves a diploma.

In most cases a state-level or district-level committee decides whether the exit exam requirement should be waived; again, this is partly a function of how state law divides power between the state government and school districts. In Indiana, for example, state law gives school principals the authority to determine whether a student has the credentials to graduate, so school principals decide who will receive a waiver. In states where district-level officials decide about waivers, they usually must inform state boards of their decisions as well as provide documentation.

Alaska delayed the implementation of its exit exam for two years, from 2002 to 2004, in part to give it time to create a workable waiver and appeals policy. First, the state board of education struggled with a policy for waiving the exam for students who suffered from a serious illness or the death of a parent in their final year. While writing the regulations for the law, the state board had to define "serious illness." It decided against including pregnancy, childbirth, treatable alcoholism, depression, and stress-related conditions. Second, the state had to decide how the appeals process would be institutionalized, settling on a system whereby students appeal to their local school board for a waiver, and if they are denied they can appeal to a committee of three people appointed by the state board of education (Pesznecker, 2003).

Defining what constitutes a serious illness also caused controversy in Florida. There, Legal Aid is providing legal support for a 15-year-old boy in a dispute with the Palm Beach County School District. After the boy's father committed suicide, the boy's psychiatrist diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder and wrote to the district that the boy should be exempted from the test. The district refused, citing the law that created the FCAT and stating that the Florida Department of Education "makes no exception for basic hardship." Florida law allows exemptions only for recent immigrants or special education students not seeking a regular diploma. Legal Aid plans to introduce a bill into the Florida legislature allowing exemptions for homeless students, those in foster care, and those with conditions such as the boy's. Lawmakers who support FCAT, however, are holding firm. State Rep. Beverly Kilmer cautioned that others would find an example of a stressful situation, leading to endless appeals and undermining of the credibility of the FCAT program (Travis, 2004).

### Alternate Diplomas

Some states have experimented with various "tiered" diplomas, whereby students are given different types of diploma based on their performance on an exit exam. In general, these efforts have been met with skepticism or public opposition. Twelve of the 25 states with exit exams do not allow them. Most of the rest award a certificate to students who complete high school but do not pass the exit exam, such as the state endorsed "certificate of attainment" that districts in Massachusetts can award to these students (Rubin, H. G., 2004b). Other states call their diplomas "certificates of achievement" or "certificates of attendance." There is no definitive research on the effects of tiered diplomas for students.

As described below, some states have abandoned tiered diplomas because of community opposition and fears that the diploma is being watered down or questions about precisely what the new diploma categories are supposed to mean. At the same time, other state education and political leaders apparently feel that tiered

diplomas provide a means to acknowledge that some work was completed by lower-achieving students or to recognize the accomplishments of higher-achieving students, while creating an incentive for all students to try harder. Also, as in the cases of Maryland and Delaware, states sometimes introduce a tiered system with a lower-level diploma for lower-achieving students after pilot and preliminary testing shows that large numbers of students would not graduate high school once the exit exam requirement kicked in.

In Alaska, policymakers have floated various ideas for alternate diplomas. In December 2003, the state board of education proposed a two-tiered system: students who passed the state exit exam would receive a diploma, while those who met graduation requirements but did not pass the tests would receive a “certificate of achievement” (Pesznecker, 2004). The following spring, several bills were introduced in the state legislature to exempt many students from the state’s exit exam. One bill, introduced by Rep. Peggy Wilson, would establish three diplomas: one for students who met graduation requirements but did not pass the state’s High School Graduation Qualifying Exam; another “enhanced” diploma for those who completed graduation requirements and passed the exam; and an “advanced” diploma for students who passed honors-level courses and the exam (Bill aims to loosen, 2004). The bill came about due to public opposition to the state’s exit exam, fueled mostly by fears that large numbers of students would not graduate. It had not passed as of July 2004.

A similar plan introduced in Maryland met with widespread criticism. The state’s school board, already concerned about the possibility of increased dropout rates resulting from the state’s new exit exam, voted in favor of creating a two-tiered exit exam system. The Maryland High School Assessments, which have been administered for two years but will not become a graduation requirement until 2009, are currently given after students take four required courses: algebra, English, government, and biology. Dropout rates became a concern last year when 60% of the students who took the exams failed the English test, and 47% failed the algebra test. The board came up with a solution to allow more students to pass: students who pass all four sections of the exit exam would receive a “state diploma.” Those who pass three of four sections would receive a “local diploma” from their school district. The plan was met with skepticism by local school officials, who felt that having two diplomas would confuse employers and would give students an “escape route,” an easier way to gain a diploma. Concerns about where students with disabilities and English language learners fit into the diploma structure were also aired (Sedam, 2003). The state’s Public School Superintendents Association and the Maryland Association of Boards of Education voiced opposition to the plan (Bowler, 2004a). By the spring of 2004, the board had backed down from the plan and substituted a system that combined scores from the four subjects into a single passing score rather than four separate ones (Sedam, 2004). However, the state would set a minimum score for each of the four sections (Mui, 2004).

Parents in neighboring Delaware lobbied that state’s legislature to do away with its three-tiered diploma system. The system was put into place when the state instituted its current accountability program in 2000, as a compromise measure to allay fears that too many students would not pass the state’s exit exam and would not graduate. Students begin taking the test in the 10th grade and, based on the results, receive a “distinguished,” “standard,” or “basic” diploma, differentiated by various colored star emblems on the diploma itself.

A Delaware parents' group, Advocates for Children, asserted that the tiered diplomas complicated a student's job or college choices, that students should get one diploma, and that it was unfair to base the type of diploma given on the outcome of just one test (Jackson, 2004). Local school superintendents are also opposed, as are political leaders in minority communities and civil rights organizations. The state's chapter of the Urban League, for example, has pointed out that the majority of low-income and minority students were receiving the low-level basic diplomas, while the majority of white students were receiving standard and distinguished diplomas, indicating that the state has not done enough to address achievement gaps (Davies, 2004). A study by the *Delaware News-Journal* found that African-American students were three times more likely to receive a basic diploma than the upper-tiered ones and that 71% of Hispanics would get a basic diploma (Fuetsch & Chalmers, 2004).

Of African-American students:

- 76% would have received a basic diploma;
- 22% would have received a standard diploma; and
- 2% would have received a distinguished diploma.

Of white students:

- 41% would have received a basic diploma;
- 48% would have received a standard diploma; and
- 11% would have received a distinguished diploma.

Among all students:

- 52% would have received the basic diploma;
- 40% would have received the standard diploma; and
- 8% would have received the distinguished diploma.

In March, then again in May, Delaware state legislators introduced legislation to suspend the three-tier system and called for a task force to examine the "unintended consequences" of the state's exit exam (Fuetsch, 2004). In May, Governor Ruth Ann Minner signed a bill delaying the use of tiered diplomas for one year (Rubin, H. G., 2004c).

Education leaders in Utah and Arizona have proposed tiered diplomas, but no actual policy change had taken place as of July 2004.

### Other Means to a Diploma

While almost all states have policies to accommodate students who cannot pass exit exams in one way or another, students and parents have also found other ways, aside from the GED, to get around exit exam requirements and obtain a diploma.

In Florida, students unable to pass the FCAT have turned to a private online home-schooling institution to convert their high school course credits to a diploma for a \$225 fee. The private school offering the diplomas, North Atlantic Regional High School, is located in Maine, and students do not have to attend classes there or

go there at all. Instead, the school's administrators, a husband and wife team, review materials sent to them by Florida students, such as standardized test scores, grades, evidence of internships, information about coursework, and other documentation and convert them into measurable credits. If the measured credits meet or surpass those required by the state of Maine, such as a certain number of classes in math, the school grants the Florida student a diploma. There is debate about the value of the online school's diploma—although the state of Maine does not have an exit exam, it does not recognize a North Atlantic diploma as equal to a diploma from a regular Maine public school. That is because a state court ruling on religious and independent schools stated that although Maine had to recognize such schools, they did not have to be subject to state curricula or meet other standards. But while Maine does not recognize North Atlantic's diplomas as equal to those from a regular public high school, some Florida public colleges and universities accept them because the school is accredited by the National Private Schools Association. Word of the online school has spread in Florida, particularly in the Haitian-American community, to the point that North Atlantic Regional High School has opened an office in Florida and even held graduation ceremonies there for its 400 Florida students. State education officials oppose the practice, but for now say they are powerless to stop it (Pinzur, 2004).

## Reciprocity

For the most part, exit exams from one state are not recognized by other states. If a student moves into a state with an exit exam, he or she must take the exam of the new home state, even if the student has passed an exit exam in another state. Texas and Ohio report that they are working on reciprocity agreements with other states. An easier approach may be that taken by Idaho, Mississippi, and New Mexico, which simply recognize exit exams from any other state. In Alaska, students can initiate a waiver process if they have already passed an exam in another state. Documentation that the students passed must be received from their previous place of residence. Utah allows other exit exams to substitute for its own on a case-by-case basis, if it is determined that the other exit exam is comparable.

Mississippi has an additional form of reciprocity. Students who transfer into Mississippi from another state are exempted from taking the Mississippi end-of-course exams if they have passed a course equivalent to one of the courses being tested.

## SUPPORTS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Testing policies for students with disabilities<sup>2</sup> and English language learners<sup>3</sup> are particularly important to any state's consideration of exit exams because these two subgroups of students consistently perform lower on standardized tests, on average, than other subgroups. Moreover, the population of students with limited proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing English continues to grow in the United States,

2 The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a student with a disability as a child with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

3 Students are designated English language learners because they are in the process of learning to speak, read, or write English.

**TABLE 12: STUDENT OPTIONS TO ALLOW GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ALTERNATE ROUTES TO A DIPLOMA**

POLICY	OPTIONS	BENEFITS	DRAWBACKS
<p><b>Retesting</b>– Allowing students multiple opportunities to retake the exit exam again if they fail</p>	<p><b>See Below</b></p>	<p>Fairness: avoids making an important decision based on a single test score</p>	<p>None– all states offer retesting</p>
	<p><b>Stringent</b>– Few (less than four) opportunities for students to retake exit exam (e.g., NJ, NM)</p>	<p>Lower costs than lenient policy; fewer forms of the test need to be developed; less administrative effort at the local level; students and teachers may take each administration more seriously</p>	<p>May be perceived as less fair than lenient policy; public opposition; more students may not ultimately pass</p>
	<p><b>Lenient</b>– Many (four or more) opportunities to retake the exit exam, including after 12th grade (e.g., MN, NC)</p>	<p>May be perceived as fairer than stringent policy, more chances to identify students who need remediation; more students may ultimately pass</p>	<p>Higher costs than stringent policy; administrative difficulties; works best with quick turnaround that gets test results to students before they must decide whether to take the next retest; students and teachers may not take early administrations of tests as seriously; more time away from classroom instruction</p>
<p><b>Alternate Assessments</b>– Different assessments that students may take to earn a regular high school diploma</p>	<p><b>See Below</b></p>	<p>Addresses needs of students who have performed adequately in high school yet cannot pass regular exit exams, allows them to demonstrate competence in another way; satisfies calls to use multiple measures for making high-stakes decisions; perceived as fair if content is as rigorous as regular exam</p>	<p>Extra costs; extra effort at local level to administer. If alternate assessment is perceived as easier than regular exit exam it can become an easy way to get a diploma; also can be perceived as unfair; can "water down" value of a diploma</p>
	<p><b>State-produced assessment</b>– Alternate assessment is developed by state, often in tandem with test development company (e.g., MS, NJ)</p>	<p>State has complete control over content; can be aligned with state standards</p>	<p>Cost, effort to develop</p>
	<p><b>Existing test</b>– Students' performance on existing assessment, such as SAT or ACT, is used in lieu of state assessment (e.g., FL, NC)</p>	<p>Inexpensive, no development effort required</p>	<p>Existing tests such as SAT were not designed to be exit exams, raising questions about their validity for this purpose; problem of determining cutoff score; may undermine support for regular state-developed test</p>

**TABLE 12: STUDENT OPTIONS TO ALLOW GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ALTERNATE ROUTES TO A DIPLOMA** continued

POLICY	OPTIONS	BENEFITS	DRAWBACKS
<p><b>Waiver or appeals</b>– Students who fail exit exam appeal to governing body to have the exit exam waived as a graduation requirement</p>	<p><b>See Below</b></p>	<p>Perceived as fair for students who were ill, suffered death in family, have difficulties taking tests, etc.</p>	<p>Cost and time; some students may see waivers as a way out of graduation requirements; some teachers and administrators may urge waivers for lower-achieving students</p>
	<p><b>Adjudicated locally</b>– District level officials decide whether or not to grant waivers (e.g., IN)</p>	<p>Perceived as fair, decision is made "close to home"; extenuating circumstances may be easier to confirm</p>	<p>Local officials may have incentives to grant many waivers to maintain or increase graduation rates; may be perceived as unfair because some districts may be more lenient in granting waivers than others</p>
	<p><b>Adjudicated by state</b>– State-level officials decide whether to grant waivers (e.g., GA)</p>	<p>May be perceived as more fair because all districts would be treated equally</p>	<p>May be administrative burden on state; no familiarity with individual requesting waiver</p>
	<p><b>Stringent criteria for granting waiver</b>– Legislation sets high bar for eligibility, such as grades, attendance, etc. (e.g., OH, MA)</p>	<p>Weeds out unqualified students who may be better served by remediation or other existing interventions; reduces number of requests; may be seen as more objective because reasons for granting or not granting a waiver are more detailed</p>	<p>Fewer students may receive diplomas; administrative burden of collecting various pieces of student data</p>
	<p><b>Lenient criteria for granting waiver</b>– Legislation sets lower bar for eligibility (e.g., GA, MS)</p>	<p>More students can apply under a wider variety of circumstances, possibly more receive diploma</p>	<p>Officials may have incentives to grant many waivers to maintain or increase graduation rates; could be seen as watering down meaning of diploma; process may be seen as less fair, or may require more work, if criteria are not clear and detailed</p>
<p><b>Alternate diplomas</b>– Students can get "certificate of attendance" or some other diploma if they do not pass exit exam</p>		<p>More students with diplomas; more students graduate from high school; appeases parents</p>	<p>Community opposition, often from business community; questions about what diploma holder actually has learned; community opposition to "second class" diplomas</p>
<p><b>Tiered diplomas</b>– Different levels of diplomas contingent on performance on exit exam</p>	<p>Can identify more than one level of achievement, including high-performing students; usually three tiers for adequate, good, and exemplary performance</p>	<p>Recognizes efforts of high-performing students; recognizes that lower performing students attended classes and fulfilled requirements; may encourage some students to try harder</p>	<p>Community opposition from civil rights groups; local school superintendents may also be opposed; confusion about what the exact value of each diploma may be</p>
<p><b>Reciprocity</b>– State accepts results of other states' exams in cases where the students transfer</p>	<p>Can be written into law, such as in waivers policy (e.g., AK) or can be negotiated with other states with exit exams</p>	<p>Inexpensive; may cut down on waiver applications</p>	<p>Other states may not have same standards; administrative time to check other state standards</p>

Source: Center on Education Policy

so reducing the achievement gap for English language learners is essential to the overall success of an exit exam policy. In previous years' studies, we reported on how states are addressing the needs of students with disabilities and English language learners. On this year's state survey, we added a variety of new questions to obtain more in-depth information about state exit exam policies for these two groups of students. This section reports on our findings.

## Federal Impact on State Policies

Federal legislation, particularly the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act, has increasingly influenced testing policies for students with disabilities and, to a lesser extent, English language learners. For students with disabilities, the IDEA lays out specific policies for testing these students that apply to all states. For English language learners, there is no federal law that mandates specific testing approaches for these students other than the NCLB requirement to assess their proficiency annually and allow the use of appropriate accommodations, but many states have implemented special policies for English language learners, mostly relating to testing accommodations.

Section 612(a)(17)(A) of IDEA requires student with disabilities to participate in general state and districtwide assessments, with appropriate accommodations where necessary. (Accommodations are changes in the testing situation that make it possible for students with special needs to participate meaningfully in the test.) This same section of law requires alternate assessments to be used to assess the achievement of students with disabilities who are determined to be unable to participate in general assessments. Students who qualify for aid under IDEA normally have an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is developed by a team made up of the child's parent, school staff, and persons with special expertise on the child's needs. The IEP outlines the educational goals for the student and generally includes the conditions under which they can participate in assessments.

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that all students—including students with disabilities and English language learners—be tested for academic progress in grades 3–8 and once in grades 10–12, using the same state assessments. As explained in more detail in chapter 6, most states with exit exams are using the same exam to meet the state graduation requirement and the federal NCLB requirements for high school testing. Except for a very limited number of students with significant cognitive disabilities who are allowed to take alternate assessments under NCLB regulations, most students with disabilities and English language learners are tested using the states' exit exam. The exams, however, do not always count toward graduation for these students if the students use some of the alternate routes to a diploma discussed later in this section.

## Students with Disabilities

In developing testing policies for students with disabilities, states face a host of complex questions and sometimes heated responses from parents, disability advocates, and others. These voices have been strong and have had some success in impacting policy.



## State Policies on Accommodations

Consistent with IDEA requirements, all 25 of the states we surveyed allow students with disabilities to use accommodations on the exit exams. The accommodations, and the circumstances in which the results from testing with accommodations may be used, vary from state to state. For instance, most states—including Georgia, Louisiana, and Massachusetts, to cite a few examples—require students to use only those accommodations that are documented in the students’ IEP or educational plan developed under section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act and that the student uses during normal classroom instruction time. Still, a few states have no restrictions on which accommodations a student uses as long as the accommodation is state-approved.

In response to our survey, Ohio officials explained that the state keeps no list of all the possible accommodations but rather has a set of guidelines. According to the Ohio Administrative Code, accommodations are allowable if they meet the following four criteria:

- Are typically afforded the student in the classroom for classroom and district-wide tests;
- Do not change the content or structure of the test;
- Do not change what the test is intended to measure; and
- Do not change or enhance the student’s response.

Other than Arizona, which has still not made a decision on whether students who use accommodations will be awarded a regular high school diploma, Nevada is the only state that does not award regular diplomas to students with disabilities who use accommodations during testing. The remaining states all allow students with disabilities to receive regular diplomas if they use accommodations.

A few states, however, had special variants of these policies. For instance, California awards regular diplomas to students who use accommodations, but has a different policy for students who take the test with modifications, defined as any variation in the assessment environment or process that fundamentally alters what the test measures or affects the comparability of scores. The scores of these students are flagged as “not valid,” but these students may be eligible for a waiver of the exit exam requirement. Several other states, including Mississippi, award diplomas to students who use accommodations only if the accommodations are listed in the students’ IEP and are used during regular classroom instruction.

## Alternate Routes to a Diploma

At least 19 states with exit exams have some type of policies that allow students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma without passing the regular state exam. (These options for students with disabilities are different from the options in the preceding section for struggling students in general.) Only Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Virginia responded that they had no diploma options for students with disabilities other than passing the exit exam. Nevada did not respond to this question. Among states that do have these options, the alternate routes for students can be categorized as waivers or exemptions, alternate assessments, and

substitute tests. Students who receive a waiver or exemption may also have to take an alternate assessment or substitute test or fulfill another set of criteria other than passing the state exam.

In deciding whether to permit alternate diploma routes for students with disabilities, states must weigh strong arguments on both sides of the issue. Proponents contend that some students with IEPs progress through school with different learning goals and objectives than general education students. Their coursework is different, and having them take an assessment based on different standards or goals would not be fair to the student. Proponents also assert that allowing alternate routes for these students can reduce the number of students who drop out of school after failing to pass the exam following multiple tries.

Opponents of alternate routes maintain that students with disabilities are too often held to very low expectations, and their academic potential may be ignored. Requiring students with disabilities to adhere to the same policies as general education students forces teachers, schools, districts, and states to raise expectations for these students and pay greater attention to their needs. Some opponents also contend that if students with disabilities do not have alternatives, fewer students may be referred for special services, and schools may focus more attention on areas of the curriculum in which these students are weak. Several states are periodically revisiting their policies as more evidence emerges on either side of the issue.

#### *Waivers and exemptions*

States with a waiver or exemption process allow students with disabilities to waive the requirement to pass the exam and still receive a diploma either on a case-by-case basis or because the student meets a predetermined set of criteria. As shown in Table 14, 11 states allow these kinds of waivers or exemptions for students with disabilities. States have various criteria for which students qualify, how they can use this option, and who administers the process. Florida, Indiana, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas all require either the IEP team or a committee to review the student's individual circumstances and make a decision about whether the student has to take and pass the exam to graduate. In New Jersey, for instance, the IEP team can exempt students from passing the High School Proficiency Assessment, but cannot exempt students from taking the exam. In California, state legislation enacted in January 2003 shifted the administration of the waiver process from the state board of education to the local school district governing board.

Alaska continues to struggle with this particular issue. On March 16, 2004, a group of parents filed a lawsuit against the Alaska Board of Education and Early Development and the Anchorage School District on behalf of their children with disabilities. The lawsuit alleges discrimination in testing policies against students with disabilities and violations of the IDEA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the U.S. and Alaska constitutions. An agreement was reached between the state and the plaintiffs that allows students with disabilities who met all other requirements except passing the high school graduation test to graduate in 2004. However, the state has not made any decisions about this subgroup for later years, and state officials plan to continue negotiations on how best to accommodate students with disabilities in future years (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2004; Joling, 2004).

Negotiations are also ongoing in Florida, where advocates for disabled children filed 13 civil rights complaints with the Office of Civil Rights, citing discriminatory

practices against students with disabilities. Following the complaints, the state board of education agreed to allow a limited number of accommodations for disabled students taking the state exam but did not approve alternate assessments or broader graduation requirements for these students (OCR investigating Florida testing of disabled students, 2003).

Massachusetts has a different appeals process for special education students than for general education students. Students with disabilities can request an MCAS appeal if they:

- Have taken the grade 10 MCAS at least three times in each required subject area without achieving a passing score or submitted a portfolio assessment through the MCAS alternative assessment process at least twice without being granted a competency determination;
- Have maintained an adequate attendance level as established by the department of education or have been excused for any absences in excess of the number allowed by the department; and
- Have demonstrated participation in academic support services made available and accessible by or approved by the school district. (An exception can be made when the student's lack of participation in these services is related to his or her disability.)

The state commissioner of education can waive any of these criteria upon the written request of a district superintendent. Some state policymakers have expressed concern, however, about whether a two-track appeals process—one for students with disabilities and one for general education students—would be subject to a legal challenge (Rothstein, 2003e). Recent reports indicate that since the MCAS became a requirement, only 47 students, approximately 2% of the high school students who have submitted portfolios of their work, have received diplomas (Schworm, 2004).

#### *Alternate assessments*

The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA requires states to administer alternate exams to students with significant cognitive disabilities. Some states have their own policies, however, that also allow all students with disabilities to take alternate assessments to receive a high school diploma if it is recommended in their IEP or if they meet some other criteria set by the state. As shown in Table 13, seven states permit these types of alternate assessments.

In New York, for example, all students must take the Regents Exams, but if students with disabilities fail an exam they may use a passing score on the less demanding Regents Competency Test in the subject to earn a local diploma. In fall 2003, the Regents extended this option for five more years, so it will end with the class of 2013 rather than the class of 2008 (Hildebrand, 2003). Washington State reports that it is working on developing an alternate assessment.

#### *Alternate criteria*

As shown in Table 13, five states (Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, and North Carolina) indicated that they allow students with disabilities to earn a regular diploma through alternate routes other than passing an exit exam. In Indiana, if the student does not achieve a passing score on the graduation examination, the student may still be eligible to receive a diploma if a conference committee assigned to consider the case finds that the following conditions have been met:

1. The student's teacher of record, in consultation with the student's teachers in each subject area in which the student has not achieved a passing score, makes a written recommendation to the case conference committee. The school principal must concur with the recommendation, and the recommendation must be supported by documentation that the student has attained the academic standard in the subject area based on tests other than the exit examination or classroom work.
2. The student meets all of the following requirements: a) retakes the graduation examination in each subject in which he or she did not achieve a passing score as often as required by the IEP; b) completes remediation opportunities provided to the student; c) maintains a school attendance rate of at least 95%; d) maintains at least a C average or the equivalent in the courses specifically required for graduation; and e) otherwise satisfies all state and local graduation requirements.

This process represents a slight modification of the waiver process available to all students in Indiana.

In New Mexico and North Carolina, students with disabilities can graduate with a regular diploma by following an alternate academic program. In New Mexico, the IEP team determines which of three pathways a student can pursue to receive a diploma: Standard Pathway, Career Readiness Pathway, or Ability Pathway.

<b>TABLE 13: STATES WITH SPECIAL EXIT EXAM POLICIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES</b>				
<b>Waiver or Exemption</b>	<b>Alternate Assessments</b>	<b>Alternate Criteria</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Response</b>
AL, AZ, CA, FL, GA, ID, IN, MA, NJ, OH, TX	AK, MA, NJ, NY, SC, UT, WA	ID, IN, MN, NM, NC	LA, MD, MS, TN, VA	NV

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

<b>TABLE 14: STATES OFFERING SPECIAL DIPLOMAS TO DISABLED STUDENTS</b>		
<b>Special Diploma or Certificate</b>	<b>No Special Diploma</b>	<b>Did Not Respond</b>
AL, AZ, CA, FL, GA, LA, MD, MA, MS, NV, NM, NY, TN, UT, VA, WA	AK, ID, IN, MN, NJ, NC, OH, TX	SC

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.

- The Standard Pathway is a program of study based upon meeting or surpassing all requirements for graduation as identified in the New Mexico Standards of Excellence, with or without reasonable modification of delivery and assessment methods. The IEP team selects required courses and electives based on the student's post-school goals, interests, and needs.
- The Career Readiness Pathway is based upon meeting the state board of education's Career Readiness Standards with benchmarks as defined in the IEP. This pathway takes into account the individual student's interests, career preference, and needs, and allows for the substitution of classes as appropriate.
- The Ability Pathway is a program of study based upon meeting or surpassing IEP goals and objectives, referencing skill attainment at a student's ability level, which may lead to meaningful employment. Typically, IEP teams develop this pathway for students with severe cognitive and/or physical disabilities or students with severe mental health challenges.

North Carolina has similar policies, in that students following the Occupational Course of Study do not participate in the administration of the North Carolina Competency Tests but still receive a diploma. In Minnesota, the IEP team may lower the scale score needed to pass for students with an IEP or 504 plan.

#### *No extra options*

Although most of the states have additional policies for students with disabilities, five states (Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Virginia) responded that they offer no additional options for students with disabilities to receive a regular diploma, other than the options available to all students.

#### *Special diplomas*

As Table 14 illustrates, 16 states award special diplomas or certificates to students with disabilities who cannot pass the high school exit exam to qualify for a regular diploma; these states include Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. Most of these diplomas are awarded to students who do not meet the requirements to receive a regular diploma but achieve the goals of their IEP. Eight states (Alaska, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas) indicated that they do not offer any special diploma or certificate for students with disabilities. South Carolina did not respond to our survey question.

Some students are using the alternate diplomas to get into community colleges (Hayden, 2003), but as we reported last year, they might not qualify for federal student aid.

Mississippi has a tiered special education diploma system. Students with disabilities who do not receive a regular diploma can be awarded a certificate of attendance, which most students with disabilities receive, or they may qualify for an occupational diploma, which has more stringent requirements than the certificate of attendance. To receive the occupational diploma, students must complete 26 course credits, including a variety of academic courses with a life and job skills focus; produce a portfolio to demonstrate their knowledge and skills of this special curriculum; and work 540 hours during high school. Only 68 students received occupational diplomas in 2003, but several of them have entered community college (Hayden, 2003).

In Virginia, students with disabilities who do not meet the requirements for a standard or advanced diploma but meet the credit requirements and numeracy and literacy requirements established by the state board of education can receive a modified standard diploma. If they do not meet the requirement for other diplomas but have completed the objectives in their IEP, they can receive a special diploma.

## English Language Learners

Unlike students with disabilities, states offer very few options specifically for English language learners, according to the data we collected. Accommodations appear to be the primary additional form of testing supports that states make available to ELLs based on their special situation. The states responding to our survey indicated that there are no special routes, waivers, or substitute tests specifically for this subgroup.

All 25 states surveyed indicated that they allow English language learners to use accommodations while testing. And all of these states but Nevada allow ELLs to receive a regular high school diploma if they pass the state exam using accommodations. We do not have information as to whether ELLs in South Carolina who use accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma.

The range of accommodations afforded to ELLs is more limited and of a different type than those offered to students with disabilities. For instance, some states allow translation dictionaries, extra testing time, and assessments in other languages. In New Jersey, some of the Special Review Assessment tasks have been translated into 10 different languages, and translations into additional languages are being explored. The state profiles at the end of this report provide more details on the specific accommodations available to these students.

The Center for Equity and Excellence in Education looked closely at state policies on accommodations and tried to identify those accommodations that directly address the needs of English language learners (Rivera et al., 2004). These direct accommodations were categorized in terms of native language and English language accommodations. The study found that 19 of the 24 states that had exit exam policies during the time period studied (a tally that excludes Idaho) allowed direct accommodation based on native language or English language accommodations.

The most common native language accommodations observed by the researchers were single- and dual-language word lists, which were offered by nine states, and use of an interpreter or site translator, which was provided by four states. The most common English language accommodations were having the test directions read aloud in English (seven states); having the test questions read aloud in English (seven states); or repeating directions in English (five states). Other accommodations offered by multiple states included:

- Providing oral directions in the native language (two states)
- Translating directions into the native language (two states)
- Simplifying directions (two states)
- Providing both oral and written directions in English (two states)
- Providing audiotaped directions in English (two states)

- Providing audiotaped test questions in English (two states)
- Explaining or clarifying directions in English (four states)
- Clarifying words on the test by defining or explaining (three states)

The impact of these various accommodations needs further study before more can be said about the effect of a specific accommodation on student performance (Rivera et al., 2004). Without more information it is difficult to suggest that one state's approach could lead to better test scores or that one set of accommodations is "fairer" than another. What we can say is that the more opportunities students have to pass the exit exam and receive a diploma, the better their chances are of finding a job or entering into postsecondary education.

### Concluding Observations

The differences in state policies for assessing students with disabilities and English language learners are revealing. Although federal policies address some of the issues faced by students with disabilities during assessment, states have also implemented their own policies that expand on federal law. While all states must allow students with disabilities to use accommodations while testing, only some states have instituted additional strategies for either helping students attain a regular diploma or providing them with an alternative diploma.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and the increase in student testing for a variety of purposes, many educators, policymakers, and advocates for students are arguing more strongly than ever that English language learners need special supports and policies just as students with disabilities do. Except for accommodations, English language learners appear to receive no special options beyond those afforded to all other students.

Limited exemption policies, such as those that allow students who have recently entered the country a year's reprieve from taking an exit exam, could be expanded to offer more alternatives with promise of improving the graduation rates. Several states have such policies, and NCLB now allows states to give students who are new to schools in the United States a year to learn English before being tested. For example, Texas allows a one-time deferral from taking the exit exam to ELLs who have been enrolled in a public school for less than 12 months. Minnesota allows an exit exam exemption for ELLs who have been enrolled fewer than three years in a school in which the primary language of instruction is English.

As mentioned above, federal policies often drive state policies. Exemptions from testing for newly arrived ELLs may be an option that states turn to for their exit exams after enforcing similar policies in NCLB. Also, if students enter the country late enough in their high school years, it may not make sense to require them to pass an exam that assesses knowledge of content and skills that the student has not had an opportunity to learn. Optional exemptions may be the way to go in such circumstances.





# Chapter 5

## What Kinds of Changes Are States Making in Exit Exam Systems?

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### Public and Press Reactions to Exit Exams

- Public opposition to exit exams remained during school year 2003-04. Although low initial passing rates in some states and persistent achievement gaps are troubling findings that deserve attention, media reports seem to overstate the degree of public concern about exit exams and neglect improvements in exam performance that are occurring in many states.

#### Changes to Exit Exams

- Several states have adjusted their exit exam policies to make the tests somewhat easier, lower the cut scores, or address special issues, such as relaxing requirements for students with disabilities. But in most states, these changes have been relatively minor and have not stopped implementation of the exams.
- Implementation of exit exams seems to proceed more smoothly and require fewer changes in states with histories of standards-based reform and aligned exams, higher initial passing rates, and appeals and remediation opportunities. Implementation of these exams is more contentious in states that lack a culture of standards-based testing, have well-organized opposition to the tests, have high initial failure rates, and face other policy challenges, such as changes in state standards, occurring at the same time they are implementing the exams.
- States are trying to find the difficult balance between avoiding high failure rates on exit exams and ensuring that graduates have attained high school level expectations. Since 2002, at least six states have revised their exit exam systems to lower the passing scores or make the tests less difficult. But a few states have chosen not to lower their cutoff scores despite pressure from parents, students, and others.

Public backlash against exit exams and concerns about their potential negative consequences continued to simmer during 2004. Nudged to take action by concerned citizens and critics of the tests, several states have modified their exit exam policies during the past year. Several states have changed the cutoff scores that determine who passes the exams or revised the content of their exams. By and large, however, the changes made during the past year have been relatively minor.

To portray the context in which state policy changes take place, this chapter begins by analyzing public and media reactions to exit exams during the past year. The bulk of the chapter describes modifications that states have made in their exit exam policies during the past year and draws out themes. The chapter also suggests factors that seem to influence how smooth or how troublesome a state's implementation of exit exams is likely to be.

### PUBLIC AND PRESS REACTIONS TO EXIT EXAMS

As we have reported in previous years, states are still struggling with public opposition to and concerns about exit exams. Clearly, the level of anxiety is high, and many of the concerns raised are valid and require careful consideration. Still, it is difficult to determine whether the backlash is actually as widespread as it is sometimes portrayed.

#### BOX 11: SELECTED HEADLINES ABOUT EXIT EXAMS

##### Negative:

- Md. tests find about a third of teens lacking  
—T. Bishop, *Baltimore Sun*, February 18, 2004
- Black activists blast effects of FCAT  
—D. Balona, *Orlando Sentinel*, October 31, 2003
- Prospect of dismal test scores renews debate over WASL  
—L. Shaw, *Seattle Times*, January 27, 2004
- High schools face graduation crisis  
—K. Blackwell, *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 2003
- Md. high school tests bring little progress  
—L. Perlstein, *Washington Post*, January 4, 2004
- TAKS forecast: Gloomy  
—J. Benton, *Dallas Morning News*, April 27, 2004

##### Positive:

- Student exit test scores increase  
—S. Pardington, *Contra Costa Times*, October 11, 2003
- 10th graders pumped up for first try at crucial test  
—J. Radcliffe, *LA Daily News*, March 15, 2004
- MCAS scores rocket  
—K. Rothstein, *Boston Herald*, September 4, 2003

Press coverage of state exit exams tends to be more negative than favorable or neutral, as the examples of actual headlines in Box 11 illustrate.

Many stories in the media focus primarily on public opposition to the exams without similar attention to supporters of testing or potential positive outcomes. Stories that weigh the pros and cons of exit exam systems appear less often than stories that focus on the negative outcomes of exams, such as low initial pass rates, large racial-ethnic achievement gaps, or otherwise competent students failing the tests. Press reports also focus on groups of parents, students, and other citizens that organize resistance to testing. This dissent tends to arise in states that have recently implemented exams or those where consequences will soon affect the graduating classes. In states where policymakers are considering changes to the testing process, opponents tend to be vocal and receive extensive attention.

Actual public opinion is difficult to gauge from news reports. Some polls indicate that a majority of citizens support the goals of exit testing, although many still express reservations. One poll found that although only 12% of parents felt that exit exams were a bad idea, 60% felt that too much emphasis was being placed on test scores (Johnson & Duffett, 2002). Moreover, because of the media's tendency to focus on problems with testing, some positive results go virtually unnoticed. This public and media reaction is important to monitor because it can influence the political process and affect implementation of tests.

This year, opposition to exit exams has continued in Florida, Massachusetts, and New York, where passing exit exams is already a graduation requirement. Dissent has also been growing in several states, including Maryland, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, and Washington—states that have either recently enforced graduation consequences for their exams or soon plan to do so. The amount and nature of opposition in states appears to depend on where they are in the implementation process, how students are performing, and what the general political climates is in the state. As a result, some states have managed to enact exams with little public outcry while others have faced more protracted public battles.

### Issues of Greatest Concern

Public concern about exit exams usually concentrates on a few major topics, including low passing rates, achievement gaps in scores, good students who fail the test, issues of fairness for students with disabilities, and uncertainty about how many students will not receive a diploma once the exam is required for graduation.

One source of public concern is low initial pass rates that may portend future low graduation rates. In Indiana, a December 2003 newspaper story noted that only 59% of sophomores had passed the graduation exam on their first attempt (Hooper, 2003). Based on this type of data, opponents of testing warn of dire consequences for students and schools if scores do not improve with subsequent testing. A January 2004 article from the Seattle press noted that only 35% of 10th grade students in Washington had passed the state exams in reading, writing, and math (Shaw, 2004a). Newspapers in Maryland reported that students had performed very poorly on the state's end-of-course exams set to be a graduation requirement for the class of 2009. *The Baltimore Sun* reported that in 2003 approximately 50% of Maryland students failed the algebra and biology tests, while 40% failed govern-

ment and 60% failed English (Bowler, 2003b). In Texas, as high school students took the TAKS exams in April 2004, one newspaper article predicted that tens of thousands of students would fail to graduate because of last year's pass rate of slightly less than 50% (Benton, 2004). Although a significant number of students may fail the exams, the pass rates are likely to be higher in 2004 than in the previous year, when the stakes were lower; moreover, students who fail can retake the test.

In the cases of Washington, Maryland, and Texas, diplomas have yet to be withheld as a result of the exit exams covered in news stories. While evidence from other states indicates that pass rates will rise once an exam has consequences for students, low passing rates from the years before the exam became a graduation requirement still attract a great deal of attention.

Opposition and media coverage often focus on achievement gaps in exit exam results because disparities in graduation rates across racial and economic groups are especially troubling. In Massachusetts, media attention has highlighted ongoing racial disparities in pass rates: less than 50% of black and Hispanic 10th graders passed the MCAS on their first try, while more than 80% of white students achieved this mark (Vaishnav, 2003b). In Texas, similar public concern exists over racial gaps in scores. May 2004 TAKS results showed racial gaps of more than 20% between white and Hispanic students (Spencer, 2004). New York is also facing gaps in pass rates between students in the New York City schools and those in the rest of the state. As reported in the *New York Times* in March 2004, many students in large city high schools have not passed any of the five required Regents exams (Lewin, 2004).

Media and public attention has also focused on the issue of "good" students who have failed the exam or students who have been penalized unfairly by testing requirements. An Associated Press story in the *Akron Beacon Journal* highlighted the plight of an Ohio senior who had received A's in science classes but had failed the science proficiency exam multiple times and faced the prospect of not graduating and attending college as she had planned (New state tests could keep more from diplomas, 2004). Stories in Florida also profiled competent students who had not passed the state test (Shanklin, 2003; Solochek, 2004).

### Extent of Opposition or Support

The numerous groups opposing state exit exams are often the focus of media coverage. While a few of these are national organizations like the National Center for Fair and Open Testing headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, others are state-based groups like Marylanders Against High Stakes Testing. These and other organizations attract media attention if they take particularly strong action against an exam. In Florida, the state NAACP received coverage for speaking out against the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, which it says has deleterious effects on black high school students (Balona, 2003).

While this opposition and these impacts are important to document, it is often difficult to determine the scope of the dissent from news reports. Media coverage of positive change or impacts is less frequent but does exist. For example, one story reported on the increased percentages of 10th graders passing the exam in Massachusetts and applauded the state for holding its students to high standards (Rothstein, 2003c). California's exit exam also received some positive media attention as students in the class of 2005 significantly outperformed their peers in the class of

2004 in results released in fall 2003 (Pardington, 2003). Increased student and teacher motivation were cited as the major source of improvement. Later, in March 2004, the Los Angeles Daily News praised the efforts made by teachers and administrators to prepare students for the spring CAHSEE (Radcliffe, 2004).

Polls and surveys of parents and the public about high-stakes testing have often found that a majority support high-stakes tests. Some positive reports came out in Massachusetts about public opinions of high-stakes testing. Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a nonprofit organization funded by businesses in Massachusetts, published a report in May 2004 documenting the ongoing public support for graduation testing. Though approval of the MCAS narrowed significantly from 77% to 51% in the five years from introduction to implementation of graduation consequences, the testing program is still supported by a slim majority of state residents. Opposition was most recently measured at 44% and appears to be holding steady, even though the class of 2003 achieved a 95% pass rate (Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2004a). A study in Washington State found that when parents were asked whether they thought the knowledge and skills tested by the WASL were important for their children's future, 57% said yes, 23% said no, and 21% said that they didn't know. Other polls, however, suggest a more conflicted public. For example, a PDK/Gallup poll of public attitudes about education found that 66% of the public believes that standardized testing encourages teachers to teach to the tests, and 60% of those holding this view also believe that teaching to the test would be a bad thing (Rose & Gallup, 2003).

While low passing rates and persistent achievement gaps are troubling findings that clearly merit public awareness and attention, reporting on exit exams may convey more public outrage than actually exists. At times, it also masks important improvements that are taking place in many states. Media and public attention to exit exams often focuses on negative test outcomes without paying similar respect to positive gains in achievement. The impact of this reaction is unclear and difficult to determine. On one hand, media attention and public concern serve as an important check on elected officials and help ensure fairness in testing. On the other hand, opposition to exit testing from the public or the press could encourage policymakers and educators to relax efforts to hold students to high standards and improve education.

## CHANGES TO EXIT EXAMS

Within this context of media interest, forceful opposition, and heightened public scrutiny, states are weighing decisions about whether and how to make revisions in their exit exam systems. Last year, we reported that several states had revised or delayed their exit exam requirements in 2002–03 in response to growing public opposition, high student failure rates, lawsuits, and concerns about negative effects of the tests on students. Most of those changes affected small numbers of students or represented temporary adjustments to testing policies before diplomas were withheld.

This past year, some states have again made important changes in their exit exam policies, but overall, the volume and scope of change appear to be far less dramatic than in previous years, with several states making small or temporary adjustments.

It is unclear why fewer states are making policy changes this year. The pattern may be largely a product of timing and where states are in the implementation

process. Most states with exit exams have already fully implemented the tests and are now withholding diplomas. The general trend in these states is to make small changes and adjustments in exam policies. A few states are set to withhold diplomas for the first time or initiate a new, more rigorous test in the next few years, and these states are experiencing more political activity than others. This activity, both real and rhetorical, is primarily a response to public concerns about low graduation rates. Not all states fit this model, however. Louisiana and Mississippi withheld diplomas using new or revised tests last year and yet reported very little change.

In addition to timing issues, a variety of other factors may influence the extent of policy changes that actually occur in states. Instruction and curriculum may now be better aligned with tests in many states, leading to higher student performance and lower public opposition. The speed with which legislators have acted, the number of students currently failing exams, the degree of organization of opponents, and the history of standards and testing in the state may also play a role in the amount of change exit exam policies undergo.

As a result of these diverse factors, states vary widely in the amount of policy changes they are undertaking. Below, we discuss the changes that have occurred over the past year and analyze trends in exit exam policies that are developing over time.

### Updates on Policy Changes and Policy Background

In Maryland, Washington, and a few other states, the process of laying the initial policy framework for exams became contentious this year, as officials debated how best to implement exams that are not set to become graduation requirements for several years. Other states, such as New York, California, and Florida, have made only small changes in their often-controversial exams. A few states have changed exam requirements for special education students this year, and a handful of states have adjusted their cutoff scores or the difficulty of their exams. Some states have seen virtually no activity in the past year, while others have debated far-reaching proposals but made no real changes.

In addition to tracking changes during the past year, we asked states survey questions about key policy changes they have made in their exit exam systems over time. We found that each state's exam is the product of a unique interaction of political forces and policy decisions that shapes the state's current approach to change.

#### Washington State

Washington passed a bill in March 2004 allowing students four opportunities to retake the state exit exam and authorizing the creation of an alternative assessment. The legislature also removed a requirement that the state board of education had to give final approval before the graduation requirement takes effect in 2008, thereby eliminating a possible obstacle to implementation.

Background information from the state and from news reports suggests that attaching a graduation requirement to the WASL has been a real challenge. The state has strong parent opposition groups, including Mothers Against WASL, led by a

woman who plans to run for state superintendent of public instruction in the upcoming election to thwart implementation of the test. The state faced a major problem in 2003 because the existing law had allowed students only one opportunity to take the test. Governor Gary Locke warned lawmakers that he would force them to stay in session until they had allowed for multiple retakes so implementation of the exam could proceed as planned (Galloway, 2003). The state legislature consented, and the bill was passed in March 2004.

In 2004, Washington lawmakers also linked the exam to higher education by voting to place scores on students' high school transcripts and use them as a factor in scholarship decisions for the University of Washington (Blesch, 2004). In addition, state leaders created provisions for special education students to receive their diploma if they meet the goals in their IEP (Shaw, 2004b). In June 2004, the board declared the WASL technically sound but warned lawmakers they needed to address opportunity to learn issues or they could be at risk of a lawsuit (Shaw, 2004e). Much of the controversy prompting these policy changes in the state has likely resulted from low initial pass rates: only 35% of 10th graders passed the exam in 2003. Despite the discouraging statistics, committees of teachers that reviewed the test in 2004 recommended only tiny revisions to cutoff scores (Shaw, 2004c).

## Maryland

Maryland revised its exit exam proposal significantly during the past year, and finally, after a decade of debate and numerous postponements, the state board of education voted in June 2004 to establish its new end-of-course exams as a graduation requirement for the class of 2009 (Bowler, 2003a). In August 2003, the state had already terminated the previous exit exam system, the Maryland Functional Testing program, because it was no longer aligned with the state's content standards, and officials did not want these exams to distract teachers and students from the new state goals and standards. Even though Maryland had used this less rigorous exit exam for more than 20 years, the state still had to weather a battle about when to implement the new exams, what the appropriate cut scores should be, how to evaluate competency in multiple ways, and whether a tiered diploma system would be acceptable. The state board did not alter its testing plan greatly from its initial proposal, but did move deliberately to implement it. Part of the delay was intentional; the state was responsive to public concerns and testimony and careful not to stir up problems by enacting the exam quickly. Another reason for the slow implementation was opposition by the state teachers' union, state PTAs, and other groups. But as noted in chapter 4, the state was very attentive to this resistance and developed plans for addressing opportunity-to-learn issues that were driving much of the backlash (Bowler, 2004d). To soften concerns about students failing, the state adopted the composite scoring model mentioned in chapter 4, and state officials further decided to allow students to substitute scores from AP or SAT II tests for exit exam scores (Maryland State Department of Education, 2004).

In 2004, Maryland also convened a task force to evaluate alternate assessment options for special education students and general education students who have a difficult time with traditional pencil-and-paper tests. In a state with well-organized and vocal opponents of high-stakes testing, a proposal for tiered diplomas by the state school superintendent was widely criticized and dropped (Bowler, 2004b).

## New York

New York is one of several states that has made small changes in its testing program without a fundamental overhaul. During the past year, the state has decided to give special education students an additional five-year reprieve from having to pass the exit exam. And as discussed below, the state revised scores after two exams administered in 2003 were felt to be inordinately difficult and resulted in lower than expected pass rates.

These revisions are the most recent in a series of numerous small changes New York has made in its testing system since the Board of Regents decided in 1996 to eliminate the state's original two-track graduation system and require all students to pass five end-of-course Regents exams. The state's testing program has faced extensive opposition from a wide range of critics, including parents of suburban students who complain the tests dilute the strength of the curriculum and advocates of poor and minority students who fear the tests raise dropout rates (New York raises stakes with comprehensive end-of-course tests, 2002). To address some of the concerns raised, the state agreed to provide alternate assessments and diplomas for special education students and allow all students to substitute scores from other tests for certain Regents exams, among other changes. Although problems such as the scoring controversy described in chapter 3 and below have fueled opposition groups and publicly embarrassed the state, they have not had any dramatic impact on policy.

## California

Since California decided last summer to delay withholding diplomas on its exit exams until 2006, the state has made only minor changes. In November 2003, the state board voted to remove some of the more difficult questions from the exam, including math questions about data analysis and English questions about research methods (Coleman, 2003). This relatively calm year follows a rough patch in the CAHSEE's history. Last year the state decided to delay the graduation requirement after the mandated evaluation projected that some 92,000 students would fail the math portion of the test (Pardington, 2003). In July 2003, the state also voted to shorten the test (Coleman, 2003). In 2002, California officials were forced to adjust testing policies for special needs students after a federal court ordered the state to provide accommodations for these students and develop an alternative assessment for students whose disabilities prevented them from being appropriately assessed by the test.

## Florida

Florida's exam has also undergone a few changes in the past year after a flurry of activity last spring, when the first class of students was set to be denied diplomas due to the FCAT. This past year, the state created a multiple-choice only retest for students who failed the original exam to facilitate faster grading. As discussed in chapter 4, critics have charged that the test is easier to pass (Pinzur, 2003a). Additionally, the state legislature voted to extend the use of SAT and ACT exams as alternative tests for members of the class of 2004 who failed the FCAT. The state legislature had originally intended to provide this alternative only for the class of 2003, but faced public pressure to extend it for one more year. This means the legislature will have to reauthorize this option next year if it wants it to apply to any future graduating classes (Florida Department of Education, 2004).



Except for these modest changes, Florida left its exam intact this year. In fact, a state representative opposed to testing has twice offered an amendment to require all state legislators to pass the state exam themselves, but the proposal has been unsuccessful (Cerabino, 2004).

Since the FCAT was initiated in 1999, Florida has made significant policy changes in its exam. These include changes to allow some accommodations and exemptions for students with disabilities, permit certificates of completion to be awarded to students who fail the test, and allow the classes of 2003 and 2004 to substitute scores from the SAT or ACT tests (changes discussed in more depth in the Florida state profile). In 2003, after some community leaders threatened to boycott key state industries over the large numbers of failing students, the state added a fast-track GED program for failing students and provided them with additional access to community colleges (Rabin, 2003; White, 2003). Through these revisions, the state has sought to respond to intense and vocal opposition without derailing the entire testing program. Opposition groups in the state continue to generate ample discussion about the exams, and many proposals have been offered but never acted upon. The state has also rejected numerous recent proposals, including one to exempt some non-native speakers from the exam and another to assess students with a series of Internet-based tests instead of the FCAT (Richard, 2003; Flannery, 2003).

### **Oklahoma and Idaho**

Two additional states have recently debated whether to implement exit exams, with opposite results. In Idaho, a 2003 state commission recommended making the state high school exam into a graduation exam. In a relatively short time, the state enacted the recommendation, and in early 2004 the legislature voted to require the class of 2006 to pass the exam. The requirement had strong support from both the governor and the state's most influential business lobby, which may have aided in its quick passage (Russell, 2004). Oklahoma's experience was the opposite. When a state representative proposed to require students to pass the state's mandatory end-of-course exams before they could graduate, the House Education Committee did not embrace the proposal, and no action was taken (Murphy, 2003).

### **Massachusetts**

The Massachusetts exit exam, the MCAS, has recently survived an attempt to put the test to a vote of the populace through a ballot initiative; the effort failed this past year. The state did adopt a minor adjustment to make it easier for students with disabilities to submit an appeal after they have failed the exam (Ring, 2003; Goldstein, 2004). The state had previously decided to allow a small number of students with severe disabilities to take an alternate assessment.

The state's history as an education reform leader may have helped to keep the MCAS largely intact. Though opposition in the state is extensive and well-organized, state leaders have been steadfast in implementing the test, and only modest policy revisions have been made. In past years, the test has endured numerous challenges, including an attempt to exempt bilingual, vocational, and special education students, and defiant protests from local school boards who initially voted to ignore

the requirement in granting diplomas before being reprimanded by the state (Rothstein, 2003a). But these other challenges ultimately did not lead to any changes.

## Utah

Utah is one of several states in which dramatic proposals for change ended up being stalled, in part because other policies or priorities have changed simultaneously and influenced implementation. In 2003, Utah faced a major decision. After the legislature passed a bill requiring students to demonstrate end-of-course competency, a state task force recommended phasing in end-of-course tests to replace the broader Utah Basic Skills Competency Tests as a requirement for graduation (Lynn, 2003a). Budget constraints had already led to a one-year delay in implementing the UB-SCT, and some state officials felt that the two assessments were redundant (Lynn, 2003b). Despite these concerns, the new end-of-course exams were not scheduled to be ready for several years, and the state wanted to implement a high-stakes accountability measure for high school students. As a result, state officials have continued implementation of the original UB-SCT, now required for the class of 2006.

## States with Little or No Change

Despite extensive talk of changes to testing policies, many states ended up with little or no change. At times, revisions were offered only to call attention to a political issue and were quickly dismissed. Other efforts were seriously put forward but were abandoned or voted down. For example, both New Jersey and Louisiana entertained amendments to their testing systems, but neither had made any major changes as of summer 2004. In 2003, New Jersey Education Commissioner William Librera recommended eliminating New Jersey's alternate assessment after approximately 15% of the class of 2003 graduated through this route (Mooney, 2004). The state board instead decided to hold off and investigate how to make the criteria for taking the alternate exam more stringent and make the exam more difficult. Louisiana has not made any large changes, either, although in 2004 a state representative proposed creating an alternate diploma for students who fail the exit exam. As of July 2004, the bill was still in the legislature (By degrees, 2004).

In 2004, the Texas legislature briefly discussed revoking the state's exit exam and replacing it with end-of-course exams, but the measure failed to attract adequate support (Elliott, 2004). In Virginia, a state legislator proposed exempting students from the graduation exam requirement in schools where less than 70% of students passed the test, but the measure failed (Helderman, 2004a). The logic behind the amendment was that students in schools with such low pass rates were not being served well by the schools and had not had an adequate opportunity to learn the material on the tests. In addition, several states, including Maryland and Nevada, rejected the idea of tiered diplomas this year, and proposals toward this end were ultimately abandoned.

## Changing Exam Cut Scores and Content

Among the most widely debated changes to exit exams are those affecting the difficulty of the tests. In seeking to make exit exams both challenging and fair, states

have wrestled with how high to set performance standards and whether to adjust these standards. Although most states have set benchmarks that call for steady rises in student performance over a certain number of years, some states have later revised their expectations, once they see how students are doing, to allow for more gradual improvement.

States face enormous political pressure on both sides. If the benchmarks or cut scores are set too high, large numbers of high school students will fail to graduate, and the public could become concerned. If benchmarks are set too low, schools could graduate too many students who are ill-prepared for work or additional schooling, escalating concerns from the business and higher education communities. Some states are in the difficult position of attempting to avert the political catastrophe of denying diplomas to large numbers of students without backing down too much from high expectations and rigorous accountability, appearing to yield to political pressure, or seeming to suggest that improvement is impossible. In response to these concerns, some states have attempted to make minor adjustments, rather than large-scale changes, to cutoff scores and exit exam content.

### Changes in Pass Scores and Benchmarks

Several states have lowered passing scores slightly or delayed demands for increases in performance, but Massachusetts has already seen improvements in exam results and is considering raising cutoff scores. Other states, like Texas, have encountered challenges in meeting established goals but have decided to maintain existing expectations anyway and adjust instruction instead.

#### *New York*

As we noted in last year's report and chapter 3 of this year's report, New York was awash in controversy during the summer of 2003 over its Regents exams. Both the June Math A exam and the July physics exam were criticized by educators and students for being too difficult and causing too many students to fail. After nullifying scores for juniors and seniors on the June math exam, the state education department admitted the tests were flawed and decided to scale up students' scores on the math test for 9th and 10th graders (N.Y. panel criticizes math test; state to raise scores, 2003). In other words, the department adjusted students' scores to make them statistically comparable to what students would have scored on uncontested exams from previous years. After initially refusing to take action on the physics exam, the state education department issued revised scores in January 2004 that scaled up scores on both the June 2002 and June 2003 physics exams. The revised pass rates went from 61.4% to 76.9% for the June 2002 test and from 52.9% to 80.5% for the June 2003 test (Hildebrand, 2004).

The controversy over how high to set the bar continued in October 2003 when state Education Commissioner Richard Mills announced that he wanted to reduce the number of math concepts covered on the math test and give districts two more years to use 55 as a passing grade on all Regents exams instead of the new level of 65 that was set to take effect in school year 2003-04. Mills also announced his intention to allow special education students five additional years before they would be required to pass Regents exams. He asserted that he was not lowering standards for students, but just allowing them a more realistic time frame in which to reach these goals. His recommendations for change were approved by the Board of Regents but were not

universally popular among the public; for example, some advocates felt that lowered expectations were especially damaging to students of color (Arenson, 2003).

After the flurry of criticism over the math exam in New York, Commissioner Mills appointed a panel to make recommendations about the test. The panel found numerous design problems in the content and difficulty level of the exam. Based on those findings, the test was revised to include more multiple-choice questions and fewer open-ended questions. However, after giving the revised exam in January, many teachers expressed concern that the cutoff scores were too low, as students had to obtain just 28 out of 84 points to graduate. Approximately 85% of students passed the January exam, which James Kadamus, the state's deputy commissioner of education, suggested was appropriate for a graduation requirement (Gootman, 2004).

#### *Alaska*

The situation in New York was not an isolated incident. States often have to revise their timelines or temporarily reduce expectations in order to treat students fairly. As we reported in the past, officials in Alaska in 2002 developed a slightly less rigorous math test after almost two-thirds of students failed the math portion of the exit exam in 2000. State officials maintained that the new version of the test still measured whether students had acquired fundamental skills, instead of all potentially desirable skills.

#### *Ohio*

Ohio also has undergone numerous changes in testing policy as it phases in a new graduation test for the class of 2007 that will be approximately two grade levels more difficult than its current exam. In March 2003, state officials initiated a trial run of the new Ohio Graduation Test and subsequently adjusted the scoring after almost 77% of students failed the math section. The test was revised to include 32 instead of 36 multiple-choice questions and just one instead of two open-response questions. In addition, the passing score was changed from 57% to 41%. In March 2004, an estimated 32% of students failed the revised exam; this lower failure rate seemed to be a result of the revisions to the test and the more lenient cutoff score for passing. In May 2004, however, the state decided to increase the difficulty of some questions to make the test compliant with new state laws and the No Child Left Behind Act (New state tests could keep more from diplomas, 2004). The state board of education decided in June 2004 to keep the revised cutoff scores scale in place and gradually raise passing levels in the future (Stephens, 2004). These scoring changes are a common practice in constructing a fair assessment; ideally, they should be implemented before any consequences are imposed, as was the case in Ohio. Generally, allowing a one- to two-year span to pilot a test helps states determine appropriate cutoff levels. As Ohio initiates three other new graduation tests in writing, science, and social studies in 2005 that will have consequences for students the first time they are administered, officials are optimistic but are prepared to exercise caution in setting cutoffs (Fisher & Elliott, 2004; Richards, 2004).

Ohio continues to struggle with how to maintain high standards but also achieve high passing rates. Although the state has established alternative criteria for students very close to passing the exam, proposals have been floated to develop an appeals process or allow students to substitute test scores from other exams. Additionally, a state task force has suggested replacing the exam with end-of-course exams, though a similar proposal was already rejected by the legislature (Fisher & Elliott, 2004).

### *Florida*

Florida officials also struggled this year with setting cutoff scores on the FCAT. Although standards were originally supposed to be raised for the 2003–04 school year, Florida school board officials voted in November to leave standards in reading and math the same and to raise standards only in writing, an area in which students generally already do well. Board members who supported the wait suggested that the board needed time to determine the effect of other recent changes before enacting higher goals and possibly damaging morale (Jones, 2003).

### *Virginia*

Virginia was given an opportunity to establish new passing scores for history and social science tests that align with new standards the state has implemented. The Virginia Board of Education lowered the passing score slightly, going from 55% to 50% for all social science tests except geography, which remained at 55%. The cutoff score of 50% for the U.S. history test marked a continued decline from its original cutoff score of 64% in 1998. Board members argued that the history tests covered large spans of time and information and that requiring higher cutoff points would be unfair to students (Wermers, 2003).

### *Nevada*

As we reported last year, state officials in Nevada in 2003 temporarily dropped the minimum passing score in math from one standard deviation below the recommended cut score to two deviations below. This action was taken after the math exam was revised to make it better aligned with state math standards, but the legislature noted that instruction had lagged behind in alignment (Roccapriore, 2003). State officials specified, however, that by 2007 the cutoff will return to the previous level and allowed the state board of education to set passing levels for the intermediate years. In June 2003, the board voted to gradually increase the passing scores required each year until 2007 (Kulin, 2003).

### *Massachusetts*

Massachusetts is considering raising the score required on the MCAS for students to receive a competency determination and a diploma. State Education Commissioner David Driscoll has proposed requiring students to score at the “proficient” level on the MCAS in order to graduate, a significant increase from the current requirement to score at the “needs improvement” level (Mass. education chief: Time to move past MCAS, 2004). As noted in chapter 6, Massachusetts currently uses a lower threshold for graduation than for determining NCLB proficiency, a more long-term goal.

Other states have also revised their cutoff scores for exit exams. Despite pressure in the state and a proposal to lower passing scores, Texas, for example, has decided to gradually raise the passing scores required for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills over the next three years (Elliott, Gonzalez & Zuiga, 2004).

## **Changes in Test Format and Content**

State officials in California have made substantive adjustments to the format and content of the CAHSEE. In July 2003, when the state board of education decided to delay using the exam as a graduation requirement, the board revised the format but not the content of the reading part of the exam, reducing the number of essay and multiple-choice questions without altering the overall level of the exam. Later,

in November 2003, the board voted to remove some of the more difficult math and English questions from the exam at the recommendation of Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell. The test will now increasingly measure more basic skills taught at earlier grade levels (Coleman, 2003).

Washington officials have also been fine-tuning the WASL to make sure the exam is fair when it becomes a graduation requirement for the class of 2008. The state has thrown out some vague questions on the exam, and as already noted, the legislature has voted to allow students up to four retests, but committees of educators, parents, and business people, convened by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to report to the Washington State Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission, recommended only minor changes overall. The committees recommended a small decrease in the reading passing score and also suggested raising the cutoff score for the advanced level of performance in 10th grade math and reading. The legislature will vote on these changes next year. Also under discussion is whether students need to reach the basic or proficient level of performance to graduate, which the commission will decide in fall 2004. Despite criticism from both those who think the test is too hard and those who feel it is not challenging enough, state officials suggested the changes were reasonable adjustments that ensured fairness (Shaw, 2004b; Shaw, 2004e).

Several other states amended the content of their exit exams during the past year. Officials in Georgia, for example, revised the spring 2004 tests in English and math to make them more challenging and consistent with NCLB requirements and more useful as a measure of adequate yearly progress as defined by that law. For the present, however, the new, more difficult test items will not count in determining whether students receive a diploma.

Minnesota also made minor changes this year to its exit exam, the Basic Skills Test, including raising the maximum possible math score. In addition, a provision passed by the legislature in 2001 requiring the exam to include non-calculator computation took effect this year, although this may not impact the overall difficulty of the exam (Welsh, J., 2004). (For more information see the Minnesota state profile at the end of this report.) Indiana is adding algebra to its exit exam, making it more rigorous to match the state's updated standards (Hooper, 2003).

### Themes in State Policy Changes

Our analysis of state actions concerning exit exams also revealed differences in states' readiness and ability to make policy changes. In the course of implementing exams, some states have had a relatively smooth process with few changes in policy, while others have had repeated delays, contentious battles in the legislature, changes in passing scores, and changes in the content of the test. Each state is in a unique position, but several overall themes emerge.

### History of Standards-based Reform

States that have extensive histories of standards-based reforms and holding students to high expectations may face a more streamlined implementation process. This could be because their students are generally more prepared for these exams since instruction has already been aligned with the tests, or because the culture of the

state is supportive of accountability. As noted above, Massachusetts has weathered challenges to its exit exam in part because of its history as a leader in education reform.

Texas, to cite another example, has a history of holding students to continually rising expectations and has been a leader in implementing standards. Although the TAKS has faced some minor challenges and has undergone small revisions while being phased in, the test remains largely the same, as does the time frame for implementation (Blackwell, 2003). The Texas state board of education also defeated an effort to lower passing scores on the test in 2003 (Stutz, 2003). Some state officials credit this firmness to the state's pride in raising standards as well as its history of accountability (Benton, 2004). Also, since Texas had had the TAAS as an exit exam for numerous years before the TAKS, the state had already endured many of the challenges that arise when an exit exam is first proposed.

### **Influence of Other Policies**

Several states have faced problems in enacting their exit exams because other policies or priorities have changed simultaneously and influenced implementation. Utah's experience, described above, of trying to transition from a minimum competency exam to end-of-course exams is one illustration. Georgia is another state that had planned to replace its current exit exam with a series of end-of-course exams but other factors intervened. The new exams were intended to be a more rigorous assessment for students than the current Georgia High School Graduation Tests. State officials realized, however, that the tests would not meet the criteria for the No Child Left Behind Act because the tests, by design, would not be taken by all students in the same year and would therefore not comply with the NCLB requirement for 95% test participation. The exams had already been delayed once before because they were not adequately aligned with state curriculum. The state decided to continue using both tests; the end-of-course exams will be used to document students' progress, and the state will develop a more difficult GHSGT in future years (Tofig, 2003).

Arizona has also faced substantial delays in implementing its exit exams in the midst of other state policy changes, including revised standards. The state originally gave its exam in 1999 and planned to require it for the class of 2001. After 88% of 10th graders failed the math exam in 1999, consequences were delayed until 2002, and some difficult items were eliminated from the exam (Olson, 2001). Because the state was issuing revised standards, officials again postponed attaching stakes in 2001 and delayed implementation until 2006 (Bowman, 2001). The state also revised the format of the test, as explained in more detail in the Arizona state profile at the end of this report. The competing priorities of revising state standards and holding students accountable proved difficult to balance. Arizona, like California, is in a difficult phase of implementation. The state has not yet implemented graduation consequences, but intends to soon, and barriers continue to arise to push back that date.

### **Tradeoffs in Delays**

In general, the longer the gap in between proposals and implementation, the more time there is for opposition to mobilize. Consequently, resistance may be greater in

states that delay implementation. But if the state or students are unprepared for the exam, premature implementation could prove disastrous and ineffective, so delays may improve the chances of successful implementation. The timeline of implementation is not entirely in the state's control, because the states must allow time for school systems to be ready for the exam to have consequences. Additionally, outside factors such as legal challenges are often unavoidable and uncontrollable.

Alaska has experienced significant delays in implementing its exit exam. As in California, the delays in Alaska were partly related to fears of huge numbers of students failing. Other circumstances in these states, such as provisions of state law and legal challenges, have also hindered efforts. Unlike many other states with standards-based exit exams, Alaska lacks a history of using aligned exams and did not develop detailed state standards until 1999, which may have slowed implementation. Also, the state originally intended to begin its testing program rapidly, with the first group of students who took the test facing graduation consequences in 2002. In 2001, however, the state legislature voted to delay consequences until the class of 2004, spurred by concerns that the education system was not prepared and that large numbers of students would fail (Pesznecker, 2001). After a lawsuit, changes were made in 2004 to exempt special education students from having to pass the exam. Additional policy changes now allow students to retake the exam indefinitely, and the state has adopted new waiver rules.

### **Public Support and Firm Leadership**

A handful of states have managed to implement tests largely on their original timetable and with few subsequent policy revisions, thanks in part to strong state-level support. In contrast to Alaska, Virginia has managed to implement its exam for the class of 2004 without too many barriers. Although early projections showed that graduation rates might drop for the class of 2004, the state board of education and the governor held firm and said that because of existing state flexibility and assistance for struggling students, the state would not alter its implementation of consequences for exit exams. This resolute stance may be more feasible in the state because the exit exams are supported by an estimated 59% of state residents (Helderman, 2004b). To bolster this support, the state has made extensive public announcements about state support systems available to struggling students (Welsh, P., 2003). And unlike Alaska, Virginia had a history of using an exit exam.

Strong state leadership has also proved effective in other states implementing exams. In Florida, robust support for exit testing was provided by Governor Jeb Bush (R). Florida first required its exit exam for the class of 2003. In New York, the strong push to maintain the new Regents exam policies has come from Commissioner Richard Mills. Both states have managed to implement their exams despite extensive criticism and opposition.

### **Making Modest Adjustments While Avoiding Major Ones**

As illustrated in the discussion above, Florida and New York are examples of states that have made some significant policy revisions during implementation of their exit exams, but have carried out the exams much as planned despite intense and vocal opposition. Part of their strategy has been to address concerns with amendments while keeping key principles intact.



Nevada's decision to temporarily lower the math passing score, then gradually raise it again, falls into this category. This decision was enacted by the legislature as an alternative to hotly debated proposals to delay the graduation requirement and use tiered diplomas (Kulin, 2003).

### Summary of Themes

In summary, many elements influence a state's implementation of an exam. Several states have seen very little overall change in their exam programs since they were implemented. Some states, like Minnesota, Louisiana, and Indiana, have made almost no changes to their exit exam policies. Other states, like Virginia and Texas, have had a relatively smooth implementation process even as they phased in new tests. New York, Massachusetts, Nevada, Florida, and others have faced very loud and organized resistance and lots of talk of potential changes but little actual change. Exit exam policies in states like Maryland, Ohio, and Washington appear to be going through a great deal of change, but much of the perceived change is part of the initial process of policy setting and represents important policy improvements rather than last-minute quick fixes. Even so, these states are facing significant political battles that complicate the process to lesser and greater degrees, depending on other contextual factors. Factors that appear to improve the chances of a streamlined process are high initial passing rates, the availability of appeals processes and remediation options for struggling students, and a state history of standards and aligned exams.

In contrast, several other states have had a very rocky process enacting exit exams. California, Arizona, Alaska, and several other states have had a much lengthier and more contentious process. The difficulties experienced in these states may be due to a variety of causes, including problems with the test itself, conflicts with other policies and priorities, inadequate alignment of curriculum to tests, widespread public opposition, large projected numbers of failing students, and a hastily implemented exam. In most states multiple factors are at work, and their complex interactions make predictions and evaluation difficult, though general trends emerge.

### Concluding Observations

As more states begin implementing and refining exit exams or requiring higher performance to comply with NCLB, others states are likely to face similar challenges and make adjustments to standards and content of exit exams. Some of these changes are minor revisions that are a normal part of initially implementing and adjusting a test. Other states have decided to phase in more gradually their proposed increases in cutoff scores, to allow teachers more time to align instruction with the exams. Many states are making moderate adjustments to comply with NCLB and raise expectations for students. A few states have already seen increased performance and want to hold their students to increasingly high standards. States make these choices in a difficult political environment with competing pressures to ensure students graduate well-prepared while also maintaining acceptably high graduation rates and setting fair expectations based on the instruction students receive.



# Chapter 6

## How Well Are Exit Exams Connected with Other Education Policies?

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### No Child Left Behind

- Nineteen of the twenty-five states with exit exams are streamlining their testing systems and using one exam both to award diplomas and to meet the accountability requirements of NCLB. However, the dual purposes of the federal and state testing policies and the sometimes conflicting cut scores for NCLB accountability and graduation requirements could lead to confusion and unintended consequences.
- Ten of the nineteen states that are using or plan to use the same exam for NCLB and graduation purposes are using or intend to use the same cut scores for both purposes.

#### Higher Education

- Few state higher education systems take into account exit exam results when making decisions about admissions, course placement, or scholarships. Among the 25 states with exit exams, only New Mexico, Texas, and New York reported that their exams are being used for admissions and/or course placement decisions by some public universities and colleges. Only Massachusetts and Nevada reported that exit exams scores are currently considered when awarding students scholarships to state colleges, but Arizona and Washington plan to link exam scores to scholarships in coming years.
- There are problems with using state exit exams for higher education decisions because these tests were not designed to gauge students' readiness for college

and because many of the exams are aligned to 10th grade standards or lower, rather than knowledge and skills at the college entry level.

- Research in Washington State has found that the state's exam, which will become a graduation requirement in 2008, is as good a predictor of college freshman success as the SAT. State officials are working to align K-12 standards and assessments with standards for college readiness and have held discussions with university officials about how to make the exit exam a more useful tool for higher education decisions.

### Other State Reforms

- High school reform efforts have interacted and sometimes conflicted with exit exam policies in unexpected ways, requiring policymakers to craft new responses. For example, increasing course requirements may place additional pressure on students who are already struggling to pass exit exams.

Exit exam systems do not operate in isolation from other federal and state education policies. They are being strongly influenced by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which has similar broad goals of raising achievement and strengthening accountability but has different timetables, processes, and requirements for achieving those goals. As states gain more experience with the demands of NCLB and as important NCLB testing deadlines come into play, states are beginning to see that their own exit exam policies and the federal NCLB testing and accountability policies don't always mesh.

Higher education is an area of education policy where there ought to be cohesion, since college and university educators and leaders are often among the most vocal proponents of high school graduation testing and since one of the main arguments that led to the adoption of exit exams was the need to effectively prepare high school graduates for education and work after high school. Yet the links between higher education and exit exam policies have not been as strong as one might have assumed.

Often exit exams were created as part of a larger package of comprehensive education reforms, or at least at the same time as other reform policies. Evidence is emerging that exit exams are more likely to achieve their outcomes when they are part of a cohesive system of high school reform.

This chapter looks at the connections between exit exams and:

- The No Child Left Behind Act
- Higher education
- Other high school reforms

## NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The most dominant force in educational testing today is the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Since its enactment in 2002, this massive federal law has exerted enormous impact on when and how states test, what grades and subjects they test, what kinds of tests they give, and how they use and report results. Beginning in school year 2005-06, the Act requires all students in grades 3 through 8 to be tested annually in reading and math and requires secondary school students to be tested at least once between grades 10 and 12 in these subjects. Testing in science will become a requirement for NCLB in 2007-08.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the scores from these tests form the backbone of a federally mandated accountability system that aims to identify which schools and districts are not doing a good job of educating students. These schools and districts are subject to increasingly stiff sanctions, ranging from the loss of students to better-performing schools under the law's parent choice provisions to massive restructuring or takeover by the state or a private management company. In short, NCLB testing brings serious consequences for schools and districts. It also affects students and parents by changing how students are taught and prepared for the exams, increasing the pressure on students to perform well on NCLB-required tests, expanding families' opportunities for school choice and tutoring services, expanding parents' access to information about school performance, and in other ways.

### Using Exit Exams for NCLB

NCLB is influencing state decisions about exit exams. Some states have elected to use the same exam for their high school exit exam and for NCLB accountability at the high school level, and those that do must ensure that their exit exam complies with the federal testing provisions.

Last year, we reported on the number of states that were using the state exit exam to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act accountability requirements and about some possible implications of using exit exams for both these purposes. In this year's state survey, we again asked states about exit exams as they relate to NCLB and expanded our questions to learn more about when the state began using or plan to use the same exam for NCLB and graduation purposes, whether the entire exam or a subset of the exam will be used, and if the cut scores for both NCLB and graduation are the same.

Last year, 17 of the 24 states we surveyed said they planned to use the same exam for NCLB accountability and awarding diplomas. This year the number of states that plan to use the same exam for both purposes rose to 19 out of 25 states. (See Table 15.)

Using the same test for both purposes can help streamline the testing process in several ways. First, it minimizes the amount of time students and teachers spend preparing for and taking the tests. Essentially since most high school exit exams are aligned with state standards and curriculum, they should test the same material as a state exam used for NCLB.

Second, using the same test can have financial benefits. It can cut back on the amount of money the state would have spent on developing, updating, and administering a second examination. This can help states devote their resources and energy to ensuring that standards, curriculum, and assessments are better aligned.

Third, using an exam for both purposes can help expand testing options for some students, particularly English language learners. Many states have developed math and other tests in other languages. Having one test that is aligned with curriculum and standards could make it more manageable for the state to expand these options.

On the other side, using the test for both NCLB and graduation could have some unintended consequences or create perverse incentives. When schools are held accountable for student performance, as they are with NCLB, they might feel added pressure to nudge students who are low performers to drop out or transfer to improve the school's average test scores. For example, because of concerns that schools were trying to artificially inflate their performance, the Florida Department of Education is watching 159 schools statewide, including some high schools that transferred 5% or more of their students just before the FCAT was administered (Rubin, H. G., 2004d). To counteract the potential dropout problem, NCLB requires state accountability systems to use graduation rates as an additional indicator of high school performance, but as chapter 2 documents, there is some evidence that "pushouts" have occurred.

Of the six states that use different tests for graduation and NCLB, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Utah administer minimum competency exams that do not meet the requirements of NCLB. Minnesota's exam is not aligned to state standards, as required by NCLB, and is given to students beginning in 8th grade. New Mexico's exit exam is also not aligned to state standards. Utah's exit exams are aligned to standards for grades 6–9, which is likely the reason these exams are not used for NCLB accountability. North Carolina's exams are aligned to 8th grade standards and cannot be used for NCLB accountability. Texas has a 10th grade and an 11th grade exam. The 10th grade exam is used for NCLB, and the 11th grade exam is used for graduation. The state had an exit exam prior to NCLB and recently switched to an exam that tests a higher set of the state standards. Although the 10th and 11th grade exams test the same objectives, the state may have moved to an 11th grade exit exam to allow students more time to grasp the high school curriculum. The state also indicated that the 10th grade exam is meant to be a source of information for schools and students to point them to those areas of academic content in which a student might need additional support to succeed on the 11th grade exit exam.

Maryland's exam will not count for graduation purposes until 2009. Because the state's English I and algebra/data analysis exams are administered primarily to 9th graders, they do not fulfill the federal requirement to measure reading and math proficiency during the band of grades 10–12. Therefore, for federal accountability purposes, Maryland tests high school reading with the 10th grade Maryland High School Assessment in reading and tests math with the High School Assessment in geometry, an end-of-course exam.

As more states move from minimum competency exams to standards-based exams, the number of states using the same exam for NCLB and graduation will probably increase.

Of the 19 states that are using the same exams for NCLB as graduation, 11 states (Alaska, California, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) began using the exit exam for NCLB accountability in the 2002–03 school year. Five states (Alabama, Georgia, Nevada, New Jersey, and Ohio) began using their exit exam for NCLB in the 2003–04 school year. Arizona, which was already administering the AIMS when NCLB became a

requirement, began using its exit exam for federal accountability in the 2001–02 school year. Florida and South Carolina did not respond to this survey question.

In 2007–08, 11 states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) plan to use the same science test used to award diplomas to meet the NCLB requirement for testing high school science, as shown in Table 15. Washington State’s science test will not be a requirement of its exit exam system until 2010. New Jersey and Ohio currently do not test in science but will add a science test to their exit exam systems in 2005.

States administer their exit exams in different grades—as early as 8th grade and as late as 11th grade—and all states have multiple retesting opportunities. If states plan to use their exit exams for NCLB accountability, the U.S. Department of Education initially said that states were required by law to use the first administration of that exam for NCLB purposes. However, the federal department also permitted exceptions. New York received special permission from the U.S. department to use the final retest of the Regents exam for NCLB.

Thirteen of 19 states using the exit exam for both purposes plan to use the first administration of the exam to meet NCLB requirements. As Table 15 shows, these states include Alaska, Arizona, California, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington. Alabama plans to use an administration after 11th grade. Nevada plans to use a cumulative approach—a percentage of students who have passed either the first administration or the first retest. Idaho will use the final administration of the test. Florida and South Carolina did not respond.

In December 2003, the U.S. Department of Education worked out a compromise with state officials concerning the use of state assessments for graduation and NCLB accountability. The compromise suggests that if an exam is developed to assess end-of-12th-grade content, and if students begin to take it in earlier grades, the state can count the scores from the final retake of the exam for NCLB purposes. However, if a student takes the exam after the 12th grade, that administration can count only for diploma purposes. (ED, states compromise on multiple test administrations, 2003).

Thirteen states (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio Tennessee, and Virginia) plan to use the entire exit exam for NCLB testing. (See Table 15.) Georgia, Mississippi, and Washington plan to use a subset of items from the exit exam for NCLB testing. Our study was limited and did not look specifically at the levels and standards tested for NCLB versus those tested for graduation. However, states might use a subset of items for NCLB because certain items might be more appropriate for different purposes. The state might have different expectations for student-level accountability than for school- and district-level accountability of the sort embodied by NCLB, since the stakes are different. Simply because states are excluding certain items from NCLB accountability doesn’t necessarily mean that they are setting lower standards for NCLB proficiency, although it may appear that way and be difficult to defend. Certain items simply might not fit certain NCLB requirements.

Our survey also revealed that 10 states (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Indiana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Virginia) are using or plan to use the same cut scores to determine whether a student should graduate as for NCLB accountability. (See Table 15.) Six states (California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Louisi-

**TABLE 15: STATE POLICIES FOR USING EXIT EXAMS FOR NCLB ACCOUNTABILITY**

State	Using Exit Exam for NCLB Accountability	Year First Used	Using Exit Exam for NCLB Science 07-08	Administration for NCLB Accountability	Part of Exam Used	Same Cut Score Used for Diploma and NCLB
Alabama	Yes	2003-04	Yes	11th grade spring	Entire exam	Yes
Alaska	Yes	2002-03	No*	First	Entire exam	Yes
Arizona	Yes	2001-02	No*	First	Entire exam	Yes
California	Yes	2002-03	No*	First	Entire exam	No
Florida	Yes	DNR	DNR	DNR	DNR	No
Georgia	Yes	2003-04	Yes	First	Subset of items	No
Idaho	Yes	2002-03	TBD	Final retest	TBD	No
Indiana	Yes	2002-03	No*	First	Entire exam	Yes
Louisiana	Yes	2002-03	Yes	First	Entire exam	No
Maryland	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Massachusetts	Yes	2002-03	No	First	Entire exam	No
Minnesota	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Mississippi	Yes	2002-03	Yes	First	Subset of items	TBD
Nevada	Yes	2003-04	Yes	First and first retest	Entire exam	Yes
New Jersey	Yes	2003-04	Yes*	First	Entire exam	Yes
New Mexico	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
New York	Yes	2002-03	Yes	Final retest	Entire exam	Yes
North Carolina	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Ohio	Yes	2003-04	Yes	First	Entire exam	Yes
South Carolina	Yes	DNR	DNR	DNR	DNR	DNR
Tennessee	Yes	2002-03	Yes	First	Entire exam	Yes
Texas	No	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Utah	No	NA	No	NA	NA	NA
Virginia	Yes	2002-03	Yes	First	Entire exam	Yes
Washington	Yes	2002-03	Yes*	First	Subset of items	TBD

\* Currently these states do not test in science as part of their exit exam system. If they plan to add a science test to be used for both purposes, they have been counted as Yes's.

NA = not applicable

DNR = did not respond

TBD = to be determined

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state departments of education, July 2004.



ana, and Massachusetts) will use different cut scores for graduation than for NCLB accountability. Washington and Mississippi have not yet decided whether they will use the same cut scores. We do not have information for South Carolina.

In California and Louisiana, the cut scores that signify proficient performance for NCLB are currently set higher than the cut scores for graduation purposes. Beginning with the February 2004 test administration, the proficient level for NCLB in California is a 380 scale score for both the math and English language arts portions, whereas the proficient level for graduation is 350 in both subjects. To be considered proficient for NCLB, students in Louisiana must achieve at the “basic” level, while to receive a diploma, students need only achieve at the “approaching basic” level or above.

Massachusetts also plans to set a higher cut score for NCLB proficiency than for graduation. Georgia will keep the same cut score of 500 on a scale of 400–600 for each subject for awarding diplomas, but will add more difficult items to evaluate adequate yearly progress under NCLB. Idaho will eventually use the same cut score to award high school diplomas as it uses for NCLB purposes, but the state is using lower cut scores for graduation for the classes of 2006 and 2007.

Using different scores could be confusing for educators and the public and difficult to justify, since a student can pass a state’s exit exam yet not be considered proficient under NCLB. That could imply low expectations for exit exam purposes in some minds.

## CONNECTIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

A common complaint from higher education officials and parents is that students sail through their high school courses and earn a diploma only to find they are not prepared to handle college-level work. It is often assumed that exit exams will help ensure that students have the necessary competencies to be successful when they enter college. As noted in chapter 2, however, the Center’s 2004 survey found that for most states, certifying that students are prepared to enter college is not the purpose of exit exams. Correspondingly, our survey results also indicate that few state higher education systems are currently considering high school exit exam results when making admissions, course placement, and scholarship decisions.

There are a number of obvious reasons for the lack of connection between high school exit exams and the needs of college admissions officers. First, as described below, exit exams are not designed with this purpose in mind. Second, a number of well-established tests, such as the SAT, already exist for college admission purposes. Third, in most states, the exit exam is not a measure of what a student knows at the end of 12th grade, but at the end of 10th or even 8th grade, and is therefore not useful in measuring skills at the college entry level (see the discussion of the alignment between exit exams and state standards in chapter 3).

Interest does seem to be growing among states in improving the alignment between high school exit and college entrance expectations and designing exit exams that could be used for higher education decisions in the future. Washington State in particular has made progress in this area; if its plans prove to be feasible, its experience may be replicated in other states in the future. A related development is that more states are planning to award scholarships for state universities based on students’ exit exam scores.

## Admissions and Course Placement Decisions

This year only two states, Texas and New York, reported that the state exit exam is used for admissions and course placement decisions for some public universities and community colleges. Those two states, along with New Mexico, indicated that exit exams are used for course placement decisions for some public universities and community colleges. Nine states responded that exit exam results are not being used by institutions of higher education; all others either indicated they did not have this information or left the question blank. Last year, a few more states reported using exit exam results for admissions and course placement decisions. This might be because last year the question was asked of officials from institutions of higher education, while this year it was asked of officials from the state departments of education who may not be fully aware of how exit exam results are being used. This may point to a lack of communication between these two groups.

Box 12 summarizes findings from a survey on college admissions conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The survey results lend further support to the notion that exit exams are not an important factor in admissions for most institutions of higher education.

## Alignment of Exit Exams with Standards for College Success

Even if colleges and universities wish to use state exit exams for admission and placement decisions, research suggests that most exit exams, as they currently exist,

### BOX 12: FACTORS IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

The table below shows the results of the Admissions Trends Survey, conducted in August 2003 by the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The survey polls hundreds of college admission officers across the nation, mostly from four-year public and private institutions, to determine which factors are most important in the admissions decision. Only 18% of responding institutions rated high school exit exam scores as an important factor in admissions decisions.

Factor	Moderate or Considerable Importance
Grades in college-prep courses	89%
Standardized admission tests	86%
Grades in all courses	85%
Class rank	68%
Essay or writing sample	58%
Counselor recommendation	59%
Teacher recommendation	56%
Work/extracurricular activities	47%
Interview	36%
Student's demonstrated interest	30%
Subject tests (SATII, AP, IB)	25%
Race/ethnicity	19%
<b>State graduation exam scores</b>	<b>18%</b>
Ability to pay	8%
State or county of residence	8%

Source: National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2003.

are not appropriate tools for determining students' preparedness for college. A study by Standards for Success, a consortium of institutions that belong to the Association of American Universities, concluded that state high school exams bear an "inconsistent" relationship to the knowledge and skills necessary for college success (Conley, 2003). That is, the researchers found that high school assessments generally provide little useful information about students' readiness for higher education. This study is described in more detail in Box 13.

An interesting illustration of the discrepancy between exit exam scores and college entrance exams comes from Texas. Even as the state's exit exam scores soared in the 1990s and into this decade, Texas high school graduates performed no better on the two main college entrance exams, the SAT and ACT. The Houston Chronicle compared student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (the state exit exam that is being phased out) with scores on the SAT and ACT. The percentage of 10th graders passing the TAAS increased from 61% in 1996 to 86% in 2002. During that same time, scores on the SAT and ACT dropped slightly, and half the students enrolling in public colleges statewide were so badly prepared academically that they needed remedial coursework (Markley, 2004).

This discrepancy between scores on exit exams and college entrance exams has been particularly significant in some Houston-area districts, where SAT and ACT scores dropped at the same time that a smaller percentage of students took the tests. The superintendent of the Aldine School District near Houston speculated that a big reason for the lower SAT scores was the district's rapidly changing demographics (Markley, 2004). The SAT, more than the TAAS, tests students extensively on vocabulary, which the superintendent argued can be challenging for the district's growing Hispanic populations, many of whom are English language learners. However, an Aldine student cited in the Chronicle investigation felt that teachers' intense focus on preparing students for TAAS, which was a relatively basic level exam, had dumbed down curriculum and instruction, even for students enrolled in gifted classes and advanced courses. It will be interesting to see if the comparative trends in exit exam and college entrance exam scores change in the next few years, as Texas moves toward the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, which is purportedly more rigorous.

An advocacy effort, titled the American Diploma Project, released a report in 2004 aimed at making stronger connections between requirements for high school graduation and the skills need to enter higher education, as well as general skills needed to enter the workforce. Three organizations—Achieve, Inc, the Education Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation—partnered to determine the English and mathematics skills that high school graduates need to be successful in college and the workplace. After two years of work with high school teachers, college professors, and employers, the partnership released a set of benchmarks that describe the specific English and mathematics knowledge and skills that graduates must have mastered if they expect to succeed in postsecondary education or in higher-performance, high-growth jobs. The report also includes actual workplace tasks and postsecondary assignments that illustrate practical applications of the "must-have" competencies described in the benchmarks (American Diploma Project, 2004). The ultimate goal of the project is to help states incorporate those skills into their standards, assessments, and high school graduation requirements.

### BOX 13: WHAT STATE HIGH SCHOOL TESTS SAY ABOUT STUDENT READINESS FOR COLLEGE

Standards for Success examined high school English and mathematics exams from 20 states—7 of which required these exams for graduation. (The researchers approached all 50 states and asked for their high school assessments, but more than half of the states, including many with exit exams, did not provide their tests for analysis for test security or other reasons.) For each test they received, the Standards for Success researchers compared each question on the test to a set of standards, called Knowledge and Skills for University Success (KSUS), outlining what students should know in various subjects when they enter college.

The KSUS standards were developed by Standards for Success (2004) with input from more than 400 university faculty members from 20 major universities and with attention to course syllabi and student work samples. This information was distilled into a set of standards. The purpose was to identify key knowledge and skills expected of university students by instructors of entry-level courses. Five raters in each subject area took questions from the high school assessments and compared them to the KSUS standards. They rated all state assessment items in terms of “categorical concurrence,” which refers to the match between each assessment item and the KSUS standards, and in terms of “depth of knowledge,” a measure of cognitive complexity. The ratings process resulted in a numerical score for each assessment item in math and English language skills. These were averaged to provide a final score for each state’s assessment. The state exams were then divided into three groups, A, B and C. Level A exams had the greatest potential to provide useful information about a student’s readiness for college and were well aligned to the KSUS standards, while level C exams provided very limited information about postsecondary readiness and were not well aligned. Level B exams were deemed to be inconsistently aligned to the standards for success in college.

Most tests fell into the B and C categories, indicating that overall, most state high school tests were not well aligned with college success standards and would need to be modified before they could provide students or admissions officers with information on readiness for college. States’ high school tests matched up most frequently with the college success standards in reading comprehension and computation. State tests were less well aligned with the college success standards in algebra, mathematical reasoning, geometry, and writing and critical thinking in English. So few tests had any items that aligned with the college standards of research skills, trigonometry, and statistics that ratings on these standards were not included in the analysis; had they been included, state tests would have fared even worse.

The study included seven states with exit exams. A partial summary of their scores is shown below; the full report can be accessed at <http://cepr.uoregon.edu/MixedMessages/>. In general, state scores for their exit exams did not differ much from the scores of state high school exams that were not exit exams. The study did not make any judgments about the quality of the high school exams as measures of high school knowledge, but only looked at the degree to which they reflected the KSUS standards.

**BOX 13 continued**

**LEVEL OF KSUS ALIGNMENT OF SOME EXIT EXAMS—  
READING AND WRITING**

State	ELA Overall	Comprehension	Writing	Critical Thinking
Massachusetts	B	A	C	B
Mississippi	C	C	C	C
New Jersey	B	A	B	C
New York (session 1)*	B	B	C	B
Utah (R/W)**	C/B	A/C	C/B	C/C
Virginia (R/W)	B/C	A/C	C/C	B/C
Washington	B	B	C	B

\*One of 2 sessions

\*\*R/W = reading/writing

**LEVEL OF KSUS ALIGNMENT OF SOME EXIT EXAMS—MATH**

State	Math Overall	Computation	Algebra	Reasoning	Geometry
Massachusetts	B	C	C	C	B
Mississippi	B	B	B	B	B
New Jersey	B	A	B	B	B
New York (Math A)*	B	B	B	B	B
Utah	B	B	C	C	C
Virginia**	B	C	B	B	C
Washington	B	C	C	B	B

\*One of five exams

\*\*Algebra I. Virginia also has separate assessments for Algebra II and Geometry.

State officials point out that their tests were never designed to measure college readiness. The researchers respond that one purpose of the study was to bring attention to the little-known fact that exit exams are not aligned to college-preparatory standards. They recommended that:

- States undertake more in-depth studies of students' scores on state tests and subsequent performance in college
- State high school tests be revised to include more complex skills so that results could eventually be used for college admissions and placement
- States work more closely with representatives from postsecondary education when they revise state content standards and assessments to promote greater alignment

Source: Conley, 2003

#### BOX 14: USING THE WASL TO CONNECT HIGH SCHOOL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the past few years, the University of Washington (UW) has conducted research to begin to explore the validity of using the state's high school exam, the WASL, for higher education admissions and course placement decisions. Diplomas will be withheld from students who do not pass the WASL beginning with the class of 2008.

In one study, university researchers analyzed the relationship between WASL scores and college success for the UW class of 2005 (McGee, 2003). The study examined how well three factors—individual students' high school grade point average (GPA), total SAT scores, and 1999 WASL results in reading, math, writing and listening—predicted freshman GPA. The researchers found that WASL scores and SAT scores correlated with UW freshman GPAs at about the same levels. That is, according to this study, students' WASL results were as good as the SAT in predicting their freshman success.

A second study examined the ways the state exit exam is similar to and different from commonly used placement tests for two-year colleges. The researchers examined the relationship between individual students' scores on the WASL in reading, writing, and mathematics, and their scores in these same subjects on the placement tests (Pavelchek, Stern & Olson, 2002). They found that in general, the higher the WASL score, the more likely it was for a student to score at college level on the placement exams. In writing, more than 90% of students who passed the WASL also met the college-level standard on the placement test. Passing the WASL in math did not mean a student would score at college level on the placement test, however. A student had to reach the highest level on the WASL to have at least a 55% chance of being placed in college math.

The Council of Presidents, who lead Washington's four-year public institutions, have called for more research and identified several issues that would need to be resolved if they were to consider using the WASL for college admissions decisions. Among their concerns are tightening test administration procedures to ensure test security and fairness and ensuring that minority students will not be discouraged or disadvantaged if the WASL is incorporated into college admissions. Currently, WASL data show a large achievement gap between white and minority students (Partnership for Learning, 2003).

## State Efforts to Build Stronger Connections

While the two nationwide studies described above imply that there is little connection between current exit exams and higher education entrance requirements, Washington State has produced some research that suggests that its high school exam, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, may be as good a predictor of first-year college success as the SAT (see Box 14). Washington's department of education has been urging state universities to use WASL scores in admissions decisions; the WASL will become an exit exam beginning with the class of 2008. The university system has responded that it needs to do more research before incorporating the WASL into its admissions policies, and for the time being, it is giving students the option of providing their WASL scores on their college applications (Shaw, 2004d).

When we surveyed state officials about whether K-12 and higher education officials have held discussions about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college, the large majority of states with exit exams responded "no" or did not answer the question. For most states this does not appear to be a priority. Maryland and Washington State expressed the greatest commitment to this effort in our survey, as the following comments show:

*Maryland's K-16 Partnership for Teaching and Learning is an alliance among the Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Higher Education Commission, and Maryland. The purpose of the partnership is to develop strategies for strengthening K-16 connections, standards, competencies, assessments, professional development of educators, and community engagement in educational activities. The Partnership has discussed the Maryland High School Assessments many times during the development of the tests. In fact, higher education institutions were involved in developing the content to be tested by the High School Assessments. However, because the current assessments are administered primarily in ninth and tenth grade [and] are required of all students pursuing a diploma, they are not considered to be college preparation tests. (Maryland)*

*State and local K-12 and higher education officials, as well as faculty, have been working toward aligning K-12 standards with college readiness. Our state legislature in 2004 passed legislation requiring K-12 and higher education to align K-12 standards with college readiness, particularly to decrease remediation rates at colleges and universities of recent high school graduates. The state has also had discussions with both the 4-year and community colleges about using the WASL as part of the admissions process. Several studies have been conducted that found WASL results have about the same predictive power as college entrance exams (e.g., SAT). (Washington)*

In their survey responses, a few other states described ongoing debates about whether this is an agenda worth pursuing.

*The State Board of Education has discussed the development of a higher standard for a competency test or exit exam that would be more connected to a student's future plans, but no decision has been made to date. (North Carolina)*

*The Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents continue to discuss issues surrounding high school exit skills and college entry level skills. (Ohio)*

*Some in the state want the NSPE to also serve as an entrance exam for the state university and community college system. The department feels that this is a different purpose from the one currently in place. (Nevada)*

Meanwhile, the most widely used college admissions test, the SAT, has been revised to be less of a general ability and reasoning test and to be more closely aligned with high school and college course content (College Board, n.d.). Sophomores taking the SAT in 2003–04 were the first class to take the newly revised test for college admissions. In the past, the SAT verbal test included a lot of general vocabulary and reasoning tasks in the form of analogies, but those analogies are now being replaced with a variety of reading passages to test comprehension; likewise, the quantitative comparison questions have been eliminated and replaced with math content that includes topics from third-year college preparatory math. In addition, a student-written essay is being added. The move to align the SAT more closely with high school content may help push alignment between high school tests and college admissions tests from the source that develops one of the main tests.

### Awarding of Scholarships

In response to the Center's survey, only two states, Nevada and Massachusetts, reported they are using exit exam results to award scholarships for higher education. Last January, Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney announced a new scholarship program to offer the top 25% of MCAS scorers four years tuition-free at any University of Massachusetts campus or any state or community college (Russell & Vaishnav, 2004). The top 10% would be eligible for an additional \$2,000 from the state to help cover fees. To earn the scholarships, students would also need to graduate in four years and maintain good grades. The governor further proposed that private school students be allowed to take the MCAS exam and also be eligible for the scholarships (Rothstein, 2004a). Based on the number of high school students who took the MCAS in 2003, about 16,000 would qualify for free tuition, and 6,500 would also be offered the fee assistance. It is estimated that the program would cost \$50 million by its fourth year. However, critics point out that for most students, the bulk of their college costs would not be covered. Tuition has been frozen for years on state campuses, while fees have skyrocketed. For instance, this year at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, tuition is \$857 per semester, while fees are \$3,634. Furthermore, the proposal would likely end up helping students who do not need financial assistance, since students from wealthier communities tend to score higher on standardized tests. The scholarship program was approved in June 2004 by the state board of higher education, though the part of the original plan that would open the scholarship program to private and parochial school students was shelved because it would require legislative approval (Rothstein, 2004c).

More states will be using exit exams to award scholarships in the coming years. Beginning with the graduating class of 2006, Washington will use WASL scores to grant two-year undergraduate scholarships valued at \$1,200 per year (Shaw, 2004d). Arizona's schools superintendent Tom Horne gained approval from the Arizona Board of Regents for a new policy that would require the state's three universities to use the high school exit exam, instead of standard college entrance exams, to determine which high school graduates will get free tuition (Arizona Board of Regents, 2004; Kossan, 2004). Research by the Arizona universities shows the proposed change



would have little effect on which students, or how many students, receive tuition waivers; if AIMS test scores replaced ACT or SAT scores for the universities' freshman class of 2003–04, the same 400 students would have received tuition waivers.

### Other Developments

A few state higher education systems are providing instructional programs to help high school students prepare for exit exams. Under the University of Massachusetts program, Destination...Graduation, college students have provided tutoring to high school students who fail the exit exams at selected schools, with promising results: most of the tutored students passed the exit exam after participating in the program (University of Massachusetts, 2004). The University of Texas system recently unveiled an online study tool called TAKS Readiness and Core Knowledge. This is a self-paced tutorial that identifies individual weaknesses and helps students prepare for the exit exam (Carnevale, 2004).

### Conclusion

Few state higher education systems are currently using high school exit exam results for admissions, course placement, or scholarship decisions. Some argue that high school exit exams are not meant to certify or predict college readiness; after all, not all high school graduates choose to go on to college. Furthermore, exit exams are typically given starting at 10th grade and are designed to measure something less than achievement through the 12th grade. However, others argue that the large majority of high school graduates do enter college, and the high school diploma should signify adequate preparation to do so.

Several large-scale research efforts have made progress in identifying the knowledge and skills needed for entry into college and/or the workplace and are encouraging states to assess those competencies with their high school exit exams. However, deciding that a student has mastered the basic skills expected of a high school graduate and certifying that a student is prepared to enter college are two different purposes, and it is not clear that a single exam can be valid for both. It remains to be seen whether states will embrace the goal of making high school exit exams into useful tools for reaching higher education decisions and will adjust their exams accordingly. For now, more research of the sort conducted in Washington should be done into how current exit exams relate to success in the first year of college (including a reduced need for remediation). Also, departments of education and higher education officials should engage in discussions about whether or how exit exams could be made more useful for higher education decisions.

### CONCURRENT HIGH SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

To ensure that students graduate with the skills they need to succeed in higher education and employment and to respond to other high school needs, states are changing high schools in a number of ways, most notably increasing graduation requirements. While some states may be undertaking these efforts to better prepare students for exit exams, others are attempting to improve the quality and rigor of education that all students receive. Although the intentions behind these concurrent

reforms are clearly laudable, their overall impact and their interactions with exit exams are still uncertain. New graduation requirements may compete with exit exams for resources and attention from teachers and students. In districts with insufficient resources and low-achieving students, attending to too many goals simultaneously may present a monumental challenge. It is also possible that other reform efforts may exacerbate potential problems with exit exam systems.

In this section we discuss the variety of high school reform efforts that we believe may have significant impacts and interactions on high school exit exams.

### Increased Course Requirements

In addition to state exit exams, students in all states are required to meet state and/or local requirements for coursework for graduation. These vary widely among states but generally include four units of English, three to four units of Math, two to four units of science, two to four units of social studies, and various requirements in foreign language, physical education, arts, technology, and electives. Additionally, Maryland and the District of Columbia—to cite two examples—impose a community service requirement on all graduates. Even within states, graduation requirements may vary for different groups of students; for example, some states have up to four tiers of requirements meant to align with students' future educational and career goals. A significant majority of states (43 states and the District of Columbia) have state-level graduation requirements, although many of these states allow local flexibility in supplementing minimum state requirements (American Diploma Project, 2003).

Drawing from evidence that the rigor of classes taken in high school is a good predictor of college completion (Adelman, 1999), many states have increased course requirements for high school graduation. Yet other research suggests that more demanding course requirements may lead to increases in dropout rates, an unresolved concern with exit exams (Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). While expansions of course requirements for graduation are intended to enhance high school performance and postsecondary outcomes, their overall effect is still undetermined.

In 2000, the California legislature amended the state's high school graduation requirements by adding an algebra requirement that would first apply to the class of 2004. All students, including special education students and English language learners, were required to take algebra before they would be granted diplomas. State lawmakers felt that algebra was an essential skill for all students to succeed in college or work. In the upheaval surrounding the proposed state exit exam, which was postponed until the class of 2006, little attention was paid to the new requirement—that is, until this year (Luna, 2003). As the requirement approached, many districts were issued one-year waivers after appealing to the California State Board of Education. The Santa Cruz City School District led the way in seeking these waivers, claiming that it had not adequately informed students of the requirement, and dozens of school districts followed. Though the state board issued numerous waivers this year, board members have vowed that this will not become a pattern and that districts will have to find ways to help students meet the requirement in the future (Rubin, J., 2004).

In another effort to better prepare California students for college, state Senator Richard Alarcon has introduced a bill sponsored by state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell to require all high school students to take classes cur-

rently required for only college-bound students. The bill would be voluntary until 2010 and become mandatory for the class of 2014. To encourage schools to implement the initiative, the bill also gives participating schools flexibility in spending money that is currently provided for categorical programs (Coleman, 2004). Currently, less than 50% of California students complete the “A-G” curriculum required for entrance into the California State University system, which all students would be mandated to take if the bill passes. While the requirements would not dramatically alter the number of classes that students must complete to graduate, it would significantly increase the level of classes required to graduate (Lindelof & Kollars, 2004). O’Connell believes that the bill’s more rigorous standards would lead to improved student results on the California High School Exit Exam (California Department of Education, 2004). As of June 2004, the bill had been amended to require students to receive access to this curriculum but without mandating that they complete the curriculum for graduation; the bill was still pending in the legislature.

Indiana is also moving to increase its graduation requirements. The state currently has an optional Core 40 curriculum designed to prepare students for higher education. Like the California proposal, Core 40 does not require an increase in the number of classes needed to graduate, but mandates that those classes fall largely in academic disciplines and be more rigorous. In 2002 approximately 61% of Indiana graduates received a Core 40 diploma (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). To further raise the bar, in his 2003 state of the state address, Governor Frank O’Bannon (D) outlined a goal of making the Core 40 curriculum a requirement for graduation (O’Bannon focuses on children in 2003 speech, 2003). Working with the state board of education, the Indiana Education Roundtable and local business leaders developed the Indiana Core 40 Scholars Initiative to encourage students across the state to participate in the challenging curriculum (Indiana Core 40 Initiative, n.d.).

### Early Graduation

Over the past year, several states have revised their graduation requirements in ways that may affect the states’ exit exams. As a response to overcrowding, the Florida legislature passed a law in June 2003 allowing students to graduate in three years instead of four by taking 18 credits instead of 24. These students must also pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in order to graduate and must maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.0 (Blair, 2003). Those electing the three-year plan may find themselves at a disadvantage when taking the FCAT because some of the essential skills covered on the test, like geometry, are not specifically required under the three-year plan. Additionally, if students elect the three-year plan but fail to pass the FCAT by the end of their junior year, they may have to scramble to meet the more stringent additional requirements of four-year students in only one year (Pinzur, 2003a).

While the Florida law was proposed to help motivated students who have fulfilled graduation requirements advance through school more quickly, initial indicators suggest it might not be having its intended effect. An early survey of guidance counselors in southern Florida by the Miami Herald indicated that many of the students who had expressed interest in early graduation were not strong students but were having academic difficulty and were eager to leave school (New Florida law faces test as students consider graduation option, 2003). Unfortunately, these are the students who most need the additional year of classes and support to succeed

on the exam and after graduation. In response to strong complaints from educators, the state Senate education committee approved a bill in December 2003 that greatly tightened the requirements for students who want to graduate early. The new law, signed in May 2004 by the governor, allows students to graduate early only if they have attained a 3.5 GPA and a B average in all required classes. The law further limits participation to students taking college preparatory classes and requires that one-third of their credits come from Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. State Senator Lee Constantine suggested that these limitations would reduce the number of eligible students to less than one percent and hopefully would prevent struggling students from exercising this option (Panel okays tightening early graduation law, 2003).

### Between Passing the Exam and Graduation

Other states have also struggled with how to handle students' 12th grade year, when many students have completed required coursework and passed state exit exams. Lawmakers and school officials worry that students who fulfill all requirements early will lose motivation and become disengaged from learning for the rest of their time in school. Several states have considered various proposals that would remedy this issue and have the added benefit of reducing education costs in a time of serious budget crises. Several representatives in Massachusetts proposed legislation requiring courses in gifted education for teacher certification and better tracking of students

#### BOX 15: MOTIVATING STUDENTS WHO HAVE ALREADY PASSED EXIT EXAMS

In September 2002, New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey outlined a 21-point plan for improving education in the state. As part of this plan, he suggested that high school seniors who had passed the graduation exam be allowed to volunteer, do apprenticeships, serve as teacher's assistants, or take college classes. His rationale was to provide seniors with meaningful learning experiences in their final year of high school and help maintain their motivation and interest (New Jersey Department of Education, 2002).

In 2003, the state ran a pilot program in 60 districts to encourage high school seniors who had completed graduation requirements to take college classes, volunteer, or participate in internships with the goal of furthering students' personal and intellectual development (New Jersey Department of Education, 2003). Students showed interest in these options. For example, 600 out of the 730 students in the senior class in Washington Township High School participated in community service, and 155 of the 195 seniors in River Dell High School participated in college credit programs (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004b). In 2004, the New Jersey Department of Education added certificate technology programs, dual credit college classes, and senior research projects to the available options for 12th grade students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2004a).

who score particularly well on the state's exit exam to ensure that high-achieving student continue to be challenged (Pappano, 2003). Governors in Virginia and New Jersey have proposed allowing seniors who have completed graduation requirements and passed the state exit exam to participate in dual enrollment with community colleges or in work-based apprenticeships (States increasingly weigh 12th-grade alternatives, 2004). Box 15 describes New Jersey's plan.

The overall impact of changes in graduation requirements and other high policy changes, as well as their interaction with exit exams, is still unclear. High school presents a challenge to states, since the curriculum lacks uniformity and individual students can choose different paths. To ensure all students graduate with an acceptable level of skills, can pass exit exams, and are challenged, states may need to continue adjusting both the graduation requirements and the tests. These modifications should be designed to ensure that students acquire essential knowledge in high school and are prepared to succeed when they graduate. Achieving these curriculum goals while also making progress for NCLB will likely be a considerable challenge for states.



# State Profiles

# Alabama

**Test Name:** Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition

**Subjects Tested:** Reading, language, mathematics, science, and social studies

**Initial Grade Tested:** 11th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

While not an official position, state officials report that the purpose of the state's exit exam is to ensure "that all Alabama students had the opportunity to learn the minimum knowledge in the core courses to earn a high school diploma."

## Historical and Policy Background

Alabama began administering exit exams in 1985 with the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 1st Edition, and in 1995 implemented a second edition of the exam titled the High School Basic Skills Exit Exam. The second edition of the exam is currently being phased out. The seniors in spring 2004 had to pass all subject-area tests of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition.

Major policy changes over this period include a change from the AHSGE testing three subjects to testing five subjects. The exam also moved from testing basic skills to testing 11th grade state standards. In addition, the state decided to allow the GED to be used as an alternate exam for the AHSGE and added waivers for special education students.

## Test Characteristics

The Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition is administered in September, December, March, and April, and students first take the tests in the 11th grade. However, students must take the exam in the 10th grade as a pre-graduation exam. The state reports that the AHSGE 3rd Edition is a standards-based exam that is aligned to 11th grade standards. It was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The state reports that the test has undergone a review to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. The state also reports conducting a study to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams. The reviews are confidential and were not available for the Center's use.

The Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition tests reading, language, mathematics, science, and social studies. The test consists of multiple-choice questions. The AHSGE is not timed. All students are allowed to use the state-approved calculator on the math test.

## NCLB

The results of the AHSGE 3rd Edition have been used to determine adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in reading and math since the 2003-04 school year. The science section of the exam will also be used to meet the science test requirement of NCLB in 2007-08. The state will use the cut score (the "pass" level) to award high school diplomas, but the state has established an advanced level of performance for NCLB proficiency. The passing rate after the 11th grade opportunity will count for NCLB purposes.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition are fail (levels I and II), pass (level III), and advanced (level IV). The tests are scored on a scale of 0-999, and the pass-



ing scores are 563 for reading, 560 for language, 477 for mathematics, 491 for science, and 509 for social studies. The results are reported to districts, schools, students, and parents three weeks after the administration of the exam. Results are reported to the public once a year. Reports include information on whether the student passes or fails each subject-area test and has mastered skills for each subject area not passed during the administration. Test questions are not released each year.

When students fail the exit exam, the district is required to provide them with information to help them prepare for future administrations of the test. There is no standard form for providing this information.

## Student Options

Students have four opportunities to retake the exam by the end of 12th grade. The first retest option is during the summer after 11th grade. If a student meets all of the other requirements to graduate except passing the AHSGE, he or she can retake the exam after the 12th grade. There are no limits on age or the number of times a student can retake an exam. The state currently does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Alabama. The state allows the GED to be substituted for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam 3rd Edition. No information is available on how many students use this option. There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive regular diplomas. There is also no waiver or appeals process in place.

## Special Populations

The state allows the following testing accommodations for students with disabilities and students identified as limited English proficient:

1. Format and/or equipment accommodations (such as having all subject area tests except for the reading test read aloud or using an English/native language translation dictionary or an electronic translator word-to-translation)
2. Setting accommodations (such as taking the test in a small group, individually, in an ESL classroom, or seated in front of the classroom or using an interpreter when oral instructions for the tests are given)
3. Recording accommodations (such as marking answers on the test booklet)
4. Scheduling accommodations (such as administering tests at the most beneficial time of day or in periods of time with rest breaks)

Students with disabilities and English language learners who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities can also receive an Alabama Occupational Diploma or can apply for a waiver to obtain a regular diploma if they do not pass the AHSGE.

There are no appeals, waiver processes, special certificates or diplomas for English language learners who do not pass the high school exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the AHSGE, although students are not required to attend remedial programs. The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the AHSGE, including training teachers how to teach test-taking skills, familiarizing teachers with the content of the AHSGE, and training them how to interpret test results. The state has not developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exams for students.

## Monitoring

The state is currently developing policies to establish consequences or rewards for schools and districts that are linked to student performance on the exit exam.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers for 2002-03 in Grade 11

Subgroups	Math	Reading	Language	Science	Social Studies
All Students	79%	88%	83%	83%	72%
White	86%	93%	89%	92%	81%
Black	66%	79%	71%	67%	55%
Hispanic	73%	72%	67%	69%	60%
Asian	91%	87%	83%	87%	78%
Native American/Alaskan Native	82%	90%	85%	84%	77%
English language learners/LEP	74%	68%	69%	66%	58%
Free or reduced price lunch	68%	80%	73%	70%	56%
Students with disabilities	46%	59%	46%	59%	47%

### Cumulative Pass Rates for 2002-03 in Grade 12

All Students	92.54%
White	96.15%
Black	85.62%
Hispanic	83.81%
Asian	94.30%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	92.86%
English language learners/LEP	98.18%
Free or reduced price lunch	85.77%
Students with disabilities	65.89%

The cumulative pass rates were calculated as follows: The state maintains a database of all students who have taken the test with scores from all administrations and the 120-day enrollment for each school district. The 120-day enrollment data show the students' grade levels. The information from the 120-day enrollment file is used to determine who is a 12th grader in each school, and these students are matched with their test data. The number of 12th graders that pass all subjects is divided by the total number of 12th graders.

## Higher Education

The state did not have information available on whether public universities and community colleges use the AHSGE for any purposes. According to the Center's 2003 study of high school exit exams, some public universities and community colleges indicated that they use the AHSGE scores to make decisions about undergraduate admissions. Students can, however, be admitted to both public universities and public community colleges if they have a GED.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.

# Alaska

**Test Name:** Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam

**Subjects Tested:** Reading, writing, and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Minimum competency

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

According to Alaska's response to the Center's survey of the state exit exam, the state department of education has not articulated an official or unofficial purpose of the exam.

## Historical and Policy Background

The Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) was approved by the state legislature in 1997 through Alaska Statute 14.03.075—Secondary Student Competency Testing. This is the state's first ever exit exam, and there are no plans to replace the HSGQE at this time.

The state began administering the exam in March 2000. An earlier version of the exam contained material that all high school students were not exposed to prior to taking the exam. The exam was refocused in 2001 to become a test of essential skills that all high school students are taught. Originally, diplomas were scheduled to be withheld for the class of 2002, but in April 2001, the legislature passed SB 133, which delayed the withholding of diplomas until the class of 2004. This bill also allowed students with individualized education programs to get diplomas either by passing all three competency tests with or without accommodations or producing a portfolio of work demonstrating mastery of state education standards.

As a result of a class action lawsuit filed on March 16, 2004, against the Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development, two state department of education officials, and the Anchorage School District, Attorney Gregg Renkes and Education Commissioner Roger Sampson filed a joint stipulation in U.S. District Court on April 7, 2004, to allow students with disabilities in the class of 2004 to receive a diploma without passing the state's high school exit exam. These students will still need to complete all other state and district graduation requirements.

Additional changes include a new policy lifting the time limit on retaking the exam and new waiver rules adopted in 2003, which are explained in greater detail below.

## Test Characteristics

In 2004, the exam was administered in February. In 2005, it will be administered in April. Retests are given in October and during the spring administration of the exam.

The state considers the HSGQE to be a minimum competency test aligned to 10th grade standards. It was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. It has undergone review by external reviewers to determine whether it is aligned to state standards, but findings are unavailable pending the outcome of legal challenges.

The HSGQE tests math, reading, and writing in grade 10. The test consists of multiple-choice, short-answer and writing prompt/essay questions. The exam is not timed. Only students who are allowed accommodations can use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

The state began using the results from the first time a student takes the HSGQE to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002-03. The entire exam will be used, but since the exam currently has no science test, a different test may be used to fulfill this requirement. The same cut scores and achievement levels will be used for NCLB proficiency as are used to award high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees grade the open-ended questions on the HSGQE. The achievement levels are advanced, proficient, below proficient, and far below proficient. The tests are scored on a scale of 100-600. Students must score 322 in reading, 275 in writing, and 328 in math to pass.

District and schools receive results two months after testing occurs. Students and parents receive results three months after testing occurs, and the public receives results four months after testing occurs. The public receives results from the spring administration on an annual basis. Reports include information about whether students pass or fail and their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) in each major subject area. Questions from the exam are not released every year.

## Student Options

Students have two opportunities each year to retake the exam, beginning with the next administration. Students who receive a certificate of achievement because they did not pass all sections of the exam by their intended graduation date may retake the exam twice a year, indefinitely. This represents a change from previous policy; originally students had only three years after their graduation date to retake the exam for a diploma.

The state permits transfer students who have passed another state's high school graduation exam in reading, English, and math to submit passing scores to meet graduation requirements in Alaska. Students must provide documentation that includes one of the following options:

- The out-of-state school from which the student transferred must transmit directly to the local school board an assessment report from the school where the student passed a secondary competency examination. The report must contain a summary of the student's assessment history in the school issuing the report.
- The out-of-state school from which the student transferred must transmit directly to the local school board student transcripts demonstrating the student passed a secondary competency examination. The transcript must show the subtests of the statewide secondary competency exit exam and the subtests that the student has passed if an assessment report is not available.

In 2004, the state began to accept applications from students for waivers of the requirement to pass the exam to receive a high school diploma. Students may submit an application to their local school board requesting a waiver. To qualify for a diploma through this option, however, a student must meet all other state and local district graduation requirements. Since the class of 2004 is the first required to pass the HSGQE, no information is available yet about how many students are using this option.

Exemptions to passing the test are also available in special cases, such as for students who have moved to Alaska within two semesters of graduation, have had a parent die during the last semester of their graduating year, or have suffered a serious or sudden illness or physical injury.

If students do not meet all high school graduation requirements, including passing the exam, or do not receive a waiver from passing the exam, they can receive a certificate of achievement in lieu of a high school diploma.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows students with disabilities to use accommodations while testing. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. If students with disabilities do not pass the HSGQE, they can also take an alternate portfolio assessment or an optional assessment. No special diplomas or certificates are available for students with disabilities who do not receive a regular diploma, except the certificate of achievement.

### English Language Learners

The state allows English language learners to use accommodations while testing. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. The state did not indicate that any alternate assessments, special diplomas, or certificates are available for ELLs who do not receive a regular diploma, besides the certificate of achievement available to all students.

### Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the HSGQE. Alaska indicated that no funds are targeted to remediation for students who fail the exam. The state also reports that it has not supported or established professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the exam. The state has developed information guides explaining the tests, but has not established any remediation programs or materials to help students prepare for the exam. The state reports that it has not developed any diagnostic or formative assessments for use prior to the exit exam.

### Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exams.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Subgroups	Mathematics	Reading	Writing
All Students	67%	70%	86%
White	76%	82%	92%
Black	44%	58%	77%
Hispanic	53%	61%	82%
Asian	68%	64%	86%
American Indian	58%	68%	86%
English language learners/LEP	38%	29%	67%
Free or reduced price lunch	47%	46%	74%
Students with disabilities	22%	22%	44%
Alaska Native	48%	44%	73%

Note: These scores are preliminary pending district verification.

### Cumulative Pass Rates

The state does not calculate cumulative pass rates.

### Higher Education

The HSGQE scores are not used in making decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement in the state's public institutions of higher education. The state reports that there have been no discussions between state K-12 education officials and higher education officials about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.

# Arizona

**Test Name:** Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards

**Subjects Tested:** Reading, writing, and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official position of the Arizona Department of Education on the purpose of the exit exam is laid out in the legislation authorizing the exam. Arizona Statute 15-701.01 asserts that the state board of education must: (1) prescribe a minimum course of study, incorporating the academic standards adopted by the state board of education, for the graduation of pupils from high school; (2) prescribe competency requirements for the graduation of pupils from high school, incorporating the academic standards in at least the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies; (3) develop and adopt competency tests for the graduation of pupils from high school in at least the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics and establish passing scores for each of these tests.

## Historical and Policy Background

Arizona Statute 15-701.01, A 3, C authorizes the use of Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) as a graduation test. The state began administering the exam in 1999 to students in the 10th grade. The exam was to begin taking effect as a graduation requirement for the class of 2001, but the requirement to withhold diplomas from those not passing the test was postponed several times—first until 2002, and eventually until the class of 2006. AIMS is the state’s first-ever exit exam, and there are no plans to replace it at this time.

Other changes to the exam include the introduction of new AIMS items in 2005 that are based on new standards adopted in 2002 for reading and math. And as described below, the writing assessment is based on a single writing prompt instead of selected response questions.

## Test Characteristics

AIMS tests math, reading, and writing in grade 10. The writing and reading exams are administered in February; the math exam is administered in April; and writing, reading, and math tests are administered in October. Students have four opportunities before the end of the 12th grade to retake the exit exam. The first time they can retake the exam is fall of the 11th grade.

The state considers the AIMS test to be a standards-based exam aligned to 10th grade standards. New standards were adopted in 2002 for reading and math. The AIMS test items will be based on the new standards beginning in 2005. The state reports that the exam has undergone review by state and external reviewers to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. The review was not available for analysis in this report. No studies have been done to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams. AIMS was developed collaboratively by Arizona and a testing company.

The test consists of multiple-choice and writing prompt/essay questions. All sections of the exam are untimed. Students are not allowed to use calculators on any part of the exam.

## NCLB

The state began using the first administration of AIMS to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001-02. The entire exam is used, but since the exam currently has no science test, a different test may be used to fulfill this requirement. The same cut scores and achievement levels will be used for NCLB proficiency as are used to award high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the AIMS. The achievement levels are exceeds the standard, meets the standard, approaches the standard, and falls below the standard. The tests are scored on a scale of 200-800, and students must score at least 500 in each subject to pass. The writing score is based on a single writing prompt scored using a six-trait writing rubric.

Districts and schools receive results 35 working days after tests are scored. Districts decide when to report scores to students and parents. The public receives results on an annual basis. Reports indicate whether students passed or failed and include subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) for each major subject area. Some of the questions from the exit exam will be posted on the internet after the fall test. They will also be released to the media.

When students fail an exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information, such as future test dates, to help them prepare for future administrations of the exam.

## Student Options

If students have not met the exit exam requirements but have met other graduation requirements, they are allowed to continue to retake the exam an unlimited number of times after 12th grade.

The state does not permit transfer students who have passed another state's high school graduation exam to submit passing scores to meet graduation requirements in Arizona. The state does not allow general education students who fail the AIMS to earn a regular diploma by passing a substitute exam. There is also no process in place for students to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam requirement. There are currently no alternate diplomas or certificates available for students who do not pass the exit exam. However, the Arizona Department of Education is currently investigating the possibility of such alternatives prior to the first class of students being required to pass the exam.

## Special Populations

The state allows students with disabilities and English language learners to use accommodations while testing. However, state leaders are currently discussing whether students in these two subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations will still receive a regular high school diploma.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities who do not pass the exit exam can receive a diploma provided that they meet all other requirements.

For English language learners, there are currently no special waivers, alternate routes, exclusions, and/or substitute tests to allow them to receive a regular high school diploma if they do not pass the exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass AIMS. Arizona did not indicate on the Center's survey whether funds are targeted to remediation for students who fail the exam. The state also did not indicate whether it supported professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the exam. The state has developed information guides explaining the tests, but has not developed remediation programs or materials to help students prepare for the exam. The state reported that it has not developed any diagnostic or formative assessments for use before the exit exam.

## Monitoring

No information was provided about whether additional accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts, other than those required under NCLB, are linked to student performance on the AIMS.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	Reading / Language Arts	Writing Composition
All Students	36%	59%	67%
White	49%	74%	79%
Black	21%	44%	61%
Hispanic	18%	38%	50%
Asian	61%	72%	80%
Native American	14%	35%	45%
English language learners/LEP	7%	13%	22%
Students with disabilities	10%	26%	29%

### Cumulative Pass Rates

The Arizona Department of Education is unable to provide information on cumulative pass rates at this time.

### Higher Education

In the Center's 2003 report on high school exit exams, public universities and community colleges in Arizona reported that they did not use the AIMS tests in admissions, scholarship, or course placement decisions. The state department of education provided no updated information for the 2004 study.

In April 2004, the Arizona Board of Regents voted to link AIMS scores, in addition to other achievement measures, to full scholarships to state universities.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*



# California

**Test Name:** California High School Exit Examination  
**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official purpose of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) is to significantly improve pupil achievement in public high schools and to ensure that pupils who graduate from public high schools can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. The CAHSEE helps identify students who are not demonstrating grade level competency and encourages districts to give these students the attention and resources needed to help them acquire these skills during their high school years. Beginning in the 2005-06 school year, no student will receive a public high school diploma without having passed the CAHSEE and met the district's requirements for graduation.

## Historical and Policy Background

The California High School Exit Examination, a standards-based exam, is the state's first exit exam. The exam was authorized in 1999 by Senate Bill 2X. The exam was part of a state effort to raise standards for high school graduation after the legislature had determined that local proficiency standards established under prior state law were generally set below the high school level and were not consistent with the state's content standards. According to Senate Bill 2X, the CAHSEE was to be developed in accordance with content standards in language arts and mathematics adopted by the California State Board of Education (SBE). The CAHSEE was developed based on recommendations of the High School Exit Examination Standards Panel, whose members were appointed by the state superintendent of public instruction and approved by the SBE.

The CAHSEE was offered for the first time in spring 2001 (March and May) to volunteer 9th graders (class of 2004). In October 2001, Assembly Bill 1609 removed the option for 9th graders to take the CAHSEE beginning with the 2002 administration. The CAHSEE was next administered in spring 2002 to all 10th graders who had not passed it during the spring 2001 administration. It has since been administered several times to the remaining students in the class of 2004 who have not yet passed one or both parts (i.e., English/language arts and mathematics). The class of 2005 took the CAHSEE for the first time in the spring of 2003.

In July 2003, the SBE approved a delay in the graduation consequences of the CAHSEE from school year 2003-04 to school year 2005-06. This action was based in part on findings of an independent study that had focused on the test development process and the implementation of standards-based instruction in California public schools. In July of 2003, the SBE also decided to reduce the CAHSEE in length from three days to two days. To make this change, the test developers revised the format, but not the content, of the ELA portion of the CAHSEE to reduce the number of essays from two to one and the number of multiple-choice questions from 82 to 72. The mathematics blueprint was revised slightly to replace questions with less frequently encountered data displays (e.g., stem-and-leaf and box-and-whiskers plot displays) with questions with more frequently encountered displays (e.g., bar charts and line graphs). The language complexity for mathematics questions was also reduced.

## Test Characteristics

The CAHSEE first-time ("census") administration for all grade 10 students occurs in either February or March. School districts may choose either March or May for makeup testing for grade 10 students. School districts may retest grade 11 and 12 students who did not previously pass one or both parts in either September or October and in February, March or May.

The CAHSEE has two parts: English/language arts and mathematics. The ELA part addresses state content standards through grade 10. In reading, the exam assesses vocabulary, decoding, comprehension, and analysis of information and literary texts. In writing, it covers writing strategies, applications, and the conventions of English, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The mathematics part of the CAHSEE addresses state standards in grades 6 and 7 and Algebra I. The exam includes statistics, data analysis and probability, number sense, measurement and geometry, mathematical reasoning, and algebra. Students are also asked to demonstrate a strong foundation in computation and arithmetic, including working with decimals, fractions, and percents.

The CAHSEE has undergone external and internal reviews to determine whether it is aligned to state standards, as well as an external review by an independent evaluator to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exam. In addition, the law requires an independent evaluation that must include analyses of: (1) pupil performance, broken down by grade level, gender, race or ethnicity, and portion of the exam, including any trends that become apparent over time; (2) the exam's effects, if any, on college attendance, pupil retention, graduation, and dropout rates, including an analysis of these effects on the subgroups described in (1) above; and (3) whether the exam is likely to have, or has, differential effects, either beneficial or detrimental, on the subgroups described in (1) above. The evaluation reports must include recommendations to improve the quality, fairness, validity, and reliability of the CAHSEE. The first report of the independent evaluation was completed and presented to the state department of education, state board, legislature, governor, and other control agencies on July 1, 2000. Subsequent evaluation reports are due to these same parties by February 1 of every even-numbered year.

California contracts with a test publisher to develop items and administer the CAHSEE. All items and test forms are reviewed by the California Department of Education prior to use on the exam.

The test consists of multiple-choice questions and a writing prompt/essay question. The CAHSEE is an untimed test, but it must be completed in the same school day unless the student has an IEP that specifies the need for additional testing time beyond the school day as an accommodation. However, it is anticipated that most students can complete the English/language arts test in three and one-half hours and the mathematics test in three hours on the same school day.

## NCLB

The state plans to use the results from the first time a student takes the CAHSEE in the 10th grade to meet the high school assessment requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. The state began using the exam for this purpose in 2002-03. The passing score on the CAHSEE is a 350-scaled score for both the mathematics and English/language arts portions. Beginning with the February 2004 test administration, the definition of proficient performance for NCLB purposes has been set at a 380-scaled score for both math and ELA.

## Scoring and Reporting

Scorers with at least a bachelor's degree retained by the testing contractor grade the open-ended questions on the CAHSEE. Teachers are encouraged to participate. The tests are scored on a scale of 275 to 450, and students need a 350 on each exam in order to pass. For English/language arts, a 350 scale score represents 60% of the items correct, and for math it represents 55% of items correct. Districts can access the results online within 10 weeks of the test administration. Student and parent reports are mailed to the district to distribute locally within 10 weeks of test administration. The results are reported to the public on an annual basis. Reports include whether students pass or fail, subject area scores, and subscores under each major subject area.

Some of the questions of the CAHSEE are released each year with sample student responses. Results are posted on the internet.

## Student Options

State law requires the CAHSEE to be administered only on the dates designated by the state superintendent of public instruction. Students may retake the examination until they pass the ELA and mathematics parts; however, students may retake only those parts not previously passed. The first opportunity students have to take the CAHSEE is in the second half of grade 10. Students who do not pass the CAHSEE during this administration have up to five additional opportunities to pass the exam.

If students have not met the exit exam requirement but have met the state's other graduation requirements, they may retake the high school exit exam once after the 12th grade and still receive a diploma. The state, however, does not permit students to transfer passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet the graduation requirements for the CAHSEE. The state also does not allow students to substitute any other tests in place of the CAHSEE. There is no waiver or appeals process for general education students who fail the exit exam. There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive a regular diploma.

California offers adult education programs and the GED. Adult education also has secondary/high school programs that offer courses to pursue a high school diploma. California also has a California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE). The CHSPE exam is aligned with the content standards (grade 7-8 Math, and 10-11 ELA). Students who pass the CHSPE receive an equivalency certificate. The certificate plus parent permission allows them to leave high school early. Students must be 16 to take this exam which is considered equivalent to a high school diploma.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

As stated in the California Code of Regulations Title 5, students must be allowed to take the CAHSEE with the accommodations and/or modifications specified in their IEP or Section 504 plan for standardized testing, CAHSEE testing, or classroom instruction and assessment. Students who take the test with accommodations and achieve a passing score receive a regular diploma if they also complete all other graduation requirements. Calculator use is considered a modification, and modifications are defined as any variation in the assessment environment or process that fundamentally alters what the test measures or affects the comparability of scores.

A student who takes one or both portions of the test with a modification and obtains a score of 350 or higher has obtained a score equivalent to a passing score. The score report will be marked "not valid" for the applicable portion of the test because the use of a modification changes the constructs of the test (what the test is measuring) and the comparability of test scores. The student is then eligible for a waiver.

Since the exam was authorized, there has been a waiver process in place for students with disabilities. Initially, the waiver process was administered by the state board of education. Senate Bill 1476 (Ch. 808, September 2002), effective January 1, 2003, moved the waiver process to the local school district governing board. This bill requires an IEP or Section 504 plan to be in place "that requires the accommodations or modifications to be provided to the pupil when taking the high school exit examination." At the request of the parent, the school principal may submit a request to waive the requirement to successfully pass one or both parts of the CAHSEE to the local school district governing board if the student has taken the CAHSEE with a modification and received the equivalent of a passing score.

Education Code section 56390 allows local school districts to give students with disabilities who are not on a diploma track a certificate of completion. This is not equivalent to a high school diploma.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows test variations for English language learners, if regularly used in the classroom, as stated in the California Code of Regulations Title 5. A test variation is defined as a change in the

manner in which a test is presented or administered, or in how a test-taker is allowed to respond, and includes but is not limited to accommodations and modifications. Students who take the test with test variations and achieve a passing score receive a regular diploma if they also complete all other graduation requirements. There are no exclusive special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions and/or substitute tests to allow English language learners to obtain a regular high school diploma, outside of the options available to all students. There are no special certificates for ELLs who do not pass the high school exit exam.

## Support Policies

California requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the CAHSEE, although students are not required to attend remediation sessions. School districts are supposed to use regularly available state resources and any available supplemental remedial resources to prepare students to succeed on the exit exam.

Professional development efforts have been focused on helping teachers learn about the state's academic content standards and familiarizing teachers with the format and types of questions on the CAHSEE. The state provided school districts with a remediation planning guide in 2002; teacher guides on the CAHSEE in 2002, 2003, and 2004; and student study guides in 2003. The state also released test questions in 2002, 2003, and 2004. School districts and county offices of education may use these resources to prepare staff development for their teachers. The state has also developed study guides for students.

## Monitoring

The CAHSEE is one part of the state accountability system, called the Academic Performance Index (API). If a school meets API criteria for test participation and achievement growth, it may be eligible to receive monetary awards. However, no award money was budgeted in 2003-04. If a school is ranked in the bottom half of the statewide distribution of performance and does not meet or exceed its growth targets, it may be identified for interventions. An independent evaluator hired by the state is responsible for looking at the impact of the CAHSEE.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

English/language arts	78%
Mathematics	59%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Data on cumulative pass rates are not available.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 high school exit exam study, public universities and community colleges in California do not use the CAHSEE to make decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement. Students can be admitted to public community colleges without a high school diploma. It is also possible for students who do not receive a diploma to be admitted to a public university through a "special action admissions process." The University of California has recently established a new path to eligibility called Eligibility in the Local Context. Under this path, students are eligible to attend the university if they place within the top 4% of their respective class. There have been no discussions between state K-12 education officials and higher education officials about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Florida

**Test Name:** Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test

**Subjects Tested:** Reading and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official purpose of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is to assess student achievement of the Sunshine State Standards benchmarks in reading, mathematics, science, and writing. The FCAT also includes norm-referenced tests in reading comprehension and mathematics problem-solving, which allow the performance of Florida students to be compared with that of students across the nation.

## Historical and Policy Background

Florida Statute 1008.22(3)(c) and State Board Rule 6A-1.09422 authorize the use of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The state first administered the exam in 1988. Students enrolled in grade 9 in the fall of 1999 were the first group of students who were required to pass the FCAT in reading and mathematics in order to receive a diploma. Diplomas were first withheld for students who did not pass reading and mathematics tests of the FCAT in 2003.

Prior to the FCAT, the state administered the High School Competency Test, which was a minimum competency test. The Educational Accountability Act of 1976 outlined a system for defining and measuring the attainment of educational objectives and competencies in basic communications and mathematics functions. The 1990 Legislature reaffirmed the importance of establishing minimum student performance skills for high school graduation.

Policy changes over the course of implementation have included the decision to allow some accommodations for students taking the FCAT, legislative action to exempt some students with disabilities from the exam requirement and allow them to demonstrate competency through other methods, the decision to award certificates of completion instead of diplomas to those who do not meet the exit exam requirement, and a short-term provision to allow scores on some other examinations to substitute for passing the FCAT.

## Test Characteristics

The exams are administered in October, March, and June. The state considers the FCAT to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to 10th grade standards. The FCAT was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The state reports that the FCAT has been reviewed by state officials and subject area teachers to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. The Center was not able to obtain verification of the review.

The FCAT tests math and reading in grade 10. The tests consists of multiple-choice, short-answer and extended/performance task questions. Students who retake the exam take a different version that consists of multiple-choice, short-answer (gridded-response), and performance task questions only. The grade 10 reading and math tests last 160 minutes each. The grade 10 retake tests are untimed. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

The state did not respond to questions about the use of the FCAT for the No Child Left Behind Act accountability. In the Center's 2003 study of high school exit exams, the state reported that it is using the results from the first time a student takes the FCAT to meet the NCLB requirements. However, based

on the state's NCLB consolidated application, the current passing scores for the FCAT would fall in the state's "basic" achievement standard or level 2 achievement level rather than the "proficient" level.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the FCAT. The achievement levels range from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. The tests are scored on a scale of 100-500. In 2003-04, the passing scores were 1926 (scaled score of 300) for the reading test and 1889 (scaled score of 300) for the mathematics test, unless the student had previously qualified for the passing scores required for the 2002-03 graduating class. The passing scores are equivalent to the state's level 2 achievement standard, according to the state's consolidated NCLB plan.

Districts, schools, students, parents, and the public receive results five weeks after testing occurs. The public receives results after every test administration. Reports include information about whether students pass or fail and their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. Some questions and sample student responses are released every year to schools, teachers, and students and are mailed home to parents and posted on the internet. The state did not respond to the Center's question about whether the state or district is required to provide students who fail the exam with information to help them prepare for future administrations of the FCAT.

## Student Options

Students have up to five opportunities by the end of the 12th grade to retake the exam. Students can begin to retake the exam in October of the 11th grade. Those who have not met the exit exam requirements but have met the other graduation requirements are allowed to retake the FCAT after the 12th grade and still receive a diploma. There are currently no limits on the number of times a student can retake the exam or age limit for taking the exam.

The state does not permit transfer students who have passed another state's high school exit exam to submit passing scores to meet graduation requirements in Florida. However, in 2004, the Florida legislature passed House Bill 23B, which provided additional opportunities and alternatives for students to meet certain high school graduation requirements.

The Florida Department of Education conducted concordance studies to determine the score relationship between the FCAT and the SAT and ACT. The studies were based on Florida students who took the FCAT in the spring of 2000 and 2001 and had also taken one of the two standardized national tests. Twelfth grade students who were scheduled to graduate in 2004 and who attained the SAT or ACT scores shown below are deemed to have satisfied the testing requirement for a Florida high school diploma.

## Passing Scores for Receiving a Florida Diploma

Reading		Mathematics	
FCAT	300	FCAT	300
SAT	410	SAT	370
ACT	15	ACT	15

Students must have taken the FCAT three times without earning a passing score in order to use the equivalent scores for the SAT and ACT. This option is not in effect for students graduating in later years unless the legislature authorizes its continued use.

The state does not have a process for students to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam. Students can, however, receive a certificate of completion if they do not receive a regular diploma.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows students with disabilities to use accommodations while testing. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. The Enhanced New Needed Opportunity for Better Life and Education for Students with Disabilities (ENNOBLES) Act, passed by the legislature in 2003, requires each district school board to provide instruction to prepare students with disabilities to demonstrate proficiency in the skills and competencies necessary for successful grade-to-grade progression and high school graduation.

The ENNOBLES Act also permits waivers of the FCAT graduation requirement for certain students with disabilities who have met all other requirements to graduate with a standard diploma except attaining a passing score on the FCAT. Before the FCAT graduation requirement can be waived, the student's IEP team must meet during the student's senior year to determine whether or not the FCAT can accurately measure the student's abilities, taking into consideration allowable accommodations. Students who receive a waiver or special exemption may graduate with a special diploma or certificate of completion.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows English language learners to use accommodations while testing. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. ELLs who do not receive a regular high school diploma can use the same options as available for general education students.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the FCAT. The Center could not obtain information about whether students were required to attend remedial services, whether any funds were targeted to remediation for students who fail the FCAT, whether the state had developed specific professional development programs and materials to help teachers administer and prepare students for the FCAT, and whether it had developed preparation and remediation program materials for general education students or special populations.

## Monitoring

In the Center's survey, the state did not indicate whether there were accountability consequences or rewards for schools or districts linked to student performance on the FCAT. However, the state is using the exam for NCLB purposes, so the consequences in the federal law would apply.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Reading	54%
Math	76%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Cumulative pass rates were not available.

## Higher Education

In the Center's 2003 report, higher education institutions in Florida reported that the FCAT is not used for admissions, scholarship, or course placement decisions. Students can be admitted to limited non-degree programs and GED preparation courses in community colleges if they do not receive a diploma as a result of not passing the FCAT.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Georgia

**Test Name:** Georgia High School Graduation Tests

**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science

**Initial Grade Tested:** 11th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The state indicated that it has an official position on the purpose of the exit exam. The Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGTs) were designed to certify Georgia high school students for graduation. The tests are grounded in the State's Quality Core Curriculum and ensure that students have mastered the content necessary to be successful in post secondary school or to become productive members of an increasingly mercurial and competitive job market.

## Historical and Policy Background

In 1991, the state legislature passed Georgia law O.C.G.A. section 20-1-281, which requires curriculum-based assessments to be administered in grade 11 for graduation purposes. The first operational administration of the GHSGTs affected the class of 1994. The exams were phased in gradually, beginning in 1991. Students who entered 9th grade in 1991 were required to pass tests in writing, English/language arts, and math, with a new test added each year after. In spring of 1996, a passing score on the social studies test was added to the graduation requirement. Passing the science exam was added as a requirement in spring of 1997.

The spring 2004 tests for English/language arts and mathematics will include additional items of greater difficulty. As explained below, the state made this change to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act.

Prior to the Georgia High School Graduation Tests, the state administered the Georgia Basic Skills Test. The curriculum changed after 1991, and to ensure that the assessments are fair and test what students learned, this test continues to be administered to students who were enrolled in 9th grade prior to 1991. Students are required to complete the graduation test that was in effect at the time of their graduation. The state supports the goal of obtaining a diploma regardless of how long it takes.

Pending a Board of Education recommendation, the state is currently exploring using another exam, the End of Course Tests, which began in fall of 2003 as a possible replacement for the GHSGT. The 2000 A+ Reform Act passed by the Georgia legislature provides for this change on a timeline to be determined by the state board of education.

## Test Characteristics

The content area exams are administered for the first time to 11th graders in March and April, and the writing exam is administered in September. The state considers the Georgia High School Graduation Tests to be a standards-based exam system that is aligned to 11th grade state standards. The standards were set by Georgia educators and education professionals based on judgments of adequate education for high school students in four content areas tested: math, English/language arts, science, and social studies. The tests were developed by a testing company specifically for the state. The exit tests are currently under review by external reviewers to assess alignment to state standards. The study was scheduled to be completed by the end of May 2004. The state reports that it has conducted a study to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams. The report is preliminary and needs state board approval before being disseminated.



The Georgia exit exams currently assess English/language arts, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science. The tests consist of multiple-choice and writing prompt/essay questions. Each content exam is 180 minutes in length, except for the writing test, which is 90 minutes long. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

Georgia began using the results from the first time a student takes the graduation test to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2003-04. The science test will also be used to meet NCLB requirements beginning in 2007-08. However, only a subset of questions on the graduation exam will be used for NCLB purposes. The spring 2004 tests for English/language arts and mathematics include additional test items of greater difficulty. The state made this change to comply with NCLB. During peer review, it was noted that the pass rate for Georgia was exceptionally high and did not fit the requirement in federal law to have of rigorous examinations based on rigorous academic content. The additional, enhanced items will be used to calculate adequate yearly progress for NCLB and will not affect the individual student's chances of passing the test for diploma purposes. The state plans to use different cut scores for NCLB proficiency than are used to award high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the graduation exam are pass plus, pass, and fail. The tests are scored on a scale of 400-600, and students must achieve a scaled score of 500 in each subject area tested. Scores are reported to districts, schools, students, parents, and the public one month after testing occurs. The public receives scores on an annual basis. Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed and showing their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. The questions from the exit exams are not released.

## Student Options

Students have five opportunities to retake the exam before the end of 12th grade. Students can retake the content area tests in July, September, and November and can retake the writing test in March and July. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after 12th grade as many times as they need to in order to receive a diploma.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other state exams to meet graduation requirements in Georgia. The state does not allow students to earn a regular high school diploma by passing a substitute test. The state does have a waiver process, which is initiated by the student's home school with a recommendation from the school system's superintendent. Students submit a waiver packet containing documentation of reasons for the waiver. The waiver is reviewed by a committee and submitted to the state board of education for a decision. All students are potentially eligible for the waiver, but receiving a passing vote from the board typically requires documentation of a limitation that would account for failing the test. No data are available on the percentage of students who have used the waiver process. If all other graduation requirements are met but the exit exam, students can receive a certificate of attendance.

## Special Populations

Students with disabilities who have a specific accommodation documented in their IEP or Section 504 plan may take the state tests with accommodations, provided the accommodation is in use for the student's regular education program. Similarly, English language learners who have a specific accommodation documented in their Limited English Proficient/Testing Participation Plan may take the state tests with accommodations, if the accommodation is in use in the student's regular education program. Students with disabilities and English language learners who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma.

Students who are experiencing difficulty passing the GHSGT may apply for a waiver of any or all of the graduation exams by submitting evidence to the department of education documenting a limitation that precludes the likelihood of passing the tests. If the state board of education approves the waiver, then the test(s) are omitted as a graduation requirement. All students must pass the GHSGT under standard administration conditions in order to be eligible for a regular diploma. However, there is a Special Education Diploma available for students with disabilities who do not receive a regular diploma. English Students of Other Languages (ESOL) students who are pursuing a regular diploma must take a standard administration of the GHSGT. ESOL students who are also in a special education program and are pursuing a special education diploma are eligible for a nonstandard administration of the GHSGT. Students who take a nonstandard administration of the GHSGT are not eligible for a regular diploma.

### Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the GHSGT. If students fail the exams, all systems offer some form of remediation for students in need, such as optional remediation opportunities, future test dates, and implications for course taking. Low performance on the GHSGT may have implications for the curriculum track that students are advised to pursue. High performance in remedial classes may clear students to take more rigorous courses. There are no funds targeted for remediation for students who fail the exam. State and federal money can be used to fund such programs.

The state has not supported or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exams. The state has developed curriculum guides based on the exam, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests. Study guides for students have also been developed. The state provides some targeted assistance to help special student populations pass the exit exams, including remediation education programs and instructional extensions. The state uses its end-of-course exams for specific courses to gather diagnostic data that could be used to address student weaknesses in content areas assessed by the GHSGT.

### Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exam. The state has not conducted research on outcomes of the exit exams.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	English/ Lang. Arts	Writing Composition	Science	Social Studies
All Students	91%	95%	91%	69%	81%
White	94%	97%	92%	77%	86%
Black	78%	89%	76%	41%	60%
Hispanic	79%	79%	62%	37%	59%
Asian	94%	90%	82%	63%	79%
Native American	86%	94%	76%	63%	80%
English language learners/LEP	68%	61%	29%	21%	40%
Students with disabilities	52%	69%	42%	28%	43%
Multiethnic	90%	68%	89%	68%	82%

### Cumulative Pass Rates

The state indicated that cumulative pass rates are not calculated.

## Higher Education

The state reports that there is no statewide protocol for how institutions of higher education use GHSGT scores. However, the state places the GHSGT scores on student transcripts. According to the Center's 2003 report, public universities in Georgia reported that they do not use the GHSGT for admissions, scholarship, or course placement decisions. However, students who fail the exam (and receive a certificate of performance) and then get a GED may be admitted to a two-year college in the state university system. Only a limited number of these students may be admitted. In addition, if a student who does not pass the graduation test shows exceptional promise for success (through SAT scores, for example), he or she may be admitted as a Presidential Exception at any institution in the Georgia state university system.

State K-12 education officials report having had no discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the GHSGT to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Idaho<sup>1</sup>

**Test Name:** Idaho Standards Achievement Tests  
**Subjects Tested:** Reading, language usage, and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

In response to the Center's survey, the state reports that the official purpose of the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) is to ensure that students are meeting and learning Idaho's curriculum standards.

## Historical and Policy Background

In January 2004, the Idaho legislature approved the state's first exit exam, the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests, which is authorized in Idaho Administrative Code 08.02.03. Idaho began administering the ISAT as an exit exam in 2004. Prior to the ISAT, the state did not administer an exit exam, but it did administer the ISAT to assess how well students were learning state curriculum standards. The class of 2006 will be the first class required to pass the ISAT in order to graduate.

The state is using a phase-in approach that gives the class of 2006 more exemption opportunities than later classes will have. This phase-in will be complete with the class of 2008, which will have minimal exemptions.

## Test Characteristics

The Idaho Standards Achievement Tests are administered in mid-April-May of the 10th grade. Students in 11th and 12th grade may elect to retake the exam during optional administrations in July, mid-September-October, mid-November-December, mid-January-February and mid-April-May. The state reports that the ISAT is a standards-based exam that is aligned to 10th grade standards. It was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The state reports that the test has undergone an external review by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. The state board of education is planning an additional external review to begin in August 2004, which will include a review of the validity and reliability of all the ISAT exams administered and will look at the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exam.

The ISAT tests reading, mathematics, and language usage. The tests consist of multiple-choice questions. The ISAT is not a timed exam. Students in 5th grade and above are allowed to use calculators on the math test only when it is presented on the computer screen, which is how the students take the exam.

## NCLB

The results of the ISAT have been used to determine adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in reading and math since the 2002-03 school year. The state has not decided whether the science test that will be required for NCLB in 2007-08 will be part of the exit exam. The state will eventually use the same cut score to award high school diplomas as it uses for NCLB purposes, but the state is using lower cut scores for graduation for the classes of 2006 and 2007. The first test in the spring of the 10th grade year will count for NCLB purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first year Idaho has implemented the ISAT as a graduation exam, and many of the policies are still in development. The Center thanks the state for providing us with the information it has.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests are below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. The tests are scored on a Rasch Unit (RIT) scale from roughly 150-300, and the passing scores are 224 for reading, 222 for language use, and 242 for mathematics. The results are generated for the districts and schools 24 hours after the administration of the exam. The district determines when to report scores to students and parents. Most districts allow the display of the results on the computer screen for the student immediately at the end of the test. Reports include information on whether the student reaches proficiency and their overall subject area scores and subscores of skills and content under each major subject area. State, district and school results are reported to the public one and one-half months after each official administration in the fall and spring. Test questions are not released each year.

School districts are not required by the state to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the exit exam.

## Student Options

Students have eight opportunities to retake the exam by the end of 12th grade. The first retest option is in July after 10th grade. The state has not yet discussed whether to allow students who meet all other graduation requirements except passing the ISAT the opportunity to retake the exam after 12th grade and receive a regular diploma. The state allows transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Idaho, if the exams are standards-based, test 10th grade material at a minimum, and are comparable to subjects tested on the ISAT. The state will allow students in the class of 2006 to substitute scores of 17 on the ACT or 200 on the SAT in English and a score of 19 on the ACT or 400 on the SAT in math for the ISAT. Since the first class has not graduated, no information is available on how many students use this option.

Students who do not pass the ISAT may appeal to their local school board. The school board can decide whether to allow the student to demonstrate proficiency of the achievement standards through some other locally established mechanism. All locally established mechanisms must meet the criteria of the state board of education rules. The mechanism must meet the following criteria:

- The measure must be aligned at a minimum to 10th grade state content standards
- The measure must be aligned to the state content standards for the subject matter in question
- The measure must be valid and reliable; and
- Ninety percent (90%) of the criteria of the measure, or combination of measures, must be based on academic proficiency and performance.

Before appealing to the local school board for an alternate measure, the student must be:

1. Enrolled in a special education program and have an IEP, or
2. Enrolled in a limited english proficient program for three academic years or less, or
3. Enrolled in the fall semester of the senior year.

There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive regular diplomas.

## Special Populations

The state allows testing accommodations for students with disabilities and students identified as limited English proficient. Students with disabilities and English language learners who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities in the classes of 2006 and 2007 can apply for an appeal if they have an IEP that outlines alternate

requirements for graduation or if adaptations are recommended on the test. LEP students who have been in a LEP program for less than three academic years can also be exempted.

There are no special diplomas or certificates for students with disabilities or English language learners who do not receive a regular diploma.

### Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the ISAT. Since implementation of the exam is new, the state has not committed targeted funding for remediation for students who fail the ISAT. The state also reports that it has not developed programs or materials to help teachers administer and prepare students for the ISAT nor developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exams for students.

### Monitoring

The state does not have additional accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the test that are separate from the accountability measures in NCLB.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-takers

Pass rates were not available.

### Cumulative Pass Rates

The first class required to pass the exam has not graduated yet, so cumulative pass rates are unavailable.

### Higher Education

Public universities and community colleges in Idaho do not use the ISAT for college admissions, scholarships, or course placement.

The state reports that conversations between higher education officials and K-12 officials are ongoing due to the recent introduction of the ISAT as an exit exam.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Indiana

**Test Name:** Graduation Qualifying Exam

**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The state's official policy position on the purpose of the exam was laid out in the law authorizing the exam. It states that beginning with the class of students who expect to graduate during the 1999-2000 school year, each student is required to meet: (1) the academic standards tested in the graduation examination; and (2) any additional requirements established by the governing body to be eligible to graduate.

## Historical and Policy Background

Indiana Code 20-10.1-16 authorizes the use of the Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE) in order for students to graduate. This is the first high school exit exam ever administered by the state. The exams were first administered in 1997 in grade 10. Diplomas were first withheld in the 1999-2000 school year. In fall 2004, the GQE will assess new Indiana Academic Standards, and new cut scores will be set after that fall test administration.

The state reports no other major policy changes since the exams were authorized.

## Test Characteristics

The tests are administered in September and March. The state considers the Graduation Qualifying Exam to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to 9th grade standards. It tests English/language arts and mathematics. It was developed collaboratively between the state of Indiana and testing company. The GQE has undergone a review by the outside group Achieve, Inc. to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. The state reports that no studies have been conducted to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams.

The tests consist of multiple choice, short-answer and writing prompt/essay questions. The math exam is 162 minutes, and the English/language arts exam is 203 minutes. All students are allowed to use calculators on portions of the math test.

## NCLB

The state began using the GQE to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in the 2002-03 school year. The results from the first time a student takes the exam counts toward NCLB accountability. The state is using the same cut scores for NCLB proficiency as it is for awarding diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the GQE. The performance levels for the graduation exam are pass and did not pass. Pass+ will be added in fall 2004. The ELA test is scored on a scale of 300-800, and students must score a 466. The math exams are scored on a scale of 300-720, and students must score a 486. Scores are reported to the district, schools, students, parents, and the public one and a half months after testing occurs. The public receives results after each administration. Students receive a score report indicating whether they pass or fail and showing their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area and for open-ended items. Some of the questions from the exit exams with sample reports are released to schools, teachers, and students and are posted on the internet.

## Student Options

Students have four opportunities to retake the exam before the end of the 12th grade. Students can first retake the exam in fall of the following year. If students fail the exam the state or district is required to provide them with information and optional remediation opportunities to help them prepare for future administrations. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and receive a diploma. They can retake the exam as many times as they need to.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other state exams to meet graduation requirements in Indiana. The state does not allow students to pass substitute tests in place of the GQE. Students who do not achieve a passing score on the graduation exam and do not meet the requirements laid out in the legislation may be eligible to graduate if they do all of the following:

1. Take the graduation examination in each subject area in which they did not achieve a passing score at least one time every school year after the school year in which they first took the graduation examination.
2. Complete remediation opportunities provided by their school.
3. Maintain a school attendance rate of at least ninety-five percent (95%) with excused absences not counting against attendance.
4. Maintain at least a "C" average or the equivalent in the courses comprising the credits specifically required for graduation by rule of the board.
5. Obtain a written recommendation from their teachers in each subject area in which the students have not achieved a passing score. The school principal must concur with the recommendation. The recommendation also must be supported by documentation that the student has attained the academic standard in the subject area, based upon tests other than the graduation examination or classroom work.
6. Otherwise satisfy all state and local graduation requirements.

Under Indiana law, the principal must certify that students meet all graduation requirements. In 2003, the state reported that 4% of students used the waiver/appeals process. There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive a regular diploma.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

Students with disabilities are allowed to use accommodations on the GQE. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma.

If a student with a disability does not achieve a passing score on the graduation examination, the student's case conference committee may determine that the student is eligible to graduate if the committee finds the following:

1. The student's teacher of record, in consultation with a teacher of the student in each subject area in which the student has not achieved a passing score, makes a written recommendation to the case conference committee. The recommendation must:
  - a. be endorsed by the principal of the student's school; and
  - b. be supported by documentation that the student has attained the academic standard in the subject area, based upon tests other than the graduation examination or classroom work.



2. The student meets all of the following requirements:
  - a. Retakes the graduation examination in each subject area in which he or she did not achieve a passing score as often as required by the student's IEP.
  - b. Completes remediation opportunities provided by the student's school to the extent required by the student's IEP.
  - c. Maintains a school attendance rate of at least 95% to the extent required by the student's IEP, with excused absences not counting against the student's attendance.
  - d. Maintains at least a C average or the equivalent in the courses comprising the credits specifically required for graduation by rule of the board.
  - e. Otherwise satisfies all state and local graduation requirements.

### *English Language Learners*

English language learners may use accommodations for the GQE. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests for English language learners except those that are in place for general education students. There are also no special diplomas or certificates for English language learners who do not receive a regular diploma.

### Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the GQE, but students are not required to attend these programs. In 2002-03, the state committed \$11 million for remediation services for students in grades 10-12 who failed the exam. These funds were allocated using a three-tiered method based on student/district performance. Districts with the lowest performing students receive the greatest levels of funding.

The state has supported and/or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exam, such as training teachers how to interpret test results and familiarizing them with the state high school exit exam and the use of returned applied skills materials and released items. The state has also developed information guides explaining the tests. However, the state has not developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the GQE for students.

The state provides free appropriate public education, adult education, free access to the test at 97 testing sites, and direct mail notification of retests to students who have failed the exam but met the other graduation requirements.

### Monitoring

In addition to NCLB accountability requirements, Indiana has its own accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exam. These accountability measures were not provided.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers 2003

Subgroups	Math	English/Language Arts
All Students	67%	69%
White	73%	75%
Black	33%	39%
Hispanic	46%	44%
Asian	85%	78%
Native American	54%	57%
English language learners/LEP	41%	27%
Free or reduced price lunch	46%	48%
Students with disabilities	27%	22%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The state is working on an enhanced method of determining cumulative pass rates. Information about cumulative pass rates on the GQE is will be available in summer 2005.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 study of high school exit exam, public universities do not use the Graduation Qualifying Exam scores for anything other than to determine whether the student has passed. Students can be admitted to most public universities with a GED or if they have received a waiver from their high school exempting them from the exam. Community colleges do not use the GQE scores other than to determine whether the student has passed. Students without a high school diploma can attend Indiana community colleges under the Ability to Benefit program, which allows students to enroll on the condition they will complete a high school equivalency program within one year.

The state education agency has had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the state's exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college. However, at this point, the state has indicated that the exit exam does not meet these needs and is considering using end-of-course assessments for these purposes.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Louisiana

**Test Name:** Graduation Exit Examination for the 21st Century

**Subjects Tested:** English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th and 11th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The Louisiana Department of Education has an unofficial position on the purpose of its exit exam: “The GEE 21 validates the high school diploma in that students who receive a high school diploma can read, write, and handle mathematical operations.” This is how the state commonly communicates the purpose of the exit exam.

## Historical and Policy Background

State law created the Graduation Exit Examination for the 21st Century (GEE 21), and state board policy in Bulletin 741 made this exam a graduation requirement. The GEE 21 tests in English language arts and mathematics were first administered in 2000-01 to 10th graders and counted toward graduation. GEE 21 science and social studies tests were administered to the first cohort of students in 2001-02; the results of these tests did not count toward graduation for the first cohort only but did count toward school accountability. Prior to the GEE 21, the state administered the Graduation Exit Examination (GEE). The district is now responsible for administering the GEE twice each year for those students who have completed their Carnegie units and still need to pass it in order to earn a standard high school diploma. The state has no plans to replace the GEE 21 in the near future. There have been no major policy changes since the authorization of the GEE 21.

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## Test Characteristics

The GEE 21 tests are administered in March as the main administration, and retest opportunities are available in July and October. The state considers the Graduation Exit Examination for the 21st Century to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to standards for grades 9-12. It was developed by a testing company specifically for Louisiana. The state has contracted with WestEd for an independent alignment study. The study was not available for analysis in this report.

The GEE 21 tests English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The exam consists of multiple-choice, short-answer and writing prompt/essay questions. The tests are all untimed. All students are allowed to use calculators on certain portions of the mathematics test.

## NCLB

The state began using the entire GEE 21 to meet the requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act in the 2002-03 school year. The results from the first time a student takes the exam counts towards NCLB accountability. The state is using the science test to meet NCLB science testing requirements. However, the achievement levels for NCLB proficiency will be different from those used for awarding diplomas. NCLB proficiency has been set at the “basic” level, while for graduation purposes students need only achieve “approaching basic” or above.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the GEE 21. The performance levels for the graduation exam are advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory. On a scale of 100-500, students must score a 286 in math, 270 in English language arts, 267 in science, and 275 in social studies to pass. These are the cut scores for the approaching basic level.

Scores are reported to districts, schools, students, parents, and the public two months after testing occurs. The public receives results after each administration. Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed and showing their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. Some of the questions from the exit exams, along with sample reports, are released to schools, teachers, and students and posted on the internet.

## Student Options

Students have six opportunities to retake the English language arts and mathematics exams and three opportunities to retake the science and social studies exams by the end of the 12th grade. The July after the initial administration is the first opportunity students have to retake the exam. When students fail the exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information, such as remediation requirements and future test dates, to help them prepare for future administrations. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after 12th grade and receive a diploma. They can retake the exam an unlimited number of times after 12th grade.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exams to meet graduation requirements in Louisiana. The state does not allow students to submit scores from alternate exams to substitute for passing the exit exam. There is no waiver or appeals process for students who fail the GEE 21. There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive a regular diploma.

## Special Populations

Students with disabilities and English language learners may use accommodations on the GEE 21. Students in these subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests for students with disabilities or English language learners to receive a regular diploma.

Some students with disabilities are eligible for a Certificate of Achievement. This is generally reserved for students who participate in the Louisiana Alternate Assessment. There are no special diplomas or certificates for English language learners who do not pass the exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the GEE 21, although students are not required to attend remediation programs. In 2003-04, the state committed \$2.7 million for remediation services for students in grades 10 and 11 who failed the exam. These funds were allocated on a per pupil basis.

The state has supported and/or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exams, such as training teachers in teaching test-taking skills, training them how to interpret test results, and familiarizing teachers with the state high school exit exam. The state has also developed curriculum guides based on the exam, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests. The state also offers computer-based programs and summer school to help students prepare for the exam or as remediation tools.

The state offers adult education to students who fail the exam but have met other graduation requirements.

## Monitoring

In addition to the NCLB accountability requirements, Louisiana has its own accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exam. Chapter 13

of the Louisiana School, District and State Accountability Bulletin 111 states that for 2003, a school will receive recognition and monetary awards (assuming funds are appropriated by the state legislature) when it meets or surpasses its growth target and when it shows growth of at least 0.1 percentage points in the performance of high-poverty students and special education students. Beginning in 2004, a school will receive recognition and monetary awards (assuming funds are appropriated by the legislature) when it achieves a growth label of exemplary or recognized academic growth.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	English/ Lang. Arts	Science	Social Studies
All Students	68%	71%	77%	79%
White	85%	87%	90%	90%
Black	51%	55%	60%	66%
Hispanic	68%	69%	72%	78%
Asian	87%	77%	87%	85%
Native American	77%	80%	80%	80%
English language learners/LEP	60%	47%	59%	58%
Free or reduced price lunch	54%	57%	63%	66%
Students with disabilities	23%	18%	31%	34%

### Cumulative Pass Rates in 2002–03

The cumulative pass rate for all students in 2002-03 was 92.8%.

The state uses the following formula to determine cumulative pass rates for students:

2,006 denied graduation due to GEE 21 only

919 denied graduation due to both GEE 21 and Carnegie units

2,925 total seniors denied graduation due to GEE 21

2,925 denied graduation divided by 40,547 seniors = 7.2% denied graduation due to GEE 21

100% - 7.2% = 92.8%

### Higher Education

The state high school exit exam scores are not used in making decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement in the state's public institutions of higher education. The state education officials and higher education officials have not discussed linking the content of state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Maryland

**Test Name:** Maryland High School Assessment

**Subjects Tested:** English I, algebra/data analysis, biology, and government

**Initial Grade Tested:** Varies

**Test Type:** End-of-course

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

When asked by the Center if there is an official position or common way in which the state communicates about the purpose of the exam, the state reported that although this is not an official position, the understood purpose of the Maryland High School Assessments (HSAs) is to assure that all Maryland high school graduates have attained a minimum level of achievement.

## Historical and Policy Background

In 1983, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted regulations that required students to pass a state exam in order to graduate from high school. In 1989, when these requirements took effect, students were required to pass the Maryland Functional Test, a minimum competency test in reading, math, and writing, in order to be awarded a diploma. The class of 2004 will be the last graduating class required to take the Maryland Functional Test as a graduation requirement.

In 1996, the state board of education approved the development of a series of challenging, end-of-course exams that would eventually replace the Maryland Functional Tests as the state test required for high school graduation. Also that same year, the state board approved the Core Learning Goals, which outline the skills and content to be tested by the Maryland High School Assessments. In 2003, the state set passing scores for the assessments, and in June 2004, the Maryland State Board of Education voted to make passing the High School Assessments a graduation requirement beginning with the graduating class of 2009 (entering freshman in 2005). The new graduation regulations allow for the first compensatory scoring system for an exit exam system in the United States, whereby students must achieve a specific combined score on all four exams.

## Test Characteristics

Students will be required to take the exam in January or May of the year they complete the course. A summer administration in July/August is planned for 2004. The state considers the HSA to be end-of-course exams that are tied to course standards. The tests were developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. As the state board of education only recently (June 2004) gave final approval to the HSAs for use as an exit exam in 2009, only one of the tests has undergone review to determine its alignment to state standards.

The Maryland High School Assessments test English I, algebra/data analysis, biology, and government. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, and writing prompt/essay questions. Students are given 150 minutes each to complete the algebra/data analysis and biology tests, 155 minutes to complete the government test, and 160 minutes to complete the English I test. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

With the exception of its biology assessment, the state does not plan to use the High School Assessments to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act for students in grades 10-12. Because the English I and algebra/data analysis exams are administered primarily to 9th grade students, they do not fulfill the federal requirement to measure reading and math proficiency during the grade band of 10th through 12th grade. Therefore, for federal accountability purposes, Maryland

tests high school reading with the 10th-grade Maryland School Assessment in reading and tests math with the Maryland School Assessment in geometry, an end-of-course exam.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the exam. The tests' scales range from approximately 0 to 800; students need a 412 in algebra/data analysis, 407 in English, 394 in government, and 400 in biology in order to pass. When passing becomes a graduation requirement, the results will be reported nine weeks after the administration. Results will be reported to the public on an annual basis. Reports will include subject area scores and, for 2004, subscores of skills and content under each major subject area. Test forms are also posted on the internet each year. If students fail the exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information, such as remediation requirements, to help prepare them for future administrations of the test.

## Student Options

Students may retake a test after completing intervention or appropriate assistance activities. Retesting will be offered during the January, May, or summer administrations. Students can retake a test until they receive a passing score or reach age 21. They must first seek appropriate assistance before retesting. The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Maryland. However, if a transfer student passes a course equivalent to one of the courses tested and the student is granted credit for the respective course by the school he or she is entering, the student is exempted from taking the test. The state also plans to allow other tests to be substituted for the High School Assessments. However this will be determined when COMAR sections 13A.03.01 and 13A.03.02 are revised in summer 2004. The state does not have a waiver or appeals process yet in place.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows justified and documented accommodations for students with IEPs, temporary or long-term disabilities, and/or section 504 plans. Students in these subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions and/or substitute tests to allow these students to obtain a regular high school diploma, outside of the options available to all students. However, students with disabilities who do not pass the High School Assessment can receive a certificate of program completion.

Maryland is considering the use of a technology-based assessment for students with disabilities who cannot pass the state's exam using accommodations but are performing at higher levels than students who receive a high school certificate instead of a diploma. The state is categorizing this test as a comparable exam to the HSAs, and not an alternative exam, to stress the fact that the exam is not necessarily testing lower standards.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows justified and documented appropriate accommodations identified by the ELL committee for students who meet the criteria for an English language learner program. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions and/or substitute tests to allow these students to obtain a regular high school diploma, outside of the options available to all students. There are no special certificates for English language learners who do not pass the high school exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the High School Assessments, and students are required to attend remediation programs if they wish to

retake the test. The state has supported programs to familiarize teachers with the content of the High School Assessments, but it has not developed any materials for the teachers. The state has not developed any preparation and remediation programs and materials for the HSAs for students.

With the Bridge to Excellence Act, Maryland targets assistance to students receiving special education services, students with limited English proficiency, and economically disadvantaged students. Passed in 2002, this Act increases funding to public schools and directs more funding to students with special needs. Each of Maryland's 24 local school systems has submitted to the state a five-year master plan documenting goals and strategies for improving achievement among all groups of students, including students receiving special education services, students with limited English proficiency, and economically disadvantaged students. It is anticipated the Act will increase funding for Maryland education by \$1.3 billion by 2008.

The state is developing optional formative assessments and formative assessment tools that will provide diagnostic and instructional help for students having difficulty passing an assessment. The Maryland State Department of Education will provide online instructional courseware that teachers can access for instructional modules matched to state standards. The courseware will be available in algebra and biology during the 2004-05 school year and in government and English by September 2005.

A complete form of each of the four High School Assessments is made public and posted on the state education website after each testing. Currently, tests from 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 can be found at [mdk12.org](http://mdk12.org). Teachers and students have a growing pool of publicly available test items that they can study and incorporate into appropriate assistance activities.

The graduation regulations in June 2004 by the state board of education also provide for a Diploma by Examination. Maryland citizens not enrolled in high school may pursue this diploma, which requires the successful completion of the GED assessments or the Maryland Adult External Diploma Program assessment.

### Monitoring

There are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exams.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Algebra	English I	Biology	Government
All Students	53%	40%	54%	60%
White	68%	52%	68%	72%
Black	28%	20%	31%	42%
Hispanic	39%	29%	43%	51%
Asian/Pacific Islander	76%	59%	76%	77%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	46%	26%	49%	51%

### Cumulative Pass Rates

The first class affected by the HSAs is scheduled to graduate in 2009, so cumulative pass rates are not yet available.

### Higher Education

The Phase I Maryland High School Assessments are primarily 9th and 10th-grade tests. Therefore, performance on these tests would not necessarily be an indicator of college readiness. But Maryland regulations do require that student performance on the High School Assessments be recorded on



the high school transcript. If Maryland moves forward with Phase II of the High School Assessments, which calls for tests in advanced mathematics, chemistry, and other challenging subjects, then students' test performance may have more relevance to higher education institutions.

Maryland's K-16 Partnership for Teaching and Learning is an alliance among the Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Higher Education Commission, and the University System of Maryland. The purpose of the partnership is to develop strategies for strengthening K-16 connections, standards, competencies, assessments, professional development of educators, and community engagement in educational activities. The partnership has discussed the Maryland High School Assessments many times during the development of the tests. In fact, higher education institutions were involved in developing the Maryland Core Learning Goals (content tested by the High School Assessments). However, because the current assessments are administered primarily in 9th and 10th grade and are required of all students pursuing a diploma, they are not considered to be college preparation tests.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Massachusetts

**Test Name:** Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The 1993 Education Reform Law requires the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to include the participation of all public school students at the grade levels being tested. The intention of the law is to insure that all students are provided with an opportunity to learn the material covered by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks' academic learning standards.

## Historical and Policy Background

The Education Reform Act of 1993 authorized the state to administer the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The class of 2003 was the first class for which diplomas were withheld if students did not pass the MCAS. Although the Education Reform Law requires exit testing in five content areas—English, math, science/technology, history/science, and foreign language—currently, exit testing is limited to English/language arts and mathematics. The state did not administer an exit exam prior to the MCAS.

## Test Characteristics

In 2004, the MCAS was administered in April/May as the initial administration and in July, November, and March retests were administered. The state considers the MCAS to be a standards-based test that is aligned with 10th grade standards. The test was developed collaboratively by the state, the testing contractor, and Massachusetts educators. The MCAS has undergone an alignment review by the state and by Achieve, Inc. of Washington, D.C. Each test item undergoes multiple reviews, as follows:

1. Assessment Development Committees review each test item for alignment with the curriculum standards before and after field testing.
2. Two external reviewers review each test item against the standards.
3. The testing contractor and the Massachusetts Department of Education select items that will be used on the different forms of the test prior to field-testing.
4. A bias review committee reviews each test item.

No studies have yet been conducted to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the MCAS.

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System consists of multiple-choice, short-answer, writing prompt/essay, and extended-response questions. The MCAS math test is 60 minutes per session for a total of 180 minutes, and the ELA test is 45 minutes per session for a total of 225 minutes. All students may use calculators on session two only of the three sessions of the math test.

## NCLB

The MCAS results counted for determining adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act starting in the 2002-03 school year. The results from the first time a student takes the MCAS are used for NCLB. Students who do not pass one or both MCAS tests on the first try have multiple opportunities to retake the test(s) they did not pass. The science test that will be developed for exit exam purposes will not be used for NCLB purposes in 2007-08. Another exam will be used for that

purpose. The state is currently using a different achievement level for NCLB proficiency than it is for awarding high school diplomas. The current cut score for a Competency Determination is the Needs Improvement level. However, the Board plans to increase the required level to Proficient.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees grade the open-ended questions on the MCAS. The performance levels are Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Failing. The tests are scored on a scale that ranges from 200-280. Students need to score a 220 in order to pass. Scores in the Needs Improvement, Proficient, and Advanced levels are passing scores for each subject. The results are reported to the districts three months after testing, and to schools, students, parents, and the public four months after testing. Results are reported to the public after each administration. Reports include information about whether the student passes or fails and shows the subject area scores and scores on individual test items with scorer comments for the ELA composition section. All of the test questions are re-released each year with sample student responses.

When students fail an exit exam, the state and district are not required to provide information to help prepare for future test administrations.

## Student Options

Students have four opportunities by the end of the 12th grade and unlimited opportunities thereafter to retake sections of the MCAS. They can begin to retake the exam in November after the initial administration. The state currently does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Massachusetts. The state does not allow general education students who fail the MCAS to earn a regular high school diploma by passing a substitute test.

The state does allow general education students who fail the exit exam to request an appeal of the graduation test requirement. To be eligible for an MCAS Performance Appeal, a student must have taken the grade 10 test in the area of the appeal at least three times, have a 95% attendance record during the school years prior to and during the appeal, receive a minimum score of 216 at least once, and have participated in the tutoring and academic support services made available by the school. Students must demonstrate that their knowledge and skills in the subject area of the appeal meet the Competency Determination standard (equivalent to the 220 Needs Improvement level on the grade 10 MCAS test). While students with disabilities are not required to attain a minimum score of 216 to be eligible for a performance appeal, they must be able to demonstrate that they meet the Competency Determination standards. In 2003, the Massachusetts Department of Education processed approximately 2,500 appeals.

Districts may award a state-endorsed Certificate of Attainment to students who have not passed MCAS and meet the eligibility requirements. To be eligible, a student in the class of 2003 must have:

- a) Completed a program of studies prescribed by the school committee or the student's IEP team;
- b) Satisfactorily participated in the tutoring and other academic support services made available by the school; and
- c) Taken the grade 10 MCAS examination at least three times in each subject in which he or she did not achieve a passing score.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows students with disabilities to use accommodations that are documented on the student's IEP and are consistent with those used during routine instruction. Students in this subgroup

who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities can also apply for an appeal. Students with significant disabilities can take portfolio-based assessments. Students can also receive a Certificate of Attainment if they do not receive a regular diploma.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows current and former English language learners to use an approved bilingual dictionary with word-to-word definitions. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using this accommodation still receive a regular high school diploma. They are eligible to go through the same appeals process as all students.

## Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the MCAS, and students are not required to attend any remediation programs. Fifty million dollars was awarded to school districts in FY 2003 for remediation in grades 4-12. Districts can apply for Support Services Grants to support remediation efforts. The state has not supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the MCAS, but it did provide information guides explaining the tests. The state has computer-based programs from the Princeton Review to assist students with preparing for the exit exam. Released test items, sample student work, and scoring guides are available on the state department's website as a means of assistance.

## Monitoring

The state is currently using MCAS scores as part of a Massachusetts school rating system that can lead to the identification of underperforming schools.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

<b>Subgroups</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>English/Language Arts</b>
All Students	80%	89%
White	86%	94%
Black	57%	76%
Hispanic	54%	66%
Asian	88%	88%
Native American	65%	80%
English language learners/LEP	57%	42%
Students with disabilities	53%	70%

### Cumulative Pass Rates Class of 2003

All Students	95%
White	97%
Black	88%
Hispanic	85%
Asian	96%
Native American	96%
English language learners/LEP	83%
Students with disabilities	85%

These figures were calculated using the enrollment data reported by districts at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year via the state department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). The method of calculating pass rates is done by taking the 12th grade enrollment as of October 1 of a school year and subtracting any students who qualify for a competency determination, whether by passing the MCAS or through the state's appeals process. The final cumulative pass rate determination counts students through September 1 of the following year.

## Higher Education

Students who score advanced on one grade 10 MCAS test and proficient on the other and meet additional criteria can apply for the Stanley J. Koplik Certificate of Mastery Award. Students who receive this award are eligible for a tuition waiver at a Massachusetts public university, state college, or community college. According to the Center's 2003 exit exam report, public institutions of higher education did not use the MCAS for admissions or course placement.

The state did not report to the Center whether state K-12 education officials have had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the MCAS to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Minnesota

**Test Name:** Basic Skills Test

**Subjects Tested:** Reading, writing, and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 8th and 10th

**Test Type:** Minimum competency

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official stated purpose of the Basic Skills Tests (BST) appears in the legislation authorizing the tests. Minnesota Rules, parts 3501.0010-0180, require statewide standards that define what a Minnesota public high school graduate should know and be able to do to function effectively as a purposeful thinker, effective communicator, self-directed learner, productive group participant, and responsible citizen.

The purpose of Minnesota Rules, parts 3501.0200-0290, which authorize the writing part of the Basic Skills Tests, is to establish a statewide minimum standard that describes what a Minnesota public high school student must demonstrate in written composition to be eligible for a high school diploma.

## Historical and Policy Background

The aforementioned parts of the Minnesota Rules authorize the use of the Basic Skills Test as a requirement for graduation. The state began to administer the math and reading sections in 1996, and these sections became mandatory for all students in 1998. The state began administering the writing section in 1999. Diplomas were first withheld for students who did not pass the BSTs in 2000. This is the state's first-ever exit exam, and there are no plans to replace the BSTs at this time.

The only policy changes for the BSTs have been a change in the maximum math score possible and a new requirement, explained below, to add non-calculator computation items in math.

## Test Characteristics

The writing composition test is administered in January in grades 10-12, and the math and reading tests are administered in February in grades 8-12. Retests are given in April to seniors only and in July to students in grades 8-12. The state considers the BST to be a minimum competency test that is not aligned with state standards. Because the state exit exam is not intended to be aligned to Minnesota Academic Standards, no alignment review has been conducted.

The Basic Skills Tests assess math and reading in grade 8 and writing in grade 10. The tests were developed by a testing company specifically for the state. The tests consist of multiple-choice and writing prompt/essay questions. All students are allowed to use calculators on a majority of the math items. In 2001, the Minnesota legislature adopted a requirement for the mathematics BST to include non-calculator computation items beginning in 2004. Students starting 8th grade in 2003-04 now have a second kind of question—computation questions—that they must answer without using a calculator. The BSTs are not timed.

## NCLB

The state does not plan to use the BSTs to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. The tests are not aligned with the state's standards. They are first administered in 8th grade, so they may not be used to satisfy NCLB requirements for a high school test.

## Scoring and Reporting

There are no open-ended questions on the exam nor are there achievement levels assigned. The tests are scored on a scale that tops off at 750 for reading and 800 for math (reflecting changes by the legislature). In order to pass the exam, students must score 75% or a scale score of 600 in both reading and math. In writing, the holistic passing score is 3 on a scale of 0-4.

Districts, schools, students, parents, and the public receive results about eight weeks after testing occurs. The public receives results after each administration. Reports include information on whether students pass or fail and their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. Questions from the exam are not released every year. Items are released on occasion—the 1998 test, 1999 test, selected reading passages and accompanying items are available. The Department has also provided "sample tests" for schools to use.

## Student Options

Students have 11 opportunities to retake the math and reading tests by the end of the 12th grade. The first time they can retake the exam is in July after the initial administration. If students fail an exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help them prepare for future administrations. Minnesota provides information about optional remediation opportunities and future test dates.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Minnesota. The state does not allow scores from other tests to be substituted for the Basic Skills Test, and there is no process in place for students who fail to request waivers or appeal the exit exam. Alternate diplomas or certificates are not available for general education students who do not receive a regular diploma.

## Special Populations

The state allows test accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners. Students in these subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. The state did not indicate on the Center's survey that any special diplomas or certificates are available for students with disabilities or ELLs who do not receive a regular diploma. However, for students with an IEP or 504 plan, the IEP team may modify (lower) the scale score needed for a pass. Students then receive a Pass Individual rather than a Pass State designation.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation and to write a remediation plan for students who have failed the BST in 8th or 9th grade. However, students are not required to attend remediation programs. Minnesota did not indicate on the Center's survey that it targets any funds on remediation for students. The state has also not supported professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the BSTs. The state has developed information guides explaining the tests, but no remediation programs or materials to help students prepare for the exam.

## Monitoring

There are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exams.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Subgroups	Math	Reading/ Language Arts	Writing Composition
All Students	71%	81%	91%
White	78%	87%	95%
Black	31%	50%	68%
Hispanic	38%	52%	69%
Asian	58%	63%	83%
Native American	43%	56%	81%
English language learners/LEP	29%	36%	56%
Free or reduced price lunch	47%	61%	79%
Students with disabilities	28%	40%	65%

## Cumulative Pass Rates in 2003

The cumulative pass rates for all students are as follows:

Math	99.1%
Reading	99.5%
Written Composition	99.1%

Cumulative pass rates are calculated based on the number of 12th graders who were tested by the July 2003 retest administration but did not pass, divided by the total number of students enrolled in the 12th grade.

## Higher Education

Results of the Basic Skills Tests are not used to make decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement in the state's public institutions of higher education. If students do not receive a diploma because they did not pass the BST, they can still be admitted to a public community college by earning a GED or through an individual evaluation of their potential. Students can be admitted to public universities as an exception to the normal requirement by meeting other rigid criteria for college admissions. State K-12 education officials have not had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the BSTs to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*



# Mississippi

**Test Name:** Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program

**Subjects Tested:** English II (with writing component), algebra, biology, and U.S. history from 1877

**Initial Grade Tested:** Varies

**Test Type:** End-of-course

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

In 1999, the Mississippi State Senate approved the Mississippi Student Achievement Act, which states that standards for high school graduation shall include student “mastery of minimum academic skills as measured by assessments developed and administered by the State Board of Education.”

## Historical and Policy Background

Mississippi began administering an exit exam, the Functional Literacy Exam (FLE), in 1999-2000. The state is currently phasing out the FLE, which was a minimum competency exam, and replacing it with a new series of end-of course exams, the Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP). In 2003, diplomas were first withheld from students who did not pass the new SATP.

According to the state’s responses to the Center’s survey, there have been no major policy changes since the new tests were authorized.

## Test Characteristics

The SATP tests are administered in August (paper and pencil retest), October (online retest), October (standard paper and pencil writing assessment), December (standard paper and pencil administration and retest), March (online retest and standard paper and pencil writing assessment), and April (standard paper and pencil administration and senior online retest). The state considers the SATP to be an end-of-course exam that is aligned with course content. The exam was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company.

The state reports that the tests have undergone review by external reviewers to determine their alignment with standards and to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exam. However, the Center was unable to find the results of such reviews for the purposes of this report.

The SATP assesses English II (with a writing component), algebra, biology, and U.S. history from 1877. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, writing prompt/essay, and extended/performance task questions. The tests are not timed. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

Beginning in 2002-03, administrations of the algebra and English tests were used to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act for students in grades 10-12. The results from the first time students take the test will count for NCLB purposes. The biology test will be used for NCLB purposes when science testing becomes a federal requirement. The standard setting process for NCLB proficiency levels had not been conducted as of summer 2004. However, the cut score for NCLB proficiency will likely be the same as the basic proficiency level for graduation purposes.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the exam. The tests are scored on a scale of 100-500, and students must score a 300 in each subject in order

to pass. The achievement levels are pass or fail. Results are reported to districts, schools, students, and parents about two and one-half months after testing. The public receives results on an annual basis at the end of the summer. Reports include information about whether students pass or fail, their proficiency levels, and their subject area scores and subscores for skills and content under each major subject area. All test questions are released each year to schools, teachers, and students and posted on the internet.

## Student Options

Students are permitted up to five opportunities a year to retake the exit exam. Students can begin retaking the exam at the next administration. If students have not met the exit exam requirement but have met the other graduation requirements by the end of 12th grade, they can retake the exam for as long as they need to. There is no age limit to their taking the test.

The state permits transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Mississippi. If a transfer student passes a course equivalent to one of the courses tested and the student is granted credit for the respective course by the school he or she is entering, the student is exempted from taking the test. If a student fails the Subject Area Test twice, he or she can appeal for a Substitute Evaluation. Students who do not receive a regular diploma can be awarded a certificate of completion, certificate of attendance, or alternate or occupational diploma. Students may also choose to earn their GED and continue to take the exit exam. If they earn their GED and then pass the SATP, they are granted a regular diploma.

## Special Populations

The state allows accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners. Students in these two subgroups who pass the exit exam using allowable accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities who do not pass the exit exam can receive a certificate of completion or occupational diploma. There are no special certificates for ELLs who do not pass the high school exit exam except those afforded to all students.

## Support Policies

If students fail an exit exam, the state recommends that districts make available remediation opportunities and has sent guidelines to districts about optional remediation opportunities and future test dates. However, the state requires no mandatory remediation process.

The state has established and supported specific professional development programs to help teachers teach test-taking skills, train teachers how to interpret test results, and familiarize teachers with the content of the state high school exit exam. The state has also developed curriculum guides based on the exams and information guides explaining the test for teachers. For students, the state has developed computer-based programs, study guides, informational booklets, a CD-ROM for practice tests, website resources, and curriculum intervention guides and supplements.

## Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability, the state has additional accountability consequences and rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exam. The consequences and rewards were not noted in the state's response to the Center's survey.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers

Pass rates were not available.

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Cumulative pass rates were not available.

## Higher Education

Results of the SATP are not used to make decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement in the state's public institutions of higher education. Students can be admitted into a public community college if they have a GED. However, students cannot be admitted into a public university without a diploma. State K-12 education officials have not yet had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the SATP to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Nevada

**Test Name:** High School Proficiency Examination  
**Subjects Tested:** Math, reading, writing, and science  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official purpose of Nevada's exit exam, according to the state legislation authorizing the exam, is to ensure that all students receiving a regular diploma in Nevada have met the same level of performance in the core subjects of reading, writing, and math. Science will be included in 2009.

## Historical and Policy Background

Nevada revised statutes (NRS) 389.015 authorizes the use of the Nevada High School Proficiency Examination (HSPE) as the high school exit exam. The exam was first based on the 1994 state course of study. In 1999 the exams were realigned to be consistent with the Nevada content standards adopted in August 1998. Science was added in 2001. However, the 2003 legislative session delayed counting the science test as a graduation requirement until the class of 2009. Passing scores were set in 2001 for the HSPE reading and math tests. In 2003 the minimum passing score in math was changed temporarily to make it two standard deviations below the recommended cut score, with the provision that by 2007 it be returned to the previous level of one standard deviation below the recommend cut.

Other than the version of the HSPE that was aligned to the 1994 state curriculum, the state had no prior exit exams. It currently has no plans to replace the HSPE in the future.

## Test Characteristics

The HSPE is administered in February, spring (March/April), summer (July), and fall (November). The state considers the HSPE to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to 8-12th grade state standards. The exam was developed collaboratively between the state and a testing company. The state has a contract with a testing company to have teachers in the state draft items for the test. The testing company produces test forms, and it scans, scores, and reports the results. The state planned to have the HSPE reviewed in summer 2004 to determine whether it is aligned with state standards. The state reports that it also plans to conduct a study to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams in summer or fall of 2004.

The HSPE tests math, reading, writing, and science. The test consists of multiple-choice and writing prompt/essay questions. The exam is designed to last 90 minutes per subject, but students can request more time if they need it. Only students who are allowed accommodations can use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

Nevada began using the results from the first time a student takes the test and the first retest of its graduation test to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2003-04. The science test will also be used for NCLB purposes beginning in 2007-08. The state plans to use the same cut scores for NCLB proficiency as are used for awarding high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the graduation exam are exceeds standards, meets standards, approaching standard, and developing/emergent. The tests are scored on a scale of 100-500, and students must achieve a scaled score of 300 in each subject area tested. The performance level for which the cut scores fall into could change from year to year. Scores are reported to the district 28 days after test administration. Districts are required to report scores to schools 15 days after receiving them from the testing contractor. The public receives scores after each administration. Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed and showing their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. The questions from the exit exams are not released.

When students fail an exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements, optional remediation opportunities, future test dates, and implications for course-taking.

## Student Options

Students have six opportunities to retake the exam before the end of 12th grade. Students can retake the exams in April of the year after they first took it. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and receive a diploma. There is no limit on age or the number of times a student can retake the exam. There are no alternate routes to a regular diploma if students do not pass the exit exam, but they can receive a certificate of completion or attendance. The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other state exams to meet graduation requirements in Nevada.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

Students with disabilities are allowed to use accommodations while taking the HSPE. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations will not receive a regular high school diploma. The state issues an adjusted diploma for students with disabilities who meet graduation requirements as determined in their IEP but have not passed the HSPE or who pass it with accommodations.

### *English Language Learners*

Students who are English language learners are allowed to use accommodations while taking the HSPE, but those who pass the exit exam using accommodations will not receive a regular high school diploma.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the HSPE, but students are not required to attend these programs. The state did not indicate whether funds were targeted for remediation for students who fail the exam.

The state has not supported or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exam. The state has also not developed materials for the exam for teachers. Study guides for students have been developed.

## Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exam.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Subgroups	Math	Reading	Writing
All Students	43%	77%	87%
White	54%	86%	92%
Black	22%	62%	80%
Hispanic	25%	62%	75%
Asian	53%	81%	88%
Native American	29%	72%	82%
English language learners/LEP	13%	34%	40%
Free or reduced price lunch	25%	60%	75%
Students with disabilities	6%	30%	42%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The state indicated that cumulative pass rates are not available.

## Higher Education

Public universities and community colleges do not use the HSPE in admissions decisions or for course placement. However, the exam is used to award the statewide Nevada Millennium Scholarship.

The state reported that it has not had discussions with higher education officials about linking the content of the HSPE to standards for what students need to know to enter college. Some citizens in the state also want to the HSPE to serve as an entrance exam for the state university and community college system. The state department leadership feels that this is a different purpose from the one currently in place.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# New Jersey

**Test Name:** High School Proficiency Assessment  
**Subjects Tested:** Language arts literacy and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 11th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official position laid out in the law authorizing the exam is that the High School Proficiency Assessment “shall measure those basic skills all students must possess to function politically, economically, and socially in a democratic society.”

## Historical and Policy Background

In 1998, the New Jersey legislature passed legislation (N.J.S.A. 18A: 7C-6.2) that requires all students who graduate from a public high school in New Jersey to pass a state exam in order to graduate. New Jersey is currently phasing out the original exam, the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11), administering it for the last time in March 2004. Students who were in the 11th grade in 2000 were the last cohort required to take the HSPT11 to graduate.

The state began administering its new standards-based exam, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), to 11th grade students in 2002. The graduating class of 2003 was the first class required to pass this new exam. The HSPA represents a set of policy changes to the previous high school exit exam, arising from the establishment of state curriculum standards in 1996 and an exit exam aligned to those standards.

## Test Characteristics

The HSPA is administered in March of the 11th grade with retests in October. The state considers the HSPA to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to 11th grade state standards. The exam was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The state indicates that the content of the exam is reviewed continuously for alignment with state standards by content committees of field educators and that an external review by Achieve, Inc., is currently being conducted but is not yet published.

The High School Proficiency Assessment tests language arts literacy and math and will include science in 2005. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, and writing prompt/essay questions. The HSPA is given over a two-day period. Day 1 testing lasts two hours and 25 minutes, and day 2 testing lasts 2 hours and 55 minutes. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

The results of the first administration of the HSPA in the 11th grade in language arts literacy and math count for determining adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, starting in the 2003-04 school year. The state will use the same cut score for NCLB proficiency as it uses to award high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Hired scorers with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the high school exit exam. The performance levels for the High School Proficiency Assessment are advanced proficient, proficient, and partially proficient. The tests are scored on a scale of 100-300, and students must score 200 in each of the subjects in order to pass. Scores between 100-199 are partially proficient, 200-249 are proficient, and 250-300 are advanced proficient.

The results are reported to districts and schools three months after testing, and to students, parents, and the public four months after testing. Results are reported to the public after each administration. Reports include information about whether the student passes or fails, subject area scores and sub-scores of skills and content under each major subject area. Some of the test questions and sample student responses on the exam are released each year. Samples are included in the student/teacher/parent guide developed each year, and the test specifications and sample tests are posted on the state department of education website. Selected writing prompts are released each year, along with sample student responses, in a writing handbook released as part of the score reporting.

If students fail the exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help them with future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements, optional remediation opportunities, future test dates, and implications for course taking. Implications for course taking means decisions about whether a student's remaining coursework is directed to areas of possible weakness and/or altered by the need to take remedial classes aimed at assuring that the student passes the HSPA the next time it is administered. There is no standard format for providing the information.

## Student Options

Students have two opportunities to retake the exam by the end of the 12th grade, and students who are retained have additional opportunities. The first retest option is in October of the 12th grade. If students meet all of the other requirements to graduate except passing the HSPA, they can retake the exam after the 12th grade. The state currently does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in New Jersey.

Students can also go through a Special Review Assessment (SRA) process, which allows students to demonstrate their mastery of the required skills on the HSPA. A team of educators, after examining other evidence, determines whether the student has mastered enough of the required skills to achieve the equivalent of a passing score on the HSPA. If students have fulfilled all of the course requirements for graduation but failed to pass the HSPA, they can continue with one of the following options:

- Continue the SRA process;
- Return to the school at testing time the following year and take the HSPA; or
- Pass the GED tests.

There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive regular diplomas. There are also no waiver or appeals processes in place.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows an extensive list of accommodations for students with disabilities as specified in their IEPs. Some students with disabilities are designated IEP-exempt from passing, but not taking, the HSPA, based on their locally determined IEP. Students who are designated IEP-exempt must take the exempt portions of the test at least once, but the scores will not affect their graduation status. Students with severe disabilities take the Alternate Proficiency Assessment instead of the HSPA.

Students with disabilities who pass the exit exam using accommodations and meet the requirements of their IEPs still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no special diplomas for students who do not meet the graduation requirements of the state or their IEPs.



### English Language Learners

The state allows students identified as limited English proficient to use accommodations on the exam, such as extra time, a small group testing environment, translated directions, and use of bilingual dictionaries. LEP students may demonstrate proficiency in the required content areas through completion of the SRA process in their native language or in English. In order to be eligible for an SRA in the native language, a LEP student must have scored below the state-established cutoff score on one of the state-approved English language tests and have either (1) participated in a bilingual, ESL, or English Language Services Program for two consecutive years or less prior to the date of the HSPA; or (2) attended school in the United States for three consecutive years or less prior to the date of HSPA testing.

English language learners who take the SRA in English must also pass an English fluency test in order to receive a high school diploma. There are no appeals or waiver processes or special certificates or diplomas for ELLs who do not pass the high school exit exam.

### Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the HSPA, and students are required to attend the remediation programs. Funding for these programs is locally determined. Students who do not pass a section of the HSPA must be given a comprehensive assessment and must be provided with supplemental remedial instruction targeted to their individual needs.

The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the HSPA, including training in how to interpret test results and training in test administration. The state has not developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exam for students. The state, however, does provide adult high schools, adult literacy support, and funding for GED courses to support students who have failed the exit exam but have met other graduation requirements.

### Monitoring

Presently, the evaluation of the performance of school districts is prescribed by state law (N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-10) and state rules (N.J.A.C. 6:8). The enactment of the Comprehensive Education Improvement and Funding Act reinforces the mandate for the Commissioner of Education to develop a process to determine each school district's performance against standards set by the state education department. The law also requires school districts to report annually to the Commissioner on their progress toward meeting these standards and to share this report with the public at a regularly scheduled board meeting. This law also establishes incremental steps of intervention that the Commissioner may invoke when individual schools experience three consecutive years of failure.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	Language Arts Literacy
All Students	65.9%	80.2%
White	77.4%	88.1%
Black	32.9%	60.5%
Hispanic	41.6%	63.2%
Asian	83.3%	86.5%
Native American	57.2%	74.1%
English language learners/LEP	22.4%	18.4%
Free or reduced price lunch	35.6%	57.1%
Students with disabilities	22.3%	35.3%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Information on cumulative pass rates is not available.

## Higher Education

HSPA scores are not used in making decisions about undergraduate admissions, scholarships, or course placement in the state's public institutions of higher education. The state education department reports that it has not had conversations with higher education officials about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students need to know to enter college.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# New Mexico

**Test Name:** New Mexico High School Competency Examination

**Subjects Tested:** Reading, English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and composition

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Minimum competency

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official state position on the purpose of the exit exam is laid out in the law authorizing the exam. The law states, "A student shall not receive a high school diploma who has not passed a state graduation examination in the subject areas of: English language arts, reading, mathematics, science, social science, and composition. The state graduation examination on social science shall include a section on the constitution of the United States and the constitution of New Mexico. If a student exits from the school system at the end of grade twelve without having passed a state examination, he shall receive an appropriate state certificate indicating the number of credits earned and the grade completed. If within five years after a student exits from the school system he takes and passes the state graduation examination, he may receive a high school diploma."

## Historical and Policy Background

The New Mexico Statutes 1978 Chapter 22-2-8.4—Graduation Requirements authorizes the use of a graduation exam as part of the high school requirements. New Mexico has been administering the New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE) since 1987-88. Students in the class of 1990 were the first who had to pass all subtests of this exam in order to receive a diploma and graduate.

A new standards-based high school exam, the New Mexico High School Standards Assessment (NMHSSA) is being phased in. It was first administered in November 2003 but is not yet a graduation requirement. The NMHSSA may become the graduation test as early as the 2007-08 school year. The NMHSSA has subtests in reading and math; science will be added in the 2007-08 school year. Other subtests may be added at the discretion of the state.

## Test Characteristics

The NMHSCE is administered in January of the 10th grade, with retests in November for seniors and those who have exited grade 12. Grade 10 students who have not passed all subtests are retested in January of grade 11 and twice in grade 12. The state considers the exam to be a minimum competency exam, and it is not intended to be aligned to state standards. Consequently, no alignment review has been conducted. The exam was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company.

The New Mexico High School Competency Examination tests reading, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and composition. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, writing prompt/essay and extended/performance task questions. The NMHSCE is an untimed exam. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

The current New Mexico High School Competency Examination will not be used for NCLB accountability. Instead, the newer exam, the New Mexico High School Standards Assessment, will be used for this purpose. The results from the first time a student takes the NMHSSA are used to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. November 2003 marked the beginning of using NMHSSA results for adequate yearly progress under NCLB. When the new state exam becomes a requirement for graduation, the same cut score will be used to award high school diplomas as is used for NCLB.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees score the open-ended questions. The performance levels for the NMHSCE are pass and fail. The tests are scored on a scale of approximately 300 points depending on the particular forms used each year. Students must score a 175 in each of the subjects and a holistic score of 3 on the composition subtest in order to pass. The passing score was changed from 150 to 175 for grade 10 students in spring of 2001. The results are reported to districts and schools two months after testing, and the district then decides when to report scores to students and parents. Results are reported to the public when the district decides. Reports include information on whether students pass or fail and their subject area scores, subscores of skills and content under each major subject area, and scores on individual test items. Test questions and sample student responses on the exam are not released each year.

## Student Options

Students can retake the exam in the spring of the 11th grade and have three opportunities to retake the exam by the end of the 12th grade, and then two opportunities a year for the five years after they exit grade 12. The state currently allows transfer students to submit passing scores from all other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in New Mexico. The state does not allow students to submit scores from alternate tests to replace the state's exit exam.

The state allows districts to grant waivers. The waiver or appeals process must be initiated by the school or district and referred to the local school board. If approved by the school board, the district superintendent sends information to the New Mexico Secretary of Education for review and approval. Districts issue certificates of completion for students who do not receive a regular diploma but have met the other graduation requirements.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows students with disabilities to use accommodations such as different modes of presentation, response, setting, and/or timing/scheduling of the assessment. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. They can also receive a regular diploma by going through the career readiness program or meeting the standards and benchmarks defined in their IEP. Students can also receive a Certificate of Completion in lieu of a state diploma.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows students identified as limited English proficient to use accommodations on the exams. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. In addition, they are also eligible for the same waiver and certificate options as general education students.

## Support Policies

The state does not require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the NMHSCE, and students are not required to attend remedial programs. The state has not supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the NMHSCE. The state did not indicate that it has developed materials for teachers or preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exams for students.

## Monitoring

There are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exam.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	Reading	Language Arts	Science	Social Studies	Composition
All Students	81%	89%	77%	78%	82%	97%
White	91%	96%	89%	91%	91%	99%
Black	71%	86%	72%	70%	75%	95%
Hispanic	76%	87%	73%	73%	79%	97%
Asian	94%	93%	88%	89%	91%	99%
Native American	72%	81%	62%	67%	71%	95%
English language learners/LEP	64%	75%	52%	58%	65%	92%
Free or reduced price lunch	72%	83%	67%	69%	74%	96%
Students with disabilities	43%	60%	33%	44%	51%	85%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The state does not collect data on cumulative pass rates.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 study of high school exit exams, the state universities in New Mexico do not require a diploma for admission, but students cannot receive financial aid without a diploma or GED. Some of the universities use exit exam scores for course placement, and others do not. Most community colleges do not use the scores for admissions; however, they may be used for course placement decisions. All of the community colleges admit students holding a GED and in some cases allow them to take classes for two years while attaining a GED. Some of the community colleges allow students to take classes without a diploma or GED, but students would need to have one or the other to receive financial aid or a degree.

The Center does not have information about whether state K-12 education officials and higher education officials have had discussions about linking the content of the state's exit exam to standards for what students should know to enter college. However, the current exit exam is a minimum competency exam that is being phased out in favor of a standards-based exam, so it seems unlikely that such a conversation would have happened.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# New York

**Test Name:** Regents Comprehensive Examinations

**Subjects Tested:** English, mathematics, global history and geography, U.S. history and government, and science

**Initial Grade Tested:** Varies

**Test Type:** End-of-course

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

When asked in the Center's survey about the official purpose of the state's exit exam, New York officials referred to the following language: "The purpose of the Regents Examinations is to measure students' achievement of the State learning standards in the five subject areas required for graduation from high school."

## Historical and Policy Background

The New York State Board of Regents approved new graduation requirements revising the Regents Exams, which are end-of-course tests, in 1996. Prior to 1996, the state administered Regents exams to students pursuing a Regents-endorsed diploma and administered a minimum competency exam to all students called the Regents Competency Tests. The class of 2000 was the first graduating class that took the revised Regents Exams. These students had to pass only the English subject test in order to graduate. The classes of 2003 and beyond have to pass all five Regents examinations (Comprehensive English, Global History and Geography, United States History and Government, and one of the following sciences: Physical Setting: Earth science; Living Environment; Physical Setting: Chemistry; and Physical Setting: Physics). Students take the exams when they complete coursework.

In October 2003, the New York Board of Regents agreed to wait three more years before raising the passing scores on state graduation tests. The board also decided to postpone until 2009 a requirement that students with disabilities pass the exams.

## Test Characteristics

Regents Examinations are administered in January, June, and August each year. The state considers the exams to be both standards-based and end-of-course exams that are aligned to the Commencement Level (grades 9-12) of the New York State Learning Standards. The exams were developed by the state. The state has reviewed the exit exams to determine whether they are aligned to state standards. External reviews have also been conducted by ETS and a technical advisory group of national experts. The state has performed standards implementation studies to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exams.

The Regents Exams assess student performance in English, math, global history and geography, U.S. history and government, and science. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, writing prompt/essay, and extended/performance task questions. Currently the Regents Exam in Physical Science: Earth Science includes extended/performance tasks. Typically, students take the Physical Setting: Earth Science Regents Examination to fulfill the science requirement because it is the first science course and examination offered. Additionally, students must satisfactorily complete a 1,200-minute laboratory requirement before they can take the science Regents Examination to meet their science requirement.

The tests last 180 minutes each, and the English test has two parts at 180 minutes each. All students are also required to use at least a scientific calculator on the Mathematics A Regents Examination.

## NCLB

New York began using the final retest opportunity of the Regents Examinations to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002-03. The science exam will also be used for NCLB accountability in 2007-08. The state is using the same achievement level for NCLB proficiency as is used for awarding high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Teachers grade the open-ended questions of the Regents exam. The performance levels for the exam are pass with distinction (85-100), pass (65-84), and low pass (55-64). Students must achieve a passing grade of 65 on a required Regents examination in order to earn a Regents diploma. Students who first enter grade 9 in or after September 2001 and before September 2005 and who score at the low pass level (55-64) may be considered to have achieved a passing score on any Regents examination required for graduation and may receive a local diploma if the school district, at its discretion, offers the low pass option.

Scores are reported to districts, schools, students, and parents immediately after the test. The public receives the scores three months after testing. Public reporting is done after each administration of the exam. Students receive a score report indicating whether they pass or fail and their subject area scores and subscores (skills or content) under each major subject area. Additional information is provided by schools. All secondary-level Regents Examinations are scored by local school districts, which are also responsible for reporting results. Tests must be stored by school districts for at least one year. Students and parents may review student answer sheets under supervision. The questions are released each year to students and posted on the Internet. Copies of the exams are not returned to the state.

If students fail an exit exam, the districts, as required by their Academic Intervention Services Plans, must provide the students with additional instructional support to help them prepare for a future administration of the test.

## Student Options

Students have three opportunities each year, until they reach the end of 12th grade, to retake the entire Regents Exam. Students who fail one of the tests can retake it during the next administration. Seniors who fail an exam are eligible to take a Component Retest on that part of the Regents Examination in which they had the most difficulty. To date, Component Retests are available in English and math only. Students who are enrolled in school up to age 21 are allowed to retake the exit exam.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other state exams to meet the graduation requirement in New York. Students who fail the exit exam are allowed to earn a regular high school diploma by passing an existing substitute test—such as the Advanced Placement, SAT II, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) exams—that has been approved by the Commissioner of Education as alternatives to some of the Regents Exams. In the 2002-2003 school year, 0.1% of students used the alternate assessment option to fulfill the high school graduation requirement. The state does not have a waiver or appeals process for students who fail the exam, and it does not award alternate diplomas or certificates.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows students with disabilities to use approved accommodations contained in the state manual that do not alter the construct being measured. Students in this subgroup who pass the Regents exams using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities who first enter grade 9 before September 2010 and who fail Regents Comprehensive Exams

required for graduation but pass the Regents Competency Tests in those subjects may be issued a local diploma. Students with disabilities can also receive an Individual Education Program diploma if they do not pass the Regents Competency Tests or participate in the New York State Alternate Assessment. The IEP Diploma is based on achievement of the IEP goals and objectives.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows English language learners to use certain accommodations on particular Regents Exams. Students can use accommodations relating to optimum testing environment, extended test time, and bilingual dictionaries on all Regents Exams. For the English Regents Exam only, ELLs are permitted the additional accommodations of using an LEP English language test proctor and having the listening comprehension passages read three times. Until 2010, ELLs will also be held to lower cut scores for the English Regents Exam. For all Regents Exams except English, students who are English language learners can take native language versions in Chinese, Haitian-Creole, Russian, Spanish, and Korean or use oral translations of the tests for low-incidence languages; they can also use bilingual glossaries and simultaneously use the English and native language versions of the test.

English language learners who pass the Regents Exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests that allow English language learners to receive a regular high school diploma, outside of the alternatives allowed for all students. There are also no alternate certificates or diplomas for these students.

### **Support Services**

The state requires school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the high school exit exam. Students who fail Regents exams are required to receive additional support as part of the school's Academic Intervention Services plan. Students are also required to attend remediation programs if they fail the Regents Exam.

State resources are not targeted to school districts based on the numbers of students who fail the exit exam, but rather are allocated based on need factors outside districts' control. A separate regulation requires school districts to provide academic intervention services to all students who are considered to need extra time and help to meet state learning standards. In the 2003-04 school year, several state aid programs were available that could be used for academic intervention services, including \$705 million in Extraordinary Needs Aid for K-12, \$72.5 million in Educational Related Support Services Aid for K-12, \$86.5 million for K-12 Limited English Proficiency, \$201 million for Pre-Kindergarten, and \$306.4 million for class size reduction in K-3.

The state has supported or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the Regents Exams, including training teachers how to interpret test results and familiarizing teachers with the content of the Regents Exams. The state has also developed curriculum guides based on the exams and information guides explaining the tests. The state has not developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for students.

In 2003-04 school year, the state also provided special assistance targeted to specific populations, such as \$2.15 billion for the excess cost program for students with disabilities in public schools, \$180.5 million for the excess cost program for student with disabilities in private schools, \$4 million for homeless students, \$13 million for incarcerated youth, and \$11.2 million for bilingual students. Districts could use a portion of these funds to help special populations meet the Regents Exam requirements.



## Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are school and district accountability rewards linked to student performance on the exit exam. Recognition for high performance includes the following:

- Schools and districts that for two consecutive years achieve all Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) and state standards are recognized as “high performing.” The first schools and districts to be considered high performing will be identified using 2002-03 and 2003-04 school year results.
- Schools and districts that do not achieve all AMOs and state standards but make adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act, are recognized as “rapidly improving.” The first schools and districts to be considered rapidly improving will be identified using 2002-03, 2003-04 and 2004-05 school year results.

The sanctions for schools and districts with low performance on state exams are those associated with No Child Left Behind.

## Cumulative Pass Rates

### PASS RATES FOR 1999 COHORT OF 9TH GRADE STUDENTS

Subgroups	Math	English	Global History and Geography	Science	U.S. History and Government
All Students	83%	85%	86%	84%	82%
White	91%	91%	92%	91%	89%
Black	65%	72%	74%	70%	68%
Hispanic	64%	69%	72%	86%	65%
Asian	89%	86%	88%	87%	85%
Native American	80%	79%	81%	81%	76%
English language learners/LEP	61%	55%	68%	62%	63%
Free or reduced price lunch	72%	76%	78%	74%	72%
Students with disabilities	65%	61%	60%	54%	51%

*Note: The numbers in this table represent the percentages of students who first entered ninth grade in 1999 who met the graduation requirement for each of the Regents Comprehensive Examinations as of June 30th of the fourth year after they first entered 9th grade. These percentages include not only students who passed the specific exam listed above but also some students who met the graduation requirement through alternate tests such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams and some students with disabilities who met the graduation requirement by passing the Regents Competency Tests.*

## Higher Education

The state reports that some public community colleges and universities use the Regents Exams for admissions, scholarships, and course placement. There have been discussions between state education officials and higher education officials about linking the content of the Regents Exams to standards for what students need to know to enter college. As an example of how these conversations are being turned into policy, the City University of New York accepts a score of 75 on the Regents English and mathematics exams as acceptable admissions tests for the university. The university is measuring the progress of students who enter via the Regents Exam route against those who use the SAT route and the CUNY Freshman Skills Assessment Test route.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# North Carolina

**Test Name:** North Carolina High School Competency Tests and the North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance

**Subjects Tested:** Reading comprehension, mathematics, and computer skills

**Initial Grades Tested:** 8th and 9th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official state position on the purpose of the exit exam is laid out in the law authorizing the exam. The law states that the state board of education must adopt tests or other measurement devices to assure that graduates of the state's public high schools and nonpublic schools supervised by the state board possess the skills and knowledge necessary to function independently and successfully in assuming the responsibilities of citizenship.

## Historical and Policy Background

North Carolina began administering the North Carolina High School Competency Tests of Reading Comprehension and of Mathematics in 1978-79 and the North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance in 1996-97. The state did not administer another exit exam prior to these exams. Diplomas were first withheld for performance on the reading comprehension and mathematics tests in 1982 for students who entered 9th grade for the first time in 1978. Diplomas were first withheld in 2001 for performance on the computer skills test for students who entered 8th grade in the 1996-97 school year.

The oldest version of the competency exam (used from 1977-78 through 1993-94) included the subjects of reading, mathematics, and writing. When the new requirement was implemented during the 1994-95 school year, the writing portion of the test was eliminated. The state board of education implemented a new requirement in 1994-95, which represents a more rigorous standard than the old minimum competency requirement.

In 2003, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation calling on the state board of education to study the adoption or development of alternate means and standards for demonstrating minimum competency, beginning in the 9th grade, for students who have failed the competency test at least two times. Due to recent legislative action, plans to develop a new exit exam have been put on hold. The only other current planned policy change is to institute a new web-based computer skills test to replace the current computer skills proficiency graduation requirement. The state plans to have this test become available in 2005-06 for entering 8th graders.

## Test Characteristics

For the tests of reading and mathematics, school systems are permitted to schedule administration dates of the competency tests during each testing cycle (summer, fall, spring). School systems must offer at least one opportunity annually beginning with the 9th grade. Students may not take the competency tests earlier than the summer after the completion of the 8th grade. A student may take each competency test only once during the summer (if in session), fall, and spring. Seniors who have not met the competency standard must be given an additional opportunity to take the test(s) during the last month of school.

Testing windows are set by the state for the administration of the computer skills tests of multiple-choice and performance. The window is approximately six weeks in length during each testing cycle

of summer, fall, and spring. If a student has not passed the test when it is initially given in the 8th grade, school systems must offer at least one opportunity to students annually beginning in the 9th grade. A student may take the multiple-choice test only once during the summer (if in session), fall, and spring. Only seniors may take the computer skills performance as a retest during the summer. Seniors who have not met the computer skills standard must be given an additional opportunity to take the test(s) during the last month of school.

The state considers the competency tests to be standards-based exams that are aligned to 8th grade standards. The exam was developed by the state. The state reports that the exit exams have undergone review internally to determine whether they are aligned to state standards as well as the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exam. However, copies of this review were not available at the time of the Center's study.

The North Carolina Competency Tests assess reading comprehension and mathematics. The North Carolina Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance assess computer proficiency. The tests in all three subjects include multiple-choice items, but only the computer skills test includes performance tasks. The competency reading test is approximately 100 minutes and the competency math test is approximately 97 minutes. However, the state reports that all students must be given sufficient time to complete the tests. All students are allowed to use calculators on part of the math test. On the computer skills test, testing times for students who entered 9th grade for the first time from 2000–01 and beyond are 90 minutes for the multiple-choice section and 100 minutes for the performance section.

## NCLB

The results of the current exit exam will not be used for determining adequate yearly progress for high schools under the No Child Left Behind Act, since the exam is aligned to 8th grade standards.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the state computer skills performance test. The performance levels for the math and reading competency exams are achievement levels I, II, III, and IV. Students must meet an Achievement Level III standard to pass the North Carolina Competency Tests of reading and mathematics.

In recent years, the state has gradually raised the cutoff scores for passing the tests. The cutoff scores for students who entered the 9th grade for the first time in 1994–95 through 2000–01 are at or above a scale score of 156 for reading and at or above a scale score of 165 for mathematics. The cutoff scores for students who entered the 9th grade for the first time in 2001–02 are at or above a scale score of 156 for reading and at or above a scale score of 256 for mathematics. The cutoff scores for students who entered the 9th grade for the first time in 2002–03 are at or above a scale score of 156 for reading and at or above a scale score of 261 for mathematics. The cutoff scores for students who entered the 9th grade for the first time in 2003–04 are at or above a scale score of 254 for reading and at or above a scale score of 261 for mathematics. The standard for computer proficiency for graduation is a minimum scale score of 47 on the multiple-choice test and a minimum scale score of 49 on the performance test.

The results are reported to the districts immediately after administration and to schools, students, and parents 30 days after the district generates scores. Results are reported to the public once a year. Reports include information on whether the student passes or fails and the subject area scores and subscores of skills and content under each major subject area. Test questions are not released each year. If students fail an exit exam, the district must provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, including information about remediation requirements and future test dates.

## Student Options

If students have not met the exit exam requirement but have met the other graduation requirements, they are permitted to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and still receive a diploma. A student may return to the school to take the tests until age 21 or beyond if the school district is willing to accept the student. The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet the graduation requirements in North Carolina.

For the competency tests requirement, if a student has scores from the North Carolina grade 8 end-of-grade tests, then these scores must be used to determine whether the student has met the competency requirements. If a student does not have these scores, screening may occur. Screening refers to the process of using certain nationally normed assessments in lieu of a score on the North Carolina Competency Tests of Reading and Mathematics. If a student passes these tests, the student does not have to take the North Carolina Competency Tests of Reading and Mathematics. However, students are still required to take the Computer Skills test of Multiple Choice and Performance.

The following screening options for the North Carolina Competency Tests of Reading and Mathematics are available for students who transfer into North Carolina.

1. Scores from a standardized, nationally normed test, normed on a sample representative of the public school population in 1995 or later, may be used for competency screening. Scores from the 8th grade or later are preferred. If a 7th grade standardized test score is the only available score, it may be accepted for screening purposes. The cutoff scores for screening for these tests are:
  - a. Reading: at or above the 50th national percentile
  - b. Mathematics: at or above the 50th national percentile
2. PSAT or SAT scores may be used for competency screening. The cutoff scores are as follows:
  - a. Reading: at or above a verbal score of 40 on the PSAT or 400 on the SAT (48 on the PSAT or 480 on the re-centered scale)
  - b. Mathematics: at or above a mathematics score of 45 on the PSAT or 450 on the SAT (48 on the PSAT or 480 on the re-centered scale)

The state does not have a process for students to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam requirement. Students who do not receive a regular diploma can be awarded a certificate of achievement.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows accommodations for students with disabilities. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Special education students who are following the Occupational Course of Study (OCS) are not required to pass the competency test in order to graduate and receive a diploma. The OCS is one of four courses of study meeting the requirements for a North Carolina high school diploma. The OCS is designed to meet the needs of some students with disabilities who require a more functional curriculum. A student would not participate in the OCS unless the student's IEP team decides that the other three courses of study are inappropriate even with adaptations, modifications, and supplemental aids and services.

If the IEP team or Section 504 committee determines that a student with disabilities who is following the Career Preparation, College Technical Preparation, or College/University course of study will not participate in the administration of the North Carolina Competency Tests of Reading and Mathemat-

ics, the decision must be documented in the current IEP or Section 504 plan. If the decision is made not to participate in competency testing, students will not receive a high school diploma.

Students with disabilities must meet the computer skills standard by participating in:

1. The standard test administration
2. The standard test administration with accommodations as stated in the student's current IEP, Section 504 plan, or limited English proficiency documentation, or
3. The Computer Skills Portfolio Assessment Accommodation as stated in the student's current IEP or Section 504 plan. Students following the Occupational Course of Study must meet the standard stated in the student's current IEP, as declared in State Board of Education policy HSP-N-004.

There are no special diplomas or certificates for students with disabilities who cannot pass the high school exit exam. The North Carolina General Assembly in 2003 passed legislation for the state board of education to study the adoption or development of alternate means and standards for demonstrating reading and mathematics competency beginning in the 9th grade for students who have failed the competency tests at least two times.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows students identified as limited English proficient to use accommodations on the exams. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, substitute tests, or diplomas for English language learners who do not pass the exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the competency tests. North Carolina State Board of Education policy HSP-N-000 states the following about student remediation:

*Beginning with the graduating class of 1998, students who did not achieve grade-level proficiency in reading and mathematics at the end of the 8th grade will receive focused extended instructional opportunities which are different from and supplemental to regular high school course work and which are specifically designed to improve these students' performance to at least 8th-grade level proficiency.*

In school year 2003-04, approximately \$45 million was allocated for Improving Student Accountability and \$178 million was allocated for At-Risk Funds for grades 3-12. School systems may use part of these funds for student remediation. The Improving Student Accountability funds are allocated based on student/district performance. Fifty percent of the At-Risk Funds are allocated on a per pupil basis and the other 50% are allocated based on poverty.

The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the competency tests, including training in how to teach test-taking skills and training to familiarize teachers with the content of the competency test. The state has developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for the exams for students, including curriculum guides based on the exams, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests. In addition, the state provides instructional notebooks in reading and mathematics to assist teachers in providing focused remediation for students who need to meet the competency requirement to receive a high school diploma. The state has also developed an instructional notebook to assist teachers in providing focused remediation for students who need to meet the computer skills requirement to receive a high school diploma.

## Monitoring

The computer skills performance test in grade 8 is also part of the performance composite score of the state's ABC accountability program. Changes in the passing rates on the competency tests be-

tween grades 8 and 10 are part of the growth composite score of the ABC accountability program. The ABC of Public Education is North Carolina's school improvement program, which is designed to focus on accountability, the basics and high educational standards, and on maximum local control. This is to ensure that the state's accountability measures are as fair and accurate as possible. It became law in 1995 prior to NCLB, which provides an additional measure of school accountability. NCLB accountability measures are included in the state's ABC accountability report.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2001-02

Subgroups	Competency Tests of Reading and Mathematics*	Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance**
All Students	78%	80%
White	87%	88%
Black	66%	68%
Hispanic	52%	53%
Asian	77%	79%
Native American	66%	70%
English Language Learners/LEP	38%	30%
Students with disabilities	45%	49%
Multi-racial	78%	81%

\*Students at grade 9 during the 2001-02 school years

\*\*Students at grade 8 during the 2001-02 school years

### Cumulative Pass Rates in 2001-02

The cumulative passing rates for students who passed both the Competency Tests of Reading and Mathematics:

All students	94%
White	96%
Black	89%
Hispanic	89%
Asian	91%
Native American	92%
English language learners/LEP	55%
Free or reduced price lunch students	NA
Students with disabilities	57%
Multi-racial	93%

The cumulative passing rates for the Tests of Computer Skills Multiple-Choice and Performance are as follows:

All students	86%
White	92%
Black	77%
Hispanic	65%
Asian	86%
Native American	80%
English language learners/LEP	54%
Free or reduced price	

lunch students	NA
Students with disabilities	63%
Multi-racial	85%

The state determines cumulative pass rates by comparing the number of grade 12 students who have passed the tests with the total number of students enrolled in grade 12. This data includes all students who were tested on the competency and computer skills tests for 2001-02.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 study of high school exit exams, public universities and community colleges in North Carolina do not use the North Carolina High School Competency Test for admission decisions or scholarships. Information was not available as to whether these exams are used for college course placements. Students can enroll in public community colleges if they do not have a diploma. However, the public universities require students to have a diploma by the time they enroll.

State K-12 education officials and higher education officials have had discussions about linking the content of the competency tests to standards for what students need to know to enter college. The state board of education has discussed the development of a higher standard for a competency test or exit exam that would be more connected to a student's future plans, but no decision had been made at the time of the initial survey.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Ohio

**Test Name:** Ohio Graduation Tests  
**Subjects Tested:** Reading and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official purpose of the exam is laid out in the law authorizing the exam. It declares that “the state has an interest in guaranteeing that all students in public schools [including community schools or charter schools as they are often called in other states] and chartered nonpublic schools meet state curriculum requirements and pass all tests associated with graduation in order to earn an Ohio diploma. Students in non-chartered, nonpublic schools are not required to meet these requirements.”

## Historical and Policy Background

Ohio Revised Code Sections 3301.0710-0712, 3313.61, and 3313.611-615 authorize the use of the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGTs) as the state high school exit exam. The state is currently phasing out its old tests, the 9th grade proficiency tests in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. The first administration of the Ohio Graduation Tests in reading and math took place in 2004. However, the first administration that counts toward graduation will occur in March 2005. The 2005 results will count for determining adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in reading, writing and math, and results will count in all five areas in March 2006 for graduation purposes. Three tests will be added to the Ohio Graduation Tests in March 2005: writing, science, and social studies. The state board of education set performance standards in June 2004 for reading and math and is scheduled to set performance standards in June 2005 for writing, science, and social studies.

New legislation mandates that the lowest performing districts—those in academic watch and academic emergency, as well as districts with a three-year average graduation rate of less than 75%—must use practice tests aligned to the graduation tests in the fall with their 9th grade students. These districts must also provide interventions for students demonstrating unsatisfactory progress.

## Test Characteristics

The initial administration of the exam is in the spring of 10th grade, with options to retake the exam in the summer and every fall and spring until the end of 12th grade. The state considers the OGT to be a standards-based exam that is aligned with 10th grade standards. The state reports that the exams have undergone informal reviews by Achieve, Inc. that show the math test is aligned to state standards. Perhaps due to the recent implementation of the exam, formal studies to determine the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to the exit exams have not yet been conducted. The results of the review by Achieve, Inc. were not available.

The Ohio Graduation Tests were developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The exam currently tests reading and mathematics. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, and writing prompt/essay questions. Students are given up to 150 minutes to complete each test and can take only one test per day. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

The OGT results will first be used for purposes of the No Child Left Behind Act in the 2003-04 school year. The scores from students' initial testing will count toward determining adequate yearly progress



for NCLB. The science OGT, which is scheduled to become operational in March 2005, will be used to meet NCLB testing in science in high school. The state will use the same achievement level on the test both for awarding diplomas and for NCLB proficiency.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the exam. The performance levels for the OGTs are advanced, accelerated, proficient, basic, and limited. The passing scores for both the math and reading tests were adopted by the state board in June 2004.

<b>READING</b>	<b>Cut Score (Out of 48 points)</b>	<b>Percent of Total Points</b>
Limited	--	---
Basic	13.5	28%
Proficient	20.0	42%
Accelerated	31.5	66%
Advanced	39.0	81%

<b>MATHEMATICS</b>	<b>Cut Score (Out of 46 points)</b>	<b>Percent of Total Points</b>
Limited	---	---
Basic	13.5	29%
Proficient	19.0	41%
Accelerated	30.0	65%
Advanced	37.5	82%

The results will be reported to districts and schools two months after the administration of the exam. Results for the district and buildings are shared with the district test coordinator so that there is one point of contact for the results. Results will be reported to the public after each administration. Reports include information on whether the student passes or fails, as well as the subject area scores and subscores of skills and content under each major subject area. All test questions, with sample student responses, are released each year on the internet.

When students fail an exit exam, the district is required to provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements, optional remediation, future test dates, implications for course study, and a graduation checklist.

## Student Options

If students have not met the exit exam requirement but have met the other graduation requirements, they are permitted to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and still receive a diploma. Students can retake the tests until they receive a passing score. There are no limits on age or the number of times a student can retake an exam. The state currently does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Ohio. However, Ohio is working on this, so that OGT reciprocity agreements will be in place for the class of 2007, the first class of students required to pass the OGT. The state does not allow other tests to be substituted for the Ohio Graduation Tests, nor are alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive regular diplomas. However, the state has a waiver or appeals process.

This appeal currently exists for seniors required to pass the 9th grade proficiency tests and will be available for seniors required to pass the OGT. In particular, qualified students may have an oral administration of all tests except the writing test. To qualify, students must:

- Be second semester seniors who have taken and failed the graduation tests before;

- Have participated in intervention programs offered; and
- Be identified as limited English proficient or have at least a 2.5 grade point average out of 4.0 in the high school courses of the test(s) not yet passed.

The school submits the application for the student to have an oral administration, and the appeal for an oral administration is granted if these qualifications are met. The oral administrations in all tests except writing are for qualified second semester seniors who are still taking the graduation tests; the state will not have second semester seniors qualify for the oral administration for several years.

In addition, Section 3313.615 of the Ohio Revised Code provides an alternate way for students graduating after September 15, 2006 to meet the graduation tests requirements. Under this section, a student may meet the testing requirement if the student passes four of the five graduation tests and meets all of the following criteria:

- Missed the proficient score by ten points or less;
- Has a 97% attendance rate in each of the last four school years, excluding any excused absences;
- Has not been expelled from school in any of the last four school years;
- Has a grade point average of at least 2.5 out of 4.0 in the subject area of the test not yet passed;
- Has completed the high school curriculum requirements;
- Has taken advantage of any intervention programs provided by the district or school; and
- Holds letters recommending graduation from each of the student's high school teachers in the subject areas not yet passed and from the high school principal.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows accommodations for students with disabilities. Ohio does not have a list of all possible accommodations. The Ohio Administrative Code defines four criteria for allowable accommodations:

- The accommodation must be typically afforded the student for classroom and districtwide tests.
- The accommodation cannot change the content or structure of the test.
- The accommodation cannot change what the test is intended to measure.
- The accommodation cannot change or enhance the student's response.

Students with disabilities who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. The IEP of a student with disabilities will reflect the decision of the IEP team about whether the student may be excluded from the consequences of having to pass each of the graduation tests in order to earn an Ohio diploma. However, the state does not award alternative diplomas or certificates for students with disabilities who do not pass the Ohio Graduation Tests. The same appeal process that applies to all students applies for students with disabilities.

### English Language Learners

The state allows students identified as limited English proficient to have additional time of up to one full day for each test and to use dictionaries. Students who are identified as English limited (who have spent less than three years in U.S. schools and have scores below proficient in both the reading and writing domains of the English language proficiency tests) may have additional accommodations. LEP

students may have an oral translator in the test areas of math, science, and social studies.

For the March 2004 test administrations, students identified as English limited are eligible for additional accommodations:

- A standard audio recording in English of the OGTs in reading and math; or
- An oral translation of the reading and math tests for OGT (with an oral translator provided by the test contractors or provided by the district and paid for by the contractor). This March 2004 administration was in reading and math only; additional accommodations in the future for eligible students will include oral translations in science and social studies.

For reading tests, reading passages may not be translated or read aloud; students must read the reading passage on the reading test in English.

English language learners who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. However, there are no special certificates for ELLs who do not pass the high school exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the Ohio Graduation Tests. However, students are not required to attend the remediation programs. The state has set aside remediation funds that are allocated on a per pupil basis for 2004 and 2005. In fiscal year 2004, \$3.7 million was set aside for interventions for 9th graders, and in fiscal year 2005, \$5.9 million was set aside for interventions for 9th and 10th graders. Funds can be used for salaries, materials and training to provide services to students whose practice OGT scores suggest they would fail graduation tests. Funds can be used to provide after-school, in-school, Saturday, or summer school interventions for students in districts that were in academic emergency status in 2003 or 2004.

The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the OGTs, including training to familiarize teachers with the content of the OGTs and training in how to teach test-taking skills, how to interpret test results, and how to score open-ended items on the graduation practice tests.

New legislation calls for the appropriation of funds to support professional development for teachers in fiscal year 2004 on a per pupil basis to districts in academic emergency and in fiscal year 2005 on a per pupil basis to districts with a three-year average graduation rate of less than 75%. These funds will be used to provide five days of ongoing, embedded professional development for 9th grade and 10th grade classroom teachers in the five areas on the graduation tests. This professional development will focus on helping teachers to develop subject competency, cultural competency, skills for analyzing test data, and data-based intervention strategies to prepare students below grade level to pass the graduation tests.

The state has developed curriculum guides based on the exams, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests. However, no preparation and remediation programs and materials have been developed at this time for students.

## Monitoring

Section 13 of recent legislation, House Bill 3 (August 2003) and Senate Bill 2 charges the Ohio Legislative Office of Education Oversight with conducting a study of performance of the class of 2007

on the Ohio Graduation Tests. The study must look at the performance of all students who enter 9th grade beginning in July 1, 2003 and must not exclude from any analysis students who leave school prior to graduation. The study will determine the number of these students who attain proficient performance on all five areas of the OGT by June 30, 2007. The study will also determine, to the extent possible, the number of these students who satisfy the alternative conditions in section 3313.615 of the Revised Code for meeting the testing requirements to be eligible for a diploma. Written reports are to be issued to the Ohio General Assembly in June 2006 and June 2007, with the final report due no later than June 30, 2008.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Subgroups	Math	Reading
All Students	68.4%	78.6%
White	73.97%	82.51%
Black	38.07%	58.28%
Hispanic	49.59%	63.49%
Asian	83.69%	84.14%
Native American	70.53%	75.59%
Multi-racial	61.59%	74.64%

### Cumulative Pass Rates

Cumulative pass rates are not available, since the OGTs are not a graduation requirement until 2007.

### Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 study, public universities in Ohio have not yet made decisions about how they will use the Ohio Graduation Test scores, but some institutions report that they have begun such discussions. Most public universities require a diploma for admission, although one accepts students with a GED. One admissions director in a public university indicated that once the results of the tests are available, the institution may establish policies to do an alternative review process for admissions. The community colleges in Ohio use open enrollment and do not require a diploma (although in some cases, students must complete their GED by the time they graduate from the college); the community colleges do not plan on using the scores in their admissions processes.

The Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents continue to discuss issues surrounding high school exit skills and college entry-level skills.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# South Carolina<sup>1</sup>

**Test Name:** High School Assessment Program  
**Subjects Tested:** English language arts and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

According to the South Carolina State Board of Education, the official purpose of the High School Assessment Program is to measure student performance on state standards, identify areas in which students need additional support, and indicate the academic achievement for schools, districts, and the State.

## Historical and Policy Background

In 1998, the South Carolina legislature passed the South Carolina Education Accountability Act, and the High School Assessment Program (HSAP) has been developed to meet both the requirements of this law and the No Child Left Behind Act. South Carolina began administering the HSAP in 2004. Prior to the HSAP the state administered the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP), which was a minimum competency exam. The class of 2006 will be the first class required to pass the HSAP in order to graduate.

The state is phasing out the BSAP as it phases in the HSAP. Students who have previously taken the BSAP but not passed all tests, students who have not previously taken BSAP and have successfully completed the Carnegie Units specified by the local school board of trustees as necessary to be classified as an 11th to 12th grader, and students who were eligible to take BSAP in fall 2003 or earlier, but did not take it for some reason must continue to participate in BSAP administrations to receive a diploma.

## Test Characteristics

The High School Assessment Program is administered in April and October each year. The state reports that the HSAP is a standards-based exam that is based on the South Carolina curriculum standards. We were unable to find further information about which entities developed the exam and whether it has undergone internal or external review to determine its alignment to state standards or to curriculum and instruction.

The HSAP tests mathematics and English language arts. The test consists of multiple-choice, constructed response and extended response questions. The HSAP is not a timed exam. However, students must complete each exam by the end of the school day. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test, although the questions were not written to require a calculator. Students are also allowed to use a dictionary, thesaurus for extended response questions in the ELA section of the exam, and a reference sheet with formulas and graph paper on the math test.

## NCLB

The results of the HSAP are used to determine adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act in English language arts and math, starting in the fall 2004 school year. The state plans to develop a science exam in 2006. However, it is unclear if the science test will be required for graduation. We do not know if the state plans to use the same or different cut scores for graduation and NCLB purposes or which administration of the HSAP will count for NCLB purposes.

1 South Carolina was unable to respond to our survey this year. This profile is based upon publicly available information on the state department of education's website. Limited information about state testing policy was available online, which may be due to the fact that this is the first year that the new exit exam is being administered in the state.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the High School Assessment Program are Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4. Students must score Level 2 or higher on each test in order to pass. District scores are reported in the annual state report card. We were unable to find other information on scoring and reporting of the exit exams in South Carolina, such as when scores are reported to the students, parents, schools, and school districts; the level of detail on score reports; and whether students are provided with information to help them prepare for future administrations by the district.

## Student Options

Students have four opportunities to retake the exam by the end of 12th grade. The first retest option is in October of 11th grade. An administration of the exit exam may be available during the summer after the 12th-grade year for students who have met all other requirements for graduation and who were actively enrolled in school. Students who do not receive a regular high school diploma may also receive a state certificate indicating the number of credits earned and the grades completed

We were unable to find other information about waivers, appeals, substitute tests, reciprocity agreements with other states, allowances for taking the exam after the 12th grade, and other options that may be available to students in South Carolina.

## Special Populations

The state allows testing accommodations and modifications used in the typical classroom instruction for students with disabilities. However, the state or school district can limit the use of test scores if certain accommodations and modifications are included.

The IEP team can decide if a student with disability can participate in an alternate assessment after they determine that the student meets all of the following criteria:

1. The student demonstrates cognitive ability and adaptive skills that prevent completion of the state approved standards even with accommodations and modifications;
2. the student has current adaptive skills requiring extensive direct instruction in multiple settings to accomplish the application and transfer of skills necessary for functional application in school, work, home, and community environments;
3. the student is unable to apply or use academic skills in natural settings when instructed solely or primarily through school-based instruction; and
4. the student's inability to complete the state standards is not the result of excessive or extended absences or social, cultural and economic differences.

Students who meet all of these requirements and are age 15 as of September 1, 2003 are eligible to take the HSAP-Alt. We were unable to find further information about waivers, special certificates, or diplomas for students with disabilities.

English language learners are allowed to use testing accommodations that are approved by the state. It was unclear if ELLs who take the exam using accommodations still receive a regular diploma. We were unable to find further information about alternate routes, waivers, exemptions, substitute exams, special certificates or diplomas for English language learners.

## Support Policies

The state has distributed an information guide to students about the exit exam. Local school districts must also ensure:

1. That students who did not pass a particular part or parts of the exit examinations are provided academic assistance related to the part or parts not passed;
2. That students who have met all other requirements for graduation but have not passed the exit examination are advised that they may elect one of the following alternatives:
  - a. To accept in lieu of a state high school diploma, a state certificate indicating the number of credits earned and the grades completed;
  - b. To continue active enrollment in high school until the age of 21 or enrolled in an adult education program until he or she passes the exit examination; or
  - c. Accept a state certificate and acquire additional opportunities to pass the exit exam by enrolling in high school until age 21 in an adult education program.

We were unable to find any information about committed funding for remediation services from the state; professional development programs and state-developed materials for teachers related to the HSAP; preparation and remedial programs and materials for students; or diagnostic and formative assessments given prior to students taking the HSAP.

## Monitoring

The Center was unable to find information on whether the state has additional accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the test that are separate from the accountability measures in NCLB.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-takers

Since the exam was first given in spring 2004, initial pass rate information was not available.

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The class of 2006 will be the first required to pass the HSAP so cumulative pass rate data were not available.

## Higher Education

We were unable to find information about whether public colleges and universities in South Carolina use the HSAP for admissions, scholarship awards, or course placement.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information collected from the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Tennessee

**Test Name:** Gateway Examinations  
**Subjects Tested:** Algebra I, Biology I, and English II  
**Initial Grade Tested:** Varies  
**Test Type:** End-of-course

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The Tennessee Department of Education's website lays out the rationale for the variety of exit exams that the state has chosen. "Algebra I is a gateway subject, needed for future success in math and in the increasingly technical workplace." English II is included because "the ability to communicate is critical for future academic success and success in the workplace." For biology, "an understanding of science content and science reasoning is crucial for success in the workplace."

## Historical and Policy Background

On October 29, 1998, in compliance with TCA 49-1-608 and TCA 49-6-6001(a)(1), the Tennessee State Board of Education accepted the recommendation of the High School Testing Advisory Committee and designated 10 high school courses for the development of end-of-course examinations. The board's recommendation was subsequently affirmed by the Select Oversight Committee on Education of the General Assembly.

In the High School End-of-Course Tests Policy, the board stipulated that beginning with students entering the 9th grade in 2001-02, students must successfully pass examinations in three subjects: Algebra I, Biology I, and English II. These examinations later became known as the Gateway Examinations. The other seven areas to be tested are math foundations, geometry, Algebra II, physical science, chemistry, English I, and U.S. history. The state will begin to withhold diplomas for students who fail the Gateway exams in 2005.

The state is currently phasing out its previous test, the Tennessee Competency Test. There are no current plans to introduce new exams in the future. The state board of education is currently discussing alternate routes for earning a diploma under this testing system.

## Test Characteristics

Beginning in 2001-02, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) plans to administer the Gateway exams three times annually to accommodate students completing work in the fall, spring, and summer semesters. Tests will not be given other than at these scheduled times. The Gateway exams are administered in December, May, and July. Students can take the exams after finishing the course associated with the exam. Most students will take the tests in high school; however, students who take Algebra I in 7th or 8th grade may take the exams when they finish the course. These earlier administrations will count toward the graduation requirement.

The state considers the Gateway exams to be end-of-course exams that are aligned to 10th grade state standards. The exams were developed by a testing company specifically for the state. The state reported that the exit exam has been reviewed internally to determine whether it is aligned to state standards. All items for potential use in the Gateway exams are screened by a representative panel assembled by the TDOE before permission is granted to the vendor. The state is then provided detailed item mapping to state content objective and subskill for each item used in each operational



form of the Gateway.

The Gateway exam tests Algebra I, Biology I, and English II. The tests consist of multiple-choice questions, and they are not timed. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

Tennessee began using the results from the first time a student takes the graduation test to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002-03. The science test will also be used for NCLB purposes beginning in 2007-08. The state plans to use the same cut scores for NCLB proficiency that are used for awarding high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

The performance levels for the graduation exam are advanced, proficient, and below proficient. The tests are scored on a scale of 300 to 700 for mathematics and 300 to 725 for language and sciences. Students must achieve a scaled score of 495 in math, 453 in language, and 443 in science for proficiency. Students must score a 541 in math, 511 in language, and 525 in science to achieve at the advanced level. Scores are reported to districts, schools, students, and parents two days after testing occurs. The public receives scores on an annual basis in July. Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed and their subject area scores and subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area. The questions from the exit exams are not released.

When students fail an exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements and future test dates.

## Student Options

Students have three opportunities to retake sections of the exam before the end of 12th grade. Students can begin to retake the exams at the next administration. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and receive a diploma. There are no limits to the number of times or age at which students can take the exam.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exams to meet graduation requirements in Tennessee. The state does not allow students to earn a regular high school diploma by passing a substitute test. The state does not have a process for students who fail the exam to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam. However, students who do not receive a regular diploma are eligible to receive a certificate of attendance.

## Special Populations

Students with disabilities and English language learners are allowed to use accommodations during the exit exam. Students in these two subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests for students with disabilities or English language learners. However, there is a Special Education Diploma available for students with disabilities who do not receive a regular diploma. English language learners who do not receive a regular diploma are eligible for the certificate of attendance available to all students.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the Gateway exams, and students are required to attend these programs. The state has supported or

established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exams, including programs to train teachers in teaching test-taking skills and interpreting test results, to familiarize teachers with the content of the state high school exit exam, and to help teachers with curriculum development in reading. The state has developed curriculum guides based on the exam, lesson plans to prepare students for the tests, and information guides explaining the tests. School districts have been responsible for preparation and remediation programs and materials to help students with the exams. The state provides some teacher training specifically to assist special student populations with passing the exit exams.

## Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the Gateway exams.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2002-03

Subgroups	Algebra I	English II	Biology I
All students	75%	87%	95%
White	85%	90%	97%
Black	52%	78%	89%
Hispanic	71%	83%	92%
Asian	87%	90%	97%
Native American	76%	83%	90%
English language learners/LEP	60%	55%	81%
Free or reduced price lunch	61%	77%	90%
Students with disabilities	41%	43%	75%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The state indicated that cumulative pass rates will not be available until 2005 when the first graduating class of students is affected.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 high school exit exam study, public universities and community colleges in Tennessee do not use the Gateway exams for admissions or course placement. Students cannot be admitted to a public university or community if they do not receive a diploma.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Texas

**Test Name:** Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills

**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies

**Initial Grade Tested:** 11th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The Texas Education Agency's 2003-2007 Strategic Plan includes the following objectives: "All students in the Texas public education system will graduate from high school with a world-class education," and "The Texas Education Agency will provide the state's public education system with program leadership to ensure all students are challenged, perform at grade level or above, and demonstrate strong performance in reading and the foundation subjects of mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies."

## Historical and Policy Background

The Texas state assessment from 1990 to 2002 was the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). TAAS was administered for the first time in spring of the 10th grade year but is currently being phased out. In 1999, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 103, which mandated the development of a new state assessment program. This new program, called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), was administered for the first time in spring 2003. Students first take the TAKS in the spring of 11th grade. Although all 11th graders took the TAKS test in spring 2003, the assessment did not become a graduation requirement for 11th graders until the spring 2004 administration.

Two standards—met standard and commended performance—were established for TAKS through a year-long standard-setting process, which culminated in a series of standard-setting meetings. At these meetings, active Texas educators and other stakeholders who were representative of the state population followed a process and methodology to develop recommendations for the state board of education. In November 2002, the state board approved the standard-setting committees' recommendations but decided to phase-in the recommended standards over two years.

## Test Characteristics

The primary administration for the English/language arts exam is in February, and the primary administration for the mathematics, science, and social studies exams is in April. Retests are given in July, October, February, and April of the 12th grade year. The state considers the TAKS to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to the state-mandated curriculum. The test was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. Both the state and external reviewers have carefully evaluated the exam to ensure that it is a valid measure of the curriculum. Internal committees of subject area specialists at the state level and committees of Texas educators review all test items to ensure a close alignment between the state-mandated curriculum and the TAKS test. In addition, Achieve, Inc. provided an external review of the link between Texas's curriculum and the TAKS test.

TAKS exit-level tests include mathematics, English/language arts (an integrated reading/writing test), science, and social studies. For the TAKS, each subject area test is linked to specific high school courses. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, and writing prompt/essay questions. The TAKS is not timed. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test, and students must

have access to a graphing calculator to take the exam.

## NCLB

The exit exam will not count for determining adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees score TAKS open-ended questions and compositions. The performance levels for the TAKS are did not meet the standard, met standard, and commended performance. The scaled scores required to pass the subject area tests in 2002-03 through 2004-05 are shown in the table below. These scaled scores are converted from raw scores and represent the phase-in standards approved by the state board of education.

School Year	Mathematics	ELA	Social Studies	Science
2002-03	2015	2045	2033	2035
2003-04	2058	2072	2067	2068
2004-05	2100	2100	2100	2100

The scale score required to achieve commended performance is 2400 for each of the subject areas.

The results are reported to districts and schools approximately 14 working days after testing. Test results are subject to the Student Success Initiative, which requires results to be reported within 10 working days of receipt of the test materials by the test. Enacted by the 76th Texas Legislature (1999), the Student Success Initiative mandates new passing requirements. Districts are required to notify students and parents of the results within approximately eight working days after receiving them. Results are reported to the public after each administration, generally one to two weeks after districts have received the results. A confidential report of results is generated for each individual student, and summary reports are generated for campuses, districts, regions, and the state as a whole. Reports include information on whether the student passes or fails and the subject area scores and subscores of skills and content under each major subject area, and scores on individual test items. All tests, answer keys, and scoring guides are released every other year.

When students fail the exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help prepare them for future administration of the test. This information may include information about remedial requirements, future test dates, and implications for course taking. A comprehensive study guide is provided by the Texas Education Agency testing contractor free of charge to any student who fails one or more subject-area tests.

## Student Options

Students are first permitted to retake the exam during the summer following the 11th grade. If students meet all of the other requirements to graduate except passing the TAKS, they can retake the exam after the 12th grade. There are no limits on age or the number of times a student can retake an exam. The state currently does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other

states' exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Texas, but the Texas Education Agency is currently working with other states to develop reciprocity agreements. The state does not allow other tests to be substituted for the TAKS. There are no alternate diplomas or certificates available for general education students who do not receive regular diplomas. There are also no waiver or appeals processes in place.

## Special Populations

The state allows students with disabilities and limited English proficient students to use accommodations on the exams. Students in these two subgroups who pass the exit exam using accommodations receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities may also be exempted from the TAKS exit-level test by their admission, review, and dismissal committee. At the state level, there are no special diplomas or certificates for students with disabilities who do not pass the TAKS. For English language learners, there are no appeals or waiver processes or special certificates or diplomas for those who do not pass the high school exit exam.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the TAKS, although the state does not require students to attend remediation programs. For 2004, the state spent over \$1 billion on remediation for grades 3-11. Summer remediation study guides are provided to students who do not pass the TAKS tests administered in grades 3-11. The cost of the guides, \$2,442,986 in 2004, is not broken down by grade level.

In addition, a State Compensatory Education Fund of about \$1.1 billion per year provides funding to school districts to serve at-risk populations such as those who are at risk of dropping out of school. This includes those in exit-level grades, but these funds are distributed among all grade levels. One of the criteria for determining "at-risk" students is specified in the Texas Education Code as "did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student." Districts are required to provide "accelerated instruction" to those students and document the effectiveness of their programs in reducing dropouts.

The funds for the summer remediation study guides are not provided to the districts or students directly; rather, they are used by the state to develop the remediation guides, which are distributed to school districts to give to students who did not pass one or more subject area on the TAKS test. The purpose of these guides is to help students strengthen their skills in the subject area or areas in which they need assistance.

The state has supported programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the TAKS, including a Teacher Quality Grant program that supports efforts to improve teachers' content knowledge of the state curriculum and assessment standards. The state has developed information guides explaining the tests, computer-based programs, and study guides for students.

The Texas Education Agency is also developing individualized focused study guides. The individualized focus study guides, which will be distributed in August 2004, will offer an additional educational resource for exit-level students who did not pass the statewide assessments.

Most of the Education Service Centers throughout the state offer summer preparatory courses to provide additional instruction to students.

## Monitoring

Performance on the exit exam is part of the state accountability system. Accreditation sanctions are specified in state law for campuses and districts that are low performing and include actions such as hearings, annexation, appointment of a conservator or management team, or reconstitution.

### Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Subgroups	Math	English/ Language Arts	Science	Social Studies
All students	85%	87%	85%	97%
White	91%	92%	93%	99%
Black	73%	82%	74%	96%
Hispanic	78%	81%	75%	95%
Asian	95%	91%	93%	98%
Native American	88%	89%	88%	98%
Title I, Part A	79%	82%	77%	95%
Migrant	73%	73%	68%	92%
English language learners/LEP	59%	42%	47%	81%
Bilingual	77%	84%	81%	98%
ESL	58%	39%	46%	80%
Special education	55%	56%	57%	88%
Gifted/talented	99%	98%	99%	100%
At-risk	72%	77%	71%	94%
Career/technology education	84%	86%	84%	97%

Note: The table of the passing rates is for the administration of the TAKS assessments in 2004, which is the first year in which students are required to pass all four exit-level assessments to be eligible to graduate from high school.

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Cumulative pass rates are not available because the test was first given in 2003.

## Higher Education

Some community colleges and public universities use results from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for admissions and course placement decisions. The TAKS testing program is required by law to include a higher education readiness component (HERC) on the exit-level assessment. Beginning in spring 2004, performance on the grade 11 exit-level mathematics and English/language arts tests will be used to assess not only a student's level of academic preparation for graduation from a Texas public high school, but also the student's readiness to enroll in an institution of higher education. A student who meets the HERC score on the exit-level TAKS will be exempt from state-mandated testing requirements under the Texas Success Initiative.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board established the higher education readiness standards on the exit-level TAKS required of students to demonstrate college readiness. To be considered "college ready," students must achieve a score of 2200 on the English/language arts assessment with a writing subscore of at least three and a score of 2200 on the mathematics assessment.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.

# Utah

**Test Name:** Utah Basic Skills Competency Test  
**Subjects Tested:** Reading, writing, and mathematics  
**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th  
**Test Type:** Minimum competency

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The official state purpose of the exam is laid out in the authorizing law. The legislation states that the Utah Basic Skills Competency Test (UBSCT) is to be administered to Utah students beginning in 10th grade and must include, at a minimum, components on English, language arts, reading and mathematics. Utah students must satisfy the requirements of the UBSCT, in addition to state and district graduation requirements, before receiving a basic high school diploma.

## Historical and Policy Background

H.B. 133 (1999); H.B. 177 (2000); and Board Rules R277-705-10; R277-70504, 6, 7; R277-700-6E; and R277-473-3A(1) authorize the use of the Utah Basic Skills Competency Test as the state high school exit exam. The first operational test was administered in February 2004. The class of 2006 will be the first required to pass the UBSCT to receive a basic high school diploma.

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## Test Characteristics

The UBSCT exams are administered the first week in February and the third week in October every year. The state considers these exams to be minimum competency tests that are aligned to 6th through 9th grade standards. The exams were developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The tests have undergone review by the state and by an advisory committee.

The UBSCT tests reading, writing, and mathematics. The test consists of multiple-choice and writing prompt/essay questions. The tests are not timed. All students are permitted to use a calculator for part of the math test.

## NCLB

The state is not planning to use the UBSCT to meet the testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees and teachers grade the open-ended questions of the exam. The performance levels of the exam range from 1 to 4, with 1 signifying Minimal performance, 2 Partial, 3 Sufficient, and 4 Substantial. Students need to score a 3 or 4 to pass the exam. Scores are reported to districts, schools, students, parents, and the public three months after testing. Results are reported to the public after each administration of the exam. Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed and their subject area scores and subscores (skills or content) under each major subject area. Some questions are released each year on the internet.

If students fail an exit exam, the state or district must provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements, future test dates, and implications for course taking.

## Student Options

Students have four opportunities by the end of 12th grade to retake the UBSCT. Students can retake an exam at the next administration in October. If students have not met the exit exam requirement but have met the other graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exam after the 12th grade and receive a diploma through an adult education program.

The state permits transfer students to submit passing scores from other state exams to meet the graduation requirement in Utah. The UBSCT Advisory Committee reviews other state exams on a case-by-case basis to determine the rigor and alignment with Utah proficiency requirements. Students who fail the exit exam are not allowed to earn a basic high school diploma by passing a substitute exam. The state is currently considering the circumstances in which to grant waivers or appeals. The school principal or the student initiates the waiver or appeals process, and the Utah State Board of Education has the final authority to approve a request. Students who do not receive a basic diploma may receive an alternative completion diploma or a certificate of completion.

## Special Populations

The state allows students with disabilities and English language learners to use accommodations while testing. Students in these subgroups who pass the UBSCT exam using accommodations still receive a basic high school diploma. Board rules R277-705-4 and R277-705-5 allow the IEP team to determine whether a student with disabilities can participate in testing using the Utah Alternate Assessment. Students with disabilities may also receive a certificate of completion or a diploma, consistent with state and federal law and the student's IEP or section 504 plan. However, there are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests that allow English language learners to receive a basic high school diploma, outside of the alternatives allowed for all students. There are also no alternate certificates or diplomas for these students except the alternative completion diploma and the certificate of completion that is available to all students. However this certificate can be converted to a basic high school diploma at whatever point in time the individual achieves a passing score on all parts of the UBSCT, or satisfies the requirements through other acceptable means as specified in Utah State Board of Education rule.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remedial services for students who do not pass the high school exit exam. Remedial services are a local responsibility with implementation and requirement issues managed locally. The state has supported or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare students for the UBSCT, help teachers learn how to teach test-taking skills, train them in how to interpret test results, and familiarize them with the content of the UBSCT. The state has also developed curriculum guides based on the exams and information guides explaining the tests. The state has developed computer-based programs to help students prepare for remediation.

## Monitoring

There are no school and district accountability consequences and rewards linked to student performance on the exit exam.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2004

Math	67%
Reading	83%
Writing	72%



## Cumulative Pass Rates

In the February 2004 test administration, 61% of the students in the 10th grade class passed all three subjects.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 report on high school exit exams, public universities and community colleges in Utah have not yet determined whether or how they will use the Utah Basic Skills Competency Test scores in their decision-making processes. There have been discussions about these issues between state K-12 education and higher education officials, and higher education officials are represented on the UBSCT Advisory Committee.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.*

# Virginia

**Test Name:** Standards of Learning End of Course Exams

**Subjects Tested:** English: Writing, English: Reading, Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Biology, Earth Science, Chemistry, World History to 1500, World History from 1500 to the Present, U.S. History, and World Geography

**Initial Grade Tested:** Varies

**Test Type:** End-of-course

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

Students in Virginia are required to accrue a specified number of standard credits and verified credits to earn a standard or advanced studies diploma. To earn a verified credit the student must pass the class as well as the associated end-of-course Standards of Learning (SOL) test.

The Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia specify that a verified unit of credit for graduation “shall be based on a minimum of 140 clock hours of instruction, successful completion of the requirements of the course, and the achievement by the student of a passing score on the end-of-course SOL test for that course....”

The Standards of Quality in the Code of Virginia (§22.1-253.13:3) state in part that the state board of education should “provide, in the requirements for the verified units of credit stipulated for obtaining the standard or advanced studies diploma, that students completing elective classes into which the Standards of Learning for any required course have been integrated may take the relevant Standards of Learning test for the relevant required course and receive, upon achieving a satisfactory score on the specific Standards of Learning assessment, a verified unit of credit for such elective class that shall be deemed to satisfy the Board’s requirement for verified credit for the required course...”

In addition, the standards state: “The Board shall include in the student outcome measures which are required by the Standards for Accreditation, end-of-course or end-of-grade tests for various grade levels and classes, as determined by the Board, in accordance with the Standards of Learning. These Standards of Learning assessments shall include, but need not be limited to, end-of-course or end-of-grade tests for English, mathematics, science, and social studies.”

## Historical and Policy Background

The state began administering the Standards of Learning tests in 1998 for all students completing a course for which there was an end-of-course test. Diplomas are being withheld for the first time in 2004.

Prior to the SOL tests, the state administered the Literacy Passport Test, a minimum competency test, as a graduation requirement. This test is no longer being used, and there are currently no plans to use a different test other than the SOL tests in the future.

## Test Characteristics

The SOL tests are administered to students in summer, fall, and spring. The state considers the SOL exams to be end-of-course exams that are aligned to the content standards for the specific course. The exams were developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The state reports that

committees of Virginia educators have reviewed each exit exam to determine whether the items are aligned to state standards. These committees review all test items and the test forms to determine their match to the state content standards. Items are examined by committees before and after field testing, and test forms are reviewed for match to the test blueprint prior to test administration.

The SOL tests measure English: Writing, English: Reading, Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Biology, Earth Science, Chemistry, World History to 1500, World History from 1500 to the Present, U.S. History, and World Geography. Beginning with students entering the 9th grade in 2003-04, students must pass the two end-of-course English tests, one test each in mathematics, history, and science, and one test of their own choosing to earn a standard diploma. The tests consist of multiple-choice questions and a response to a writing prompt on the English: Writing test. None of the tests are timed. All students are allowed to use calculators on the math test.

## NCLB

Virginia began using the results from the first time a student takes the graduation tests in English, Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002-03. The Earth Science, Biology and Chemistry tests will also be used for NCLB purposes beginning in 2007-08. The state plans to use the same cut scores for NCLB proficiency that are used for awarding high school diplomas.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the SOL tests. The performance levels for the graduation exam are advanced, proficient, and fail/does not meet the standard. The tests are scored on a scale of 0-600, and students must achieve a scaled score of 400 in order to pass.

Once equating has occurred, electronic versions of results for students taking the paper version of the test are returned to school districts approximately two weeks after answer documents are received at the scoring contractor. Scores for students taking these tests online are available within 24 hours, again assuming that equating has occurred. School districts are responsible for distributing score reports to parents. School districts are also asked to review the individual scores and to make any necessary changes (such as corrections in demographic data). If changes are required, a "record change" request is submitted to the state department of education. Once any necessary record changes are made, the school division authorizes the scoring contractor to develop the school and district summaries. The state report is made public once all school division summaries have been run; this is usually about three months after the last school division has finished testing. State results are reported to the public annually after the main spring administration. School divisions that are on block schedules often report the results of the fall administration separately.

Students receive a score report indicating whether they have passed or failed, their subject area scores, their subscores (skills and content) under each major subject area, and their scores on individual test items. Student responses to the direct writing portion of the English: Writing test are provided on CDs to school divisions. If students fail an exit exam, the state or district is required to provide them with information to help prepare them for future administrations of the test, such as information about remediation requirements, optional remediation opportunities, future test dates, and implications for course taking.

## Student Options

Students have three opportunities each year to retake sections of the exam before the end of the 12th grade. In addition, students who fail an end-of course exam with a score of 375-399 may immediately retake the test using an alternate form without waiting for the next regularly scheduled administration. Students who fail the test with scores of 374 or below may take the test again at the next regularly scheduled administration. If students have not passed the exit exam but have met the other

graduation requirements, they are allowed to retake the exit exam after the 12th grade and receive a diploma. There are no limits to the number of times a student takes the exam as long as the student is still of school age: 20 for regular education students and 22 for special education students and limited English proficient students.

The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states' exams to meet graduation requirements in Virginia. The state allows students to earn a regular high school diploma by passing a substitute test, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests, the SAT II, TOEFL, APIEL, Cambridge International Examinations, ACT, and CLEP. In 2003, about 0.08% of students used alternate assessments in lieu of the SOL tests for graduation purposes. The state does not have a process for students who fail the exam to request a waiver or appeal the exit exam. However, students who do not receive a regular diploma are eligible to receive a certificate of completion or a GED.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

Students with disabilities are allowed to use accommodations during the exit exam. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests specifically for students with disabilities. However, students with disabilities may use the same substitute tests as regular education students. There is a Modified Standard Diploma for students with disabilities who do not meet the requirements for a standard or advanced diploma but meet the credit and the numeracy and literacy requirements established by the state board of education. These students can also receive a Special Diploma for students with disabilities who do not meet the requirement for other diplomas and who have completed the objectives in their IEP.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows English language learners to use accommodations while testing that are used routinely in classroom instruction and assessment. Students must take all of the tests in English; translations of the test into a different language are not permitted. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations will receive a regular high school diploma. There are no alternate routes, waivers, exclusions, and/or substitute tests for English language learners. There are also no special diplomas or certificates, other than those available to all students, for English language learners who do not receive a regular diploma.

## Support Policies

The state requires school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the SOL exams, although students are not required to attend remediation programs. For the 2003-04 school year, the state committed \$600,000 of targeted funding for remediation for seniors who failed the high school exit exam. The money was allocated as a \$75,000 grant to each of the eight Superintendent Regions in the state. Each region had to submit a grant proposal addressing how it would meet the needs of the students in its school divisions.

The state has supported or established specific professional development programs to help teachers administer and prepare for the state high school exit exams, including training teachers in teaching test-taking skills, training teachers how to interpret results, familiarizing teachers with the content of the state high school exit exam, and assisting them with additional instructional strategies based on resources developed through the department of education. The state has developed curriculum guides based on exams and lesson plans to prepare students for the tests. Practice tests with annotations for students' use are also available for teachers and students, as is an online tutorial for English: Reading. The state has also developed preparation and remediation programs and materials for students, such as after-school tutorials, weekend tutorial programs, computer-based programs, and summer school.

Continuation academies were scheduled to be offered in summer 2004 to provide students with remediation and give them additional opportunities to take the needed assessments.

A General Achievement Diploma (GAD) was established by the General Assembly that allows students who are at least 18 years of age with 20 standard units of credit to take (and pass) the GED to earn the GAD.

The Algebra Readiness Initiative provides funding for intervention programs for students who need additional instruction to be successful in Algebra I. The initiative includes access to a diagnostic test (ARDT) to be used to determine the areas of weakness for the student so appropriate intervention can occur.

The electronic Practice Assessment Tool (ePAT) is available for student use. This tool uses the released SOL assessments in English: Reading, English: Writing (multiple-choice), Algebra I, Geometry, and Grade 8 English: Reading in an online format for students to practice taking the tests before either their first administration or a retake. The tool provides feedback to the students through annotations that explain which answers are correct and incorrect. It is available on the Virginia Department of Education website and is free for all students and teachers to use.

## Monitoring

Schools may be recognized by the state board for high performance in accordance with procedures established by the Virginia Board of Education. Recognition may include public announcements recognizing individual schools, tangible rewards, waivers of certain state regulations, exemptions from certain reporting requirements, or other commendations deemed appropriate to recognize high achievement. Schools may also be eligible to receive the Governor's Award for outstanding improvements.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2002-03

Subgroups	Math	English	History	Science	Writing
All students	80%	92%	82%	81%	90%
White	85%	95%	87%	88%	93%
Black	65%	86%	67%	64%	82%
Hispanic	73%	88%	74%	67%	82%
Asian	89%	94%	89%	86%	92%
Native American	77%	92%	80%	78%	85%
English language learners/LEP	74%	79%	68%	55%	70%
Free or reduced price lunch	69%	86%	67%	65%	81%
Students with disabilities	51%	70%	55%	54%	57%

## Cumulative Pass Rates

Cumulative pass rates are not available.

## Higher Education

According to the Center's 2003 high school exit exam study, all public universities in Virginia use the SOL for admissions. Some public universities also use the SOL to make decisions about scholarships. Public community colleges in Virginia do not use the SOL for admissions. Students can be admitted into public community colleges without receiving a diploma from high school as long as they meet other entrance requirements.

# Washington

**Test Name:** Washington Assessment of Student Learning

**Subjects Tested:** English/language arts and mathematics

**Initial Grade Tested:** 10th

**Test Type:** Standards-based

## Stated Purpose of the Exam

The Certificate of Academic Achievement, based upon student achievement on the state exit exam, is “evidence that students have successfully met state standards in the content areas” of reading, writing, and math, and in 2010, science.

## Historical and Policy Background

The state of Washington is preparing to fully implement the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in reading, writing, and math. The state voted to no longer require the listening test and to add science in 2010.

In March 2004, the Third Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2195 (3ESHB) passed the legislature. It provides further legislation on the conditions for taking the WASL in order for students to receive a Certificate of Academic Achievement (CAA). The class of 2008 will be the first graduating class required to pass the WASL in order to receive a diploma. This legislation also set the exam retake policies and authorized the state to move ahead with its plan to design an additional assessment option for students who have the necessary skills but experience difficulty demonstrating those abilities on the WASL.

## Test Characteristics

Students will be required to take the exam in late April. The state considers the WASL to be a standards-based exam that is aligned to 10th grade standards. It was developed collaboratively by the state and a testing company. The math test has undergone review to determine its alignment to state standards by external reviewers at SRI International. The reading, writing, and science tests are currently undergoing a similar review, scheduled to be completed by November 2006. The state also commissioned a broad study of students’ opportunity to learn and exit exams in the state. The study covered the extent to which curriculum and instruction are aligned to exit exams. Copies of both studies were made available to the Center.

The WASL tests science, math, reading, and writing. The tests consist of multiple-choice, short-answer, writing prompt/essay questions, and extended/performance tasks. The tests are not timed. All students are allowed to use calculators on some parts of the math test.

## NCLB

The state is using the initial 10th grade administration of the WASL to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. All of the reading and math items will be used, but the writing test will not be used for NCLB purposes. The results of this exam were first used in the 2002-03 school year for NCLB purposes, and the science results will be included in 2010. The state’s accountability commission will decide in fall 2004 if the same passing score will be used for NCLB accountability and high school graduation.

## Scoring and Reporting

Testing company employees with college degrees grade the open-ended questions on the exam. The scales for test scores vary from year to year and subject to subject; however, students need a 400 in English/language arts and math and a raw score of 17 in writing to meet the standard. The performance levels for reading and math are levels I and II, which are “does not meet the standard”; level III, which is “meets the standard”; and level IV, which is “exceeds the standard.” There are only two levels in writing, “meets standard” and “does not meet standard.” The results will be reported to districts and schools two and one-half months after test administration and to students, parents, and the public three and one-half months after testing. Official results are reported to the public in late August. However, minor changes are made and the final results are posted on the public website after the official release. Reports will include information about whether the student passes or fails and the subject area scores and subscores of skills and content under each major subject area. Some of the test questions with sample student responses are posted on the internet and distributed to districts each year.

## Student Options

Once the CAA is required for graduation, students who do not meet the standard can retake the exam twice a year, starting in the summer following the first spring administration. The state legislature in 3ESHB 2195 has approved up to four retakes, and students may retake the test at their own expense after they exceed the statutory limits. If students have completed all other graduation requirements but have not passed the graduation test by the end of the 12th grade, they cannot retake it.

Schools are required to provide “student learning plans” for students who have not met the standard in one or more content areas; these plans must include actions the student and the school will take to meet standards and stay on track for graduation. Under 3ESHB 2195, the state must recommend alternative assessments, including a possible appeals process for students who have not met state standards on the WASL. Alternative assessments must have comparable rigor. However, in order for students to use an alternative means of testing or the appeals process, they must retake the WASL at least once. Specific details of the appeals process are still being worked out. The state does not permit transfer students to submit passing scores from other states’ exit exams to meet graduation requirements in Washington.

## Special Populations

### *Students with Disabilities*

The state allows accommodations for students with disabilities. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. Students with disabilities for whom the WASL is not appropriate have the option of using other assessments to demonstrate skills and abilities commensurate with their IEPs. Students with disabilities who use alternate assessments to demonstrate skills and abilities earn a “Certificate of Individual Achievement” and can still receive a regular high school diploma.

### *English Language Learners*

The state allows English language learners to use accommodations. Students in this subgroup who pass the exit exam using accommodations still receive a regular high school diploma. There are no exclusive special alternate routes, waivers, exclusions and/or substitute tests to allow these students to obtain a regular high school diploma outside of the options available to all students. There are no special certificates for ELLs who do not pass the WASL.

## Support Policies

Beginning in 2005, the state will require school districts to provide remediation services for students who do not pass the WASL, although students will not be required to attend remediation programs. The state has supported programs to train teachers how to interpret test results and familiarize teach-

ers with the content of the WASL, and has developed information guides explaining the tests. The state has also developed sample tests for students and releases some test items each year.

## Monitoring

Aside from NCLB accountability requirements, there are no accountability consequences or rewards for schools and districts linked to student performance on the exit exams. Criteria for recognition for noteworthy improvement in all grades and subjects are under construction.

## Pass Rates for First Time Test-Takers in 2003

Subgroups	Math	English/ Language Arts	Writing Composition	Science
All students	39.4%	60.0%	60.5%	31.8%
White	44.0%	65.1%	65.5%	36.3%
Black	14.2%	37.1%	39.3%	9.2%
Hispanic	16.2%	34.6%	34.3%	11.1%
Asian	46.8%	64.2%	66.1%	32.7%
Native American	21.9%	42.5%	41.1%	15.9%
English language learners/LEP	8.1%	11.7%	10.8%	2.8%
Title I*	24.1%	42.7%	44.6%	18.3%
Students with disabilities	4.0%	11.9%	11.6%	3.6%
Male	38.3%	52.4%	52.2%	32.6%
Female	40.7%	66.0%	69.3%	30.9%

\*Low-income students are defined not by free or reduced price lunch status but by Title I status.

## Cumulative Pass Rates

The cumulative pass rate in 2003 was 33.6% for all students. This is the percentage of students who passed all the sections of the exam. The rate does not reflect any retakes, since the exams are not yet required for graduation, and data were not available for subgroups of students.

## Higher Education

State and local K-12 and higher education officials, as well as faculty, have been working toward aligning K-12 standards with college readiness. The state legislature in 2004 passed legislation requiring K-12 and higher education to align K-12 standards with college readiness, particularly to decrease remediation rates of recent high school graduates at colleges and universities. The state has also had discussions with both four-year and community colleges about using the WASL as part of the recruitment and admissions process. Several studies have been conducted that found WASL results have about the same predictive power as college entrance exams like the SAT.

Source: Center on Education Policy, based on information verified by and collected from state assessment personnel and the state department of education website, July 2004.



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# Acknowledgments

The Center on Education Policy would like to acknowledge the following people for their work on this report: Keith Gayler, associate director of the Center, for coordinating, researching, and writing this report; Naomi Chudowsky, consultant to the Center, for researching and writing this report; Madlene Hamilton, research associate, for researching and writing the state profiles and the report; Nancy Kober, consultant to the Center, for editing the report; Margery Yeager, intern, for assisting in writing the report; Jack Jennings, director, and Diane Stark Rentner, deputy director, for providing advice on the content and format of the report; and Cutting Edge Design for designing the report.

We would like to thank Dr. Dawn E. (Sunny) Becker of the Human Resources Research Organization; Dr. Henry Braun of the Educational Testing Service; Dr. Thomas S. Dee of the Department of Economics at Swarthmore College; Dr. Laura Hamilton of the RAND Corporation; and Katherine A. (Kit) Viator of the Massachusetts Department of Education for their input and attendance at our March 2004 panel on student achievement. For their work on the study of high school exit exam costs in Indiana, Massachusetts, and Minnesota, we would like to thank Douglas Rose, John Myers, Justin Silverstein, and the members of our expert panels in the state. We are also grateful to Dr. David Conley, Dr. Sherman Dorn, and Dr. Kirk T. Schroder for reviewing and advising on this report. We would like to thank the members of our 2004 national steering committee for their assistance: Dr. Reg Allen, former director of assessment of the Minnesota Department of Education; Dr. David Conley, associate professor at the University of Oregon, director of the Center for Educational Policy Research, and director of Standards for Success; Matt Gandal, executive vice president of Achieve, Inc.; Dr. Lorraine McDonnell, professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara; and Dr. Kirk T. Schroder, former president of the Virginia Board of Education. Finally, we appreciate the considerable assistance we received from state personnel in the 25 states with exit exams, who answered our questions and verified that the state profile information was up-to-date and accurate. Without their assistance, time, and patience, this report would not have been possible.



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