CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY CEP

State High School Tests:
Exit Exams and Other Assessments

December 2010

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Shelby Dietz, CEP research associate. Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO, Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's national program director, and Nancy Kober, CEP consultant, provided advice and comments. Jennifer McMurrer, CEP research associate, assisted in developing the state survey and state profiles. Rebecca Barns, CEP consultant, edited the report and state profiles. CEP interns, Rebecca Johnson, Malini Roy, and Alexandra Usher, provided general assistance on the report.

CEP is deeply grateful to the state officials who provided invaluable information about policies in their states. We would like to thank the 28 states who responded to our state survey on exit exams, verified the information in the state profiles, and answered other questions about exit exam policies. CEP would also like to thank the state officials in the non-exit exam states that responded to surveys, e-mails, and phone calls from CEP and offered invaluable information about policies in their states. Without the assistance from these state officials, this report would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank the experts who reviewed a draft of this report and provided insightful comments and suggestions about its content: Dr. David Conley, professor and director, Center for Education Policy Research, University of Oregon; Dr. Sherman Dorn, professor, Social Foundations of Education, University of South Florida; and Dr. John Robert Warren, Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, University of Minnesota.

Finally, we are thankful for the general support funds from The George Gund Foundation and the Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation that made this report possible. The statements made and the views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of CEP.

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Executive Summary and Study Methods

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit organization, has been studying state high school exit examinations—tests students must pass to receive a high school diploma. This is CEP's ninth annual report on exit exams. The information in this report comes from several sources: our survey of states that have mandatory exit exams, surveys of states without exit exams, media reports, state Web sites, and personal correspondence with state education officials.

This report focuses on the impact of high school exit exams across the nation as well as new developments in high school exit exam policies that have occurred since our last report on this topic in 2009. This year's report also contains a new feature providing information on trends in state graduation requirements and assessment policies in states that do not require exit exams. Chapter 3 discusses these trends and how these policies compare to the states with exit exams. Unless otherwise noted, the data in this report refer to the 2009-10 school year.

The bulleted points that follow summarize CEP's major findings from this year's study.

Key Findings

Impact of High School Exit Exams

- **The number of states with exit exams increased from 26 states to 28 states, with the addition of Oregon and Rhode Island.**[1] CEP continues to monitor policy developments in two states with developing exit exam policies (Connecticut and Pennsylvania).

- **The percentage of all public school students enrolled in states administering exit exams has reached 74%.** Furthermore, 83% of the nation's population of students of color, 78% of low-income students, and 84% of English language learners were enrolled in public schools in states that administered exit exams in the 2009-10 school year.

- **Recent research concludes that high school exit exams may have a negative impact on certain student populations, such as low-performing students, student of color, or students from low-income families.** However, determining the relationship, if any, between high school exit exams and high school completion rates proves especially difficult due to a lack of consistent and reliable data on high school completion rates as well as the number of societal factors that affect these rates.

[1] In the 2009-10 school year, 25 states withheld high school diplomas based on exit exams. Three states required students to take the exams, but diplomas have not yet been withheld.

New Developments

- **The number of states currently administering end-of-course exit exams increased to 7 states.** An additional 10 states have future plans to implement end-of-course exit exams (see Figure 3).

- **23 of the 28 states with exit exams have adopted the Common Core State Standards in both English language arts and mathematics.** At least 13 states with exit exams reported in their state surveys that they would either realign their exams to the new standards or replace their exams with new assessments aligned to the new standards.

- **23 of the 28 states with exit exams have joined at least one of the two federally funded state consortia developing new assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and some have reported that the assessments could potentially replace their exit exams.** Six states with current exit exam policies are members of both state consortia.

- **Seven states reported that tightening education budgets at both the state and local levels impacted funding for programs related to high school exit exams.** These programs include remediation services, student scholarships, and extending testing to additional subjects.

- **States use varying calculation methods to determine initial and cumulative pass rates on high school exit exams.** This further complicates making state-to-state comparisons and drawing conclusions about exit exams from these pass rates.

Other Emerging Trends in States With and Without Exit Exams

- **End-of-course (EOC) exams are growing in popularity even in states that do not require exit exams for graduation.** At least five states without exit exam policies currently administer or plan to administer end-of-course exams for a variety of purposes. This is in addition to the 17 states with exit exams that tie end-of-course exams to graduation requirements.

- **States with and without high school exit exams are moving toward policies that require students to take college entrance exams.** At least eight states without exit exams require students to take the ACT, SAT, or Work Keys college entrance exams. In addition, three states with exit exams will soon require students to also take a college entrance exam.

- **States with and without exit exam policies already use or are considering adopting portfolio-based assessments or senior projects as part of the state high school testing system.** At least three states that do not have exit exam policies use samples of student work for assessment purposes.

Study Methods

As in previous years of this study, CEP designed and conducted an annual survey of state department of education officials in the states with current or planned exit exams. The survey was piloted with Maryland and Nevada. We further revised the survey based on comments and suggestions from those states. Chief state school officers designated survey respondents, who most often were state assessment officials. CEP staff pre-filled the survey based on information collected and reported in 2009 and 2010. In July 2010, we asked these designated officials to verify, update, and add information to survey forms for their state. All 28 states administering exit exams responded to our survey.

We used the states' survey responses to develop detailed profiles about exit exams in each of the 28 states, which the state contacts reviewed for accuracy. We also used the survey responses to analyze trends in state exam features, policies, and actions that appear throughout each chapter of this report. The state profiles are available on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

Some states did not answer all the survey questions, often because the data were unavailable or their policies were in flux. In many states, we followed up with e-mails and phone calls to ensure the information in this report was accurate and up-to-date. However, some statistics or policies will undoubtedly have changed soon after publication because events in this field move quickly.

In addition, we collected state and federal policy documents and reviewed relevant studies that were either published or produced during the past year. We tracked media coverage of exit exams and searched state and U.S. Department of Education Web sites for exit exam developments and information.

In order to research policies in states without exit exams, CEP initially sent invitation letters to the chief state school officers in those 22 states, inviting these states to participate in our study. The invitation letter included a faxback form that allowed each of the 22 states to agree to participate in the study, as well as explain why they felt their state should or should not be considered an "exit exam state" according to CEP's definition (see **Box 1**). Ten states replied and provided a brief, open-ended explanation of their state graduation and assessment policies.

CEP then constructed a short survey based on the trends we noticed in the initial state responses. Ten states returned surveys (some of which did not return our original invitation) with more detailed information about their state policies. In total, CEP received direct feedback from state department of education personnel in 16 of the 22 states without exit exam policies.

To supplement information received from state department of education personnel and to better understand policies in states that did not respond, we also collected state and federal policy documents and tracked media coverage of policy changes in these states. The information collected from our research was analyzed alongside the results of our state surveys in the 28 states with exit exam policies. The state profiles of states with exit exam policies are available on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

Box 1 **CEP's Criteria for Identifying States with High School Exit Exams**

States that require students to pass, not just take, state exit exams 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 school districts to pass exit exams, rather than allowing districts to decide for themselves whether to make the exams a condition of graduation.

Chapter 1: Impact of High School Exit Exams

Introduction

For decades, states have used educational assessments to identify weaknesses in the educational system as well as to implement educational reform. State governments have a limited number of policy levers through which they can impose education reform, especially for high schools. As a result, an increasing number of state policymakers in recent years are attaching high stakes to state developed and administered assessments in an attempt to increase student achievement.

One form of high-stakes assessment, high school exit exams, has become the policy lever of choice for an increasing number of states. Proponents of high school exit exams argue the exams can increase student performance through both internal and external influences. Some proponents feel high school exit exams internally influence student achievement because they provide an incentive for students to study when diplomas are withheld based on student performance on these exams (Jacob, 2001). Externally, exit exams may influence student achievement by shaping the classroom curriculum or pedagogy or impacting the level of teacher effort. Opponents of these exams fear they narrow the scope of the curriculum and/or increase dropout rates, particularly for typically under-served student populations.

This chapter summarizes the continued impact of exit exam policies across the country according to the information collected in this year's study. We also discuss academic research that attempts to determine if and how high school exit exams impact high school completion rates.

Key Findings

- **The number of states with exit exams increased from 26 states to 28 states, with the addition of Oregon and Rhode Island.**[2] CEP continues to monitor policy developments in two states with developing exit exam policies (Connecticut and Pennsylvania).

- **The percentage of all public school students enrolled in states administering exit exams has reached 74%.** Furthermore, 83% of the nation's population of students of color, 78% of low-income students, and 84% of English language learners were enrolled in public schools in states that administered exit exams in the 2009-10 school year.

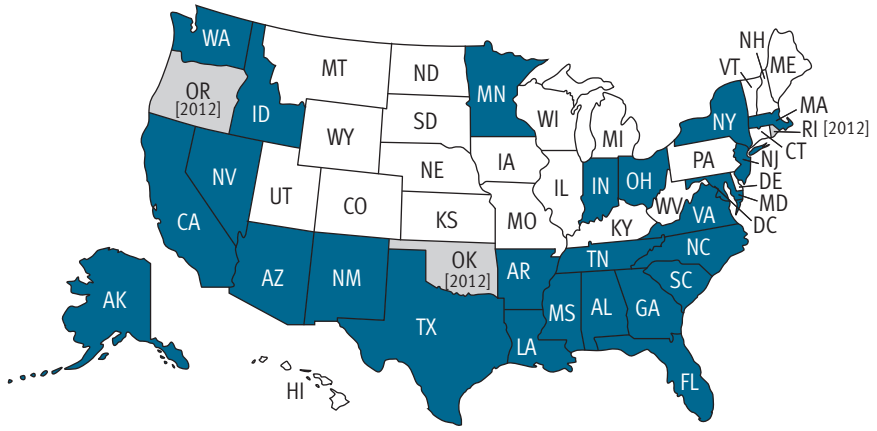
[2] In the 2009-10 school year, 25 states withheld high school diplomas based on exit exams. Three states required students to take the exams, but diplomas have not yet been withheld.

➤ **Recent research concludes that high school exit exams may have a negative impact on certain student populations, such as low-performing students, students of color, and students from low-income families.** However, determining the relationship, if any, between high school exit exams and high school completion rates proves especially difficult due to a lack of consistent and reliable data on high school completion rates as well as the number of societal factors that affect them.

Number of States with Mandatory Exit Exams Increased

CEP's 2009 study on exit exams reported that 26 states had mandatory exit exams or were phasing in exit exam policies by 2012. In the 2009-10 school year, the number of states with exit exam policies increased by two states with the addition of Oregon and Rhode Island. **Table 1** summarizes the major characteristics of exit exams in these 28 states. CEP continues to monitor two additional states (Connecticut and Pennsylvania) with similar policies to the 28 exit exam states. Connecticut plans to implement exit exam policies beginning in the 2013-14 school year for the graduating class of 2018, and Pennsylvania finalized graduation requirements for the Keystone exams in January of 2010. Descriptions of policies in Oregon and Rhode Island as well as Connecticut and Pennsylvania are discussed in further detail below. **Figure 1** shows states with exit exams and those implementing exit exams by 2012.

Figure 1 **States Administering Exit Exams in 2009-10**



States with mandatory exit exit exams in 2010:

AL, AK, AR, AZ, CA, FL, GA, ID, IN, LA, MA, MD, MN, MS, NC,[1] NJ, NV, NM, NY, OH, SC, TN,[2] TX, VA, WA

States phasing in exit exams by 2018 but not yet withholding diplomas [year withholding diplomas]:

OK [2012], OR [2012], RI [2012]

States with no mandatory exit exam:

CO, CT, DE, DC, HI, IL, IA, KS, KY, ME, MI, MO, MT, NE, NH, ND, PA, SD, UT, VT, WV, WI, WY

[1] NC will no longer withhold diplomas based on exit exam requirements beginning with the graduating class of 2011

[2] TN will no longer withhold diplomas based on exit exam requirements beginning with the graduating class of 2012

Table 1 **Major Characteristics of State Exit Exams 2009-10**

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Alabama	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 3rd Edition[1]	2001	Reading, language, math, biology, social studies	Comprehensive	11th	10th	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 1st and 2nd Editions
Alaska	Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE)	2004	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	8th–10th	10th	None
Arizona	Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)	2006	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	10th	10th	None
Arkansas	Arkansas Comprehensive Assessment Program	2010	Algebra I English II (2013–14)	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	None
California	California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)	2006	ELA, math	Comprehensive	ELA (through 10th), math (6th–7th and Algebra I)	10th	None
Florida	Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)[1]	2003	Reading and math	Comprehensive	10th	10th	High School Competency Test (HSCT)
Georgia	Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) and Georgia High School Graduation Writing Test (GHSWT)	1994	ELA, writing, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	9th-11th	11th	Basic Skills Test
Idaho	Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)	2006	Reading, language usage, and math	Comprehensive	10th	10th	None

continues ➤

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Indiana	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)	2000	ELA, math	Comprehensive	9th, including pre-algebra and Algebra I	10th	
	End-of-Course Assessments (ECAs)[1]	2012	Algebra I, English 10	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)
Louisiana	Graduation Exit Examination (GEE)	2003	ELA, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	9th–12th	10th	
	End-of-Course Exams[1]	2014	Algebra I, English II, Geometry, Biology, English III, and American history	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	Graduation Exit Exam
Maryland	Maryland High School Assessment (HSA)	2009	English 2, algebra/data analysis, biology, government	End-of-course	10th	Varies	Maryland Functional Tests
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)	2003	ELA, math, science and technology/ engineering (STE)	Comprehensive plus end-of-course exams in science (2010)	10th/high school standards	10th; 9th or 10th for science	None
Minnesota	Graduation Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD)	2010	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	High School Standards	Writing–9th Reading–10th Math–11th	Basic Skills Test (BST)
Mississippi	Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)	2006	English II (with writing component), Algebra I, Biology I, U.S. history from 1877	End-of-course	Aligned to course content	Varies	Functional Literacy Examination (FLE)

continues ➤

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Nevada	High School Proficiency Examination (HSPE)	2003	Reading, writing, math, science	Comprehensive	9th–12th	10th, writing in 11th	High School Proficiency Examination (earlier version based on 1994 curriculum)
New Jersey	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)	2003	Language arts literacy, math; end-of-course exam in biology (2011)	Comprehensive plus one end-of-course in biology (2011)	11th	11th	High School Proficiency Test
New Mexico	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)	1990	Reading, language arts, written composition, math, science, social studies	Minimum competency	8th	10th	
	Grade 11 Standards Based Assessment/ High School Graduation Assessment (SBA/HSGA)[1]	2012	Reading, writing, math, science, social studies	Minimum competency	Content and performance standards in grade 9–12	11th	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)
New York	Regents Examinations	2000	ELA, math, science, global history and geography, U.S. history and government	End-of-course	9th–12th	Varies	Regents Competency Tests
North Carolina[2]	North Carolina Competency End-of Course Exams	2010 Policy eliminated beginning with the class of 2011	Algebra I, English I, U.S. history, civics and economics, and biology	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	North Carolina Competency Test and Tests of Computer Skills
Ohio	Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT)	2007	Reading, writing, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	10th	10th	9th Grade Proficiency Tests

continues ➤

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Oklahoma	Oklahoma End-of-Instruction (EOI) Exams	2012	Algebra I, English II, and two of the five additional subjects (Algebra II, geometry, English III, Biology I, and U.S. history)	End-of-course	High school standards	Varies	None
Oregon	Oregon State Assessment System (OSAS) (Multiple assessment options available to students)	2012	Reading (2012), reading and writing (2013), and reading, writing and mathematics (2014). The remaining Essential Skills will be phased-in over subsequent years, with the timeline to be determined.	Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS)–comprehensive exam; other approved standardized tests (PSAT, SAT, ACT, PLAN, Work Keys, Compass, or ASSET); and samples of student work.	Varies	Varies	None
Rhode Island	New England Common Assessments Program (NCAP)	2012	Reading, math	Comprehensive	9th-10th	11th	None
South Carolina	High School Assessment Program (HSAP)	2006	ELA, math, science (beginning in 2010)	Comprehensive, End-of-course in science	Through 10th	10th	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)
Tennessee[3]	Gateway Examinations	2005	English I, II, III, Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, Biology I, chemistry, physics, and U.S. history	End-of-course	10th	Varies	Tennessee Competency Test

continues ➤

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Texas	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)[1]	2005	ELA (reading/ writing), math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	Aligned to course content	11th	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
Virginia	Standards of Learning (SOL)	2004	English (reading/ writing), Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, biology, earth science, chemistry, world history to 1500, world history from 1500 to present, Virginia and U.S. history, world geography	End-of-course	Aligned to course content	Varies	Literacy Passport Test
Washington	High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE)	2011	Reading, writing, math, science	Comprehensive	10th	10th	Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)[1]

Table reads: Alabama administered the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE), 3rd Edition in 2009-10, for which consequences began for the class of 2001. The exam assesses reading, language, math, biology, and social studies, and is considered by the state to be a comprehensive, standards-based exam aligned to 11th grade standards. The exam is first adminstered in the 10th grade. The current test replaces the Alabama High School Graduation Exam, 1st and 2nd Editions.

Note: ELA = English language arts

Source: Center on Education Policy, exit exam survey of state departments of education, August 2010

[1] Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington will transition to new exams. See state profiles, available on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org for detailed information.

[2] North Carolina's exit exam policy will sunset with the graduating class of 2011. Students will still be required to take end-of-course exams that count for 25% of the student's course grade. Please see North Carolina's state profile available on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org for detailed information.

[3] Tennessee's Gateway Examinations will sunset with the graduating class of 2012 and will be replaced by end-of-course exams. The new end-of-course exams do not fit CEP's definition of exit exams at this time. Please see Tennessee's state profile available on CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org for detailed information.

Two New States With Exit Exams

Oregon

As of January 2007, the Oregon State Board of Education requires students to demonstrate a state-determined level of proficiency in the Essential Skills of reading, writing, and math. Oregon requires high school students to take the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) by grade 11 or their 3rd year in high school. Students may satisfy a graduation requirement by meeting the state-determined minimum performance level on the OAKS exam. Similar to alternate pathways offered in other states, students in Oregon may meet the graduation requirement in other ways. Students may choose to provide samples of their work scored by trained teachers or substitute scores from another state-approved assessment such as the SAT, PSAT, ACT, Work Keys, or Compass.

Oregon meets CEP's criteria for a state with mandated high school exit exams because although local school districts have the freedom to choose which assessments are available to students in addition to the OAKS exam, the state determines which assessments local districts can choose from and determines minimum cut scores for each assessment. As in Maryland, which allows substitution of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exam scores, Oregon does not require students to first take and fail the OAKS exam before these alternative assessment scores can be used for the graduation requirement. Oregon began phasing in the new graduation requirements beginning in 2008 for the graduating class of 2012. The Essential Skills will be phased in as follows:

- Class of 2012: Read and comprehend a variety of text
- Class of 2013: Write clearly and accurately
- Class of 2014: Apply mathematics in a variety of settings

Rhode Island

In 2008, the Board of Regents in Rhode Island established new regulations for high school diplomas. Beginning with the graduating class of 2012, Rhode Island will require students to meet a minimum performance standard on a state assessment in order to receive a high school diploma. Students must also complete at least two of the following additional performance-based diploma assessments: graduation portfolios, exhibitions, comprehensive course assessments, or some combination thereof. A student's performance on the statewide assessment will account for one third of a student's total assessment of proficiency for graduation in English language arts and mathematics for 2012. As in other states with exit exams, Rhode Island will provide students who fail the state assessment with alternate pathways to show evidence of proficiency. The Board of Regents will establish the manner and format of these alternate pathways and will seek approval from the state commissioner at a later date.

CEP Continues to Monitor Developing Policies in Two States

Connecticut

Connecticut will require end-of-year examinations in Algebra I, geometry, biology, American history, and 10th grade English beginning with the graduating class of 2018. Connecticut does not yet meet CEP's criteria for an exit exam state because the state department of education has not determined if it will require students to meet a specific performance level on the exams or if the exams will count for a portion of the student's final grade in each course.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania began calling for new graduation requirements in 2006. In 2008 the state board of education responded by planning to require students to demonstrate proficiency through a number of assessments. On January 8, 2010, the state board of education published new regulations for graduation requirements, which will begin with the graduating class of 2015. Local school districts will choose any or a combination of the following options for their students:

- Option 1—Demonstrate proficiency in core subjects by passing Keystone final exams that will count for one-third of the final course grade. Core subjects will include English composition, literature, Algebra I, and biology. In 2017, the requirements under this option will expand to include two English courses (composition and literature), two math courses (Algebra I, Algebra II, or geometry), one science course (biology or chemistry), and one social studies course (civics, American history, or world history).
- Option 2—Demonstrate proficiency by passing local assessments that have been independently validated. The state will share validation costs with local districts.
- Option 3—Demonstrate proficiency by passing rigorous national assessments, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams.

Pennsylvania does not currently meet CEP's criteria for a state with mandated high school exit exams because the policy allows local school districts to develop their own assessments. According to a state board of education decision in September 2010, local school districts may also determine whether scores on the Keystone exams will count for a third of the student's final grade in the respective course or if a student will simply need to meet a minimum level of proficiency on the exams.

States Consider Changing Exit Exam Policies

In four states (Alaska, North Carolina, Ohio, and Tennessee) legislation was proposed that would either eliminate or significantly alter exit exam requirements.

Alaska

In Alaska, S.B.109, a bill to remove the High School Graduation Qualifying Examination (HSGQE) as a graduation requirement by July 1, 2011, was proposed to the state legislature. However, S.B.109 did not pass both houses of the legislature, and as of press time for this study the exam remains a graduation requirement.

Ohio

In Ohio, Governor Ted Strickland proposed replacing the Ohio Graduation Test with a three part assessment system to include a nationally standardized assessment, a series of end-of-course exams, and a senior project. The proposal suggests using the ACT college entrance exam as the nationally standardized exam; however, it has yet to be determined if a national exam such as the ACT would be sufficiently aligned to Ohio's academic content standards to comply with NCLB (No Child Left Behind) or if an exam of this sort would need to be adapted.

The new high school exit policies will not go into effect until the 2014-15 school year. Ohio is also presently a member of both state consortia to develop new common state assessments (see chapter 2). Both consortia plan for operational assessments by 2014-15, and Ohio will determine how the work of these consortia may impact the requirements in Governor Strickland's proposal at that time.

North Carolina

The State Board of Education in North Carolina decided in October 2010 to eliminate the requirement that all students must pass end-of-course exams in order to graduate. The exams were part of high school exit standards referred to as Gateway policies. Students will still be required to take the exams, and the exams will still be used for accountability purposes. Students' scores will continue to count as 25% of the student's final grade in the course. Local school districts have the option to require that their students pass the end-of-course exams in order to graduate. The state determined that this change will go into effect for the 2010-11 school year.

Tennessee

Tennessee will replace the high school exit exam known as the Gateway Exam with 10 end-of-course exams. Similar to the policy in North Carolina, instead of a passing requirement, the exams will count for 25% of the student's final grade in each course. The new end-of-course exam requirements began with students entering the 9th grade in the 2009-10 school year and will be fully implemented by the 2011-12 school year. Because Tennessee will continue to withhold diplomas until 2012, Tennessee is still currently part of CEP's study.

Number of Students Impacted Increases

In the 2009-10 school year, states administering exit exams enrolled 74% of the nation's students and 83% of students of color. Additionally, 78% of the nation's low-income students and 84% of the nation's students who are English language learners (ELL) attended public school in states with high school exit exams (see **Table 2**). In previous reports, CEP reported only the numbers and percentages of high school students impacted by exit exams, rather than all students enrolled in exit exam states. However, some states have been withholding diplomas based on exit exams for up to 20 years. It is now apparent that these policies no longer impact only current high school students, but rather all public school students in these states.

Table 2 **Percentage of Public School Students Enrolled in States Administering Exit Exams in 2009-10**

	Enrollment of Students in Exit Exam States (28)	Percentage of Nation's Students in Exit Exam States
All Students	36,461,607	74.01%
White	17,751,737	66.42%
Latino	9,070,274	86.74%
African American	6,541,841	79.25%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1,930,710	79.68%
American Indian/ Native Alaskan	463,991	79.20%
All Students of Color	18,006,816	82.90%
Free/Reduced Lunch	16,684,805	77.60%
ELL	3,674,713	84.42%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2008-09 enrollment data

Exit Exams and High School Completion Rates

Research Challenges

A number of factors affect graduation rates in each state, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of exit exam policies on graduation rates. The two biggest challenges to research in this area are the lack of consistent and reliable data on high school completion rates and differentiating between the affects of high school exit exams and other factors that impact graduation rates. For example, societal factors, such as unemployment rates, and state policy decisions outside of exit exams, such as per pupil expenditures, pupil-teacher ratios, and changes in the number and content of courses required for graduation, may all impact high school completion rates.

Characteristics of student populations also vary a great deal from state to state. As previously mentioned, states that administer exit exams enroll 83% of the nation's students of color and 78% of the nation's students from low-income families. Both of these populations typically graduate high school at lower rates than their peers.

Academic Research Using a Variety of Student Data

Researchers have attempted to control for these outside influences in order to better understand how implementing exit exams impacts high school completion rates. Some of these researchers have found no relationship between exit exam policies and graduation rates. For example, Greene and Winters (2004) analyzed high school completion rates in 18 states they identified as administering exit exams to graduating classes from 1991 to 2001. They used two different calculation methods to calculate graduation rates in these states before and after implementation of an exit exam. The first method, developed by Greene, estimates the number of high school graduates in a given year by dividing the number of completers that year by the estimated number of ninth graders four years earlier, making certain adjustments for population changes. Through their analysis they determined that implementing a high school exit exam had no significant impact on a state's graduation rate.

However, other researchers, such as Amrein and Berliner (2002) used similar methods and similar data to estimate high school completion rates and found conflicting results. Amrein and Berliner found evidence that exit exams were associated with increased dropout rates, decreased completion rates, and increased enrollments in GED programs. Robert Warren, Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Minnesota, says Greene's method of calculating high school completion rates may be biased by not accounting for students migrating from state to state and those retained in the 9th grade (Warren, Jenkins & Kulick, 2006).

Researchers have used additional data sources to evaluate the relationship between exit exams and high school completion rates, such as the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS-99), which includes detailed longitudinal information about a large sampling of 8th grade students in 1988, Current Population Surveys (CPS), U.S. Census data, the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core Data (CCD), and GED test-taking rates as reported by the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education. Many of the above data sources have been used by researchers in studies that have found limited to no relationships between high school exit exams and completion rates, except possibly for low-performing students.

However, each of these data sources comes with a unique set of limitations. For example, NELS-99 does not contain data for cohorts of students after the graduating class of 1992. Dr. Robert Warren points out that many high school exit exams did not exist in states prior to 1992, and those exams that did exist may have become increasingly more difficult. Other data sources, such as the CCD, rely on annual state-reported enrollments and completion counts. We discuss limitations associated with using state-reported completion rates, as supported by CEP survey results, later in this chapter.

In an attempt to account for the weaknesses of the available data sets, Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2006) use three different measures of high school completion. First, they use Current Population Survey data that report the number of 16- to 19-year-olds in each state not enrolled in school and who have not obtained a diploma or GED. Second, they used a measure developed by Warren that estimates high school completion rates. Warren's measurement is similar to other estimates based on 9th grade enrollments according to the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core Data, except that he attempts to minimize bias created by interstate migration of students. Finally, Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick calculate the percentage of 16- to 19-year-olds in each state that took the GED exam in each year of their study, based on data from the GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education.

Through the combination of these data sets, Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2006) found evidence that associates high school exit exams with lower rates of high school completion and higher rates of GED test-taking. They also concluded that completion rates in states with "more difficult" exit exams, or those that assess course content found in the 9th grade and beyond, were lower than in those with "less difficult" exams. Furthermore, the negative relationship between high school exit exams and completion rates was more pronounced in states with higher poverty rates or higher percentages of racial minority enrollments.

Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick note the limitations of their research, specifically the remaining weaknesses in the data used and their inability to address why exit exams appear to limit high school completion for certain students.

Academic Research on State and Local Levels

Reliable and consistent sources of data on a national level in this area are simply hard to come by. Detailed state-level longitudinal data systems may contain more reliable data. Research focused on a state or local level allows researchers to specifically account for variables such as changes in state policy and characteristics of the student population. Findings from research at the state or local level may not be generalizable to the nation as a whole, but may still allow states and local school districts to better understand how these policies affect their students.

California's CAHSEE and Graduation Rates

Reardon, Atteberry, and Arshan (2009) studied the effects of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in four large urban school districts by analyzing longitudinal data for students scheduled to graduate before and after the CAHSEE became a graduation requirement. They found that the exam requirement had a largely negative impact on low-performing students. This finding supports the argument that because exit exams often assess less-than-advanced skills and learning standards, they tend to affect lower-performing students more than average or high-performing students (Jacob, 2001). Reardon et al. reported that the CAHSEE had a negative impact on minority students and girls and showed no positive effects for students as a whole.

California, one of the only states that funds an annual independent review of its high school exit exam, contracts with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) to conduct an annual independent evaluation of the CAHSEE. Similar to Reardon et al., HumRRO has also found that low-income students and students of color continue to experience more difficulty passing this exam than their peers. The HumRRO (2010) evaluation, however, provides a more detailed analysis of how the exit exam in California impacts graduation rates, both for students as a whole and within specific minority groups. The evaluation found that only about 1% of the graduating class of 2008 was denied diplomas because of CAHSEE requirements alone. Additionally, "over half of the students in the class of 2008 who dropped out, left California public education, or failed to graduate for other reasons had already met the CAHSEE requirement."

The 2009 HumRRO evaluation of the CAHSEE found that English language learners specifically have significantly more trouble passing the CAHSEE than their peers. Many of these students, especially those who

do not learn to speak English until high school, require more than four years to complete their high school diploma requirements. HumRRO found that more than 40% of the class of 2008 that did not meet CAHSEE requirements continued to retake the test after their 4th year of high school, and furthermore, more than a quarter of those who took the exam after their senior year had passed by the 2009 evaluation. As a result, HumRRO determined that "four-year graduation rate estimates provide an incomplete picture of eventual outcomes for these students."

Massachusetts' MCAS and Graduation Rates

A study of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) found similar results. Papay, Murnane, and Willett (2010) found that failing the mathematics MCAS requirement increased the probability of dropping out for low-income urban students in their sample more than their peers. However, they also determined that most students who failed the math exam retook it, and low-income urban students were just as likely to retake the exam as their peers.

Papay, Murnane, and Willett (2010) recognize that low-income urban students are less likely to pass a retest of the exit exam. However, because they found that 60% of students in their sample who did not graduate actually passed the MCAS requirement, they determined that the MCAS is only one of many possible factors contributing to drop-out rates in Massachusetts.

New Jersey's HSPA and High School Dropouts

Ou (2009) analyzed longitudinal data for four cohorts of students in New Jersey who took the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) in the 11th grade from 2002-06. Ou compared students who barely failed the math or English HSPA with students who barely passed. He reports that both groups of students in his study were characteristically similar in terms of racial composition, student achievement level, and English proficiency. Ou concluded that students who barely failed the initial administration of the HSPA in his sample were more likely to drop out of high school than students who barely passed the initial HSPA. Furthermore, he found significant evidence that black and Hispanic students as well as students from low-income families were more likely to drop out after barely failing the exam in the first administration.

When looking at the population of students that retook the test, Ou found similar results. However, he noted that the population of students retaking did not reflect the same racial and economic composition as those in the initial administration. Possibly because the retesting sample excluded students who dropped out after the initial testing, the proportion of racial minority and low-income students was lower in the retesting sample.

Minnesota's BST and Early Grade vs. Late Grade Dropouts

As part of Dee and Jacob's (2006) national study on the effects of high school exit exams, they used Common Core Data to specifically research the impact of the exit exam policy in Minnesota implemented for the graduating class of 2000. As previously stated, some researchers argue that the CCD is not a reliable data source for high school completion rates; however, Dee and Jacob attempted to improve this data set for Minnesota students in a number of ways, including accounting for district errors in reporting students who drop out of high school.

The interesting aspect of Dee and Jacob's study is that they found evidence of *decreased* dropout rates among 10th and 11th graders in Minnesota after the first year the test was administered. However, dropout rates for the same student sample increased in 12th grade. Dee and Jacob analyzed the data at the district level, specifically comparing districts with higher concentrations of racial minority students and low-income students to those with fewer concentrations of these student populations. The authors found that the reductions in 10th and 11th grade dropouts were concentrated in the districts with lower poverty levels, and that the most significant negative effects on 12th grade dropout rates were found in districts with higher poverty levels.

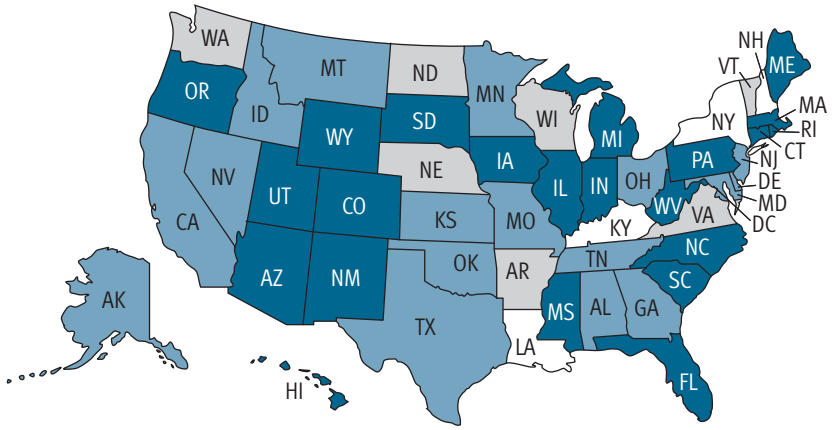
Dee and Jacob concluded from their research in Minnesota that although exit exams may have the ability to improve student achievement, they also may have further complicated inequality in educational attainment among the students in their sample.

Varying Graduation Rate Calculations

Although state and local student data may allow states and school districts to better understand how these policies affect their students, state-reported graduation rates can be misleading depending upon how they are calculated. For example, a state that counts GED recipients as graduates may report a higher graduation rate than a state that does not include students who receive GEDs. States that calculate graduation rates based on the number of entering 12th grade students at the beginning of that year may have a higher graduation rate than states that account for students who have dropped out between grades 9 and 11.

Despite attempts both by the National Governors Association (NGA) in 2004 and ED in 2008 to set a national standard for graduation calculation, discrepancies still exist. Secretary Margaret Spellings issued a federal requirement in 2008 that all states use an adjusted cohort rate, which calculates on-time recipients of standard diplomas adjusted for transfers in, transfers out, dropouts, and deaths, by the 2010-11 school year. According to CEP's survey responses and reviews of state education department Web sites, 22 states used the adjusted cohort rate, 17 states used the "leaver rate," and 7 states used another calculation method in 2010 (see **Figure 2**). Three states, Maryland, Tennessee, and Virginia, indicated on their state surveys that they would begin using the adjusted cohort rate calculation for the graduating class of 2011. CEP's definitions of the adjusted cohort rate and the leaver rate calculation methods can be found in the **Appendix**.

Figure 2 **State Graduation Rate Calculation Methods 2009-10**



States Using the Adjusted Cohort Rate in 2010:

AZ, CO, CT, HI , IL, IA, FL, IN, MA,[1] ME, MI, MS, NC, NM, PA,[1] RI, SC,[1] SD,[1] OR, UT,[2] WV,[3] WY[3]

States Using the Leaver Rate in 2010:

AK, AL, CA, DE, GA, ID, KS, MD,[4] MN, MO, MT, NJ, NV, OH, OK, TN,[4] TX

States Not Using the Adjusted Cohort Rate or the Leaver Rate in 2010:

AR, NE, ND, VA,[4] VT, WA, WI

Unknown:

KY, LA, NH, NY

[1] HI, MA, PA, SC, and SD do not specifically account for incoming transfers when explaining their graduation rate calculation method.

[2] UT begins tracking the cohort in 10th grade to accommodate some Utah schools that only serve grades 10-12.

[3] WV and WY do not specifically account for outgoing transfers when explaining their graduation rate calculation method.

[4] MD, TN and VA will change to the adjusted cohort rate in 2011

Chapter 2: New Developments

Introduction

As discussed in chapter 1, using high-stakes testing to reform high schools has become an increasingly popular policy decision. State policymakers hope that state-mandated exit exams allow them to increase student motivation and the value of a high school diploma. However, as mentioned in chapter 1, the high stakes attached to these exams may cause states to avoid assessing advanced skills and learning standards.

States implementing reform efforts that include high-stakes testing do so believing that rewards and consequences based on assessments will motivate student and teacher effort, and that the arguably negative effects of high-stakes testing during previous reform efforts can be overcome with the introduction of better assessments (Linn, 1993). These policies constantly change as states attempt to find the balance between exams that assess a minimum performance standard and those intended to increase student achievement. These changing policy decisions, along with new federal policies and additional states adopting exit exams, create a number of new developments associated with this policy trend.

This chapter outlines the new developments CEP observed when analyzing this year's responses to the state surveys on high school exit exams.

Key Findings

- **The number of states currently administering end-of-course exit exams increased to 7 states.** An additional 10 states have future plans to implement end-of-course exit exams (see **Figure 3**).

- **23 of the 28 states with exit exams have adopted the Common Core State Standards in both English language arts and mathematics.** At least 13 states with exit exams reported in their state surveys that they would either realign their exams to the new standards or replace their exams with new assessments aligned to the new standards.

- **23 of the 28 states with exit exams have joined at least one of the two federally funded state consortia developing new assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and some have reported that the assessments could potentially replace their exit exams.** Furthermore, six states with current exit exam policies are members of both state consortia.

- **Seven states reported that tightening education budgets at both the state and local levels impacted funding for programs related to high school exit exams.** These programs include remediation services, student scholarships, and extending testing to additional subjects.

- **States use varying calculation methods to determine initial and cumulative pass rates on high school exit exams.** This further complicates making both state-to-state comparisons and drawing conclusions about exit exams from these pass rates.

The Movement Toward End-of-Course Exams Continues

In our 2008 report, CEP highlighted the movement away from comprehensive assessments and toward end-of-course (EOC) assessments in a number of states with high school exit exams. As stated in the 2008 report, comprehensive exams tend to be longer and assess multiple subjects at once, depending on each state's requirements, and are taken by all students at a specific grade level (typically 10th or 11th grade). EOC exams, however, assess mastery of specific courses and are administered to students as they complete each course.

The Education Testing Service, Pearson Education, Inc. and the College Board (2010) suggest that education stakeholders often prefer EOC exams to comprehensive exams due to a number of advantages. Because EOC exams can be more closely aligned with curriculum and instruction and are typically administered closer in proximity to when the curriculum is taught, proponents consider these exams to be a more accurate assessment of student knowledge and therefore able to more directly inform curriculum development. Additionally, the College Board reports that EOC exams can be aligned to college-level courses and possibly used as placement or prequalification for college. Because EOC exams often involve numerous tests, however, they can impose logistical challenges to states involving funding and scoring.

In 2002, only two states (New York and Texas) of the 18 states with exit exams at that time administered end-of-course exams (CEP, 2008). New York began requiring passage of the Regents Examinations to earn a diploma in 2000, and Texas offered students the option of passing either a comprehensive exam or an EOC exam in 2002. By 2008, four of the 23 states with exit exams at that time were administering EOC exams. CEP found the following based on the data we collected this year:

- The number of states requiring passage of EOC exams to earn a diploma in 2009-10 increased to seven states (see Figure 3).

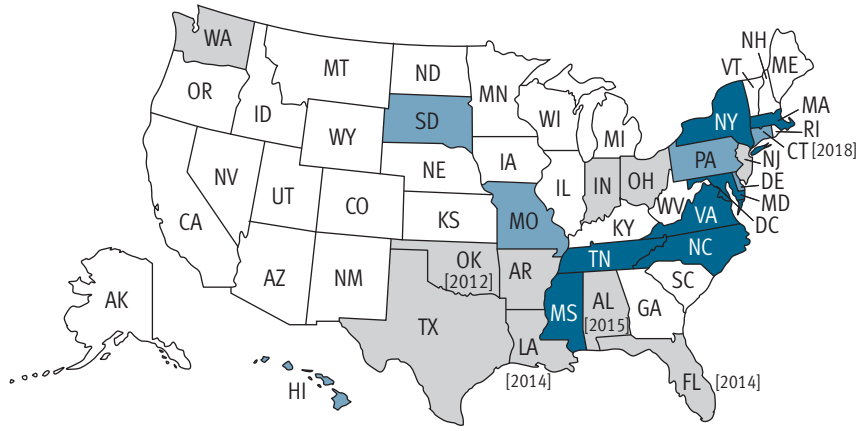
- An additional 10 states will begin phasing in EOC exams soon or have plans to implement EOC exams in the future.

- Six additional states administer state-developed and scored EOC exams but do not require passing scores for graduation.

- 17 of the 28 states with high school exit exams either withheld diplomas in 2009-10 or plan to withhold diplomas in the future based on EOC exams.

- In total, 23 states administer state-developed EOC exams, whether used as exit exams or not.

Figure 3 **States Using End-of-Course Exams 2009-10**



States withholding diplomas in 2009-10 based on EOC exams:

MD, MA [science only], MS, NY, NC, TN, VA

States planning to implement EOC exams [year withholding diplomas if known]:

AL [2015], AR, FL [2014], IN [2012], LA [2014], NJ, OH, OK [2012], TX [2015], WA

States administering EOC exams not used as a graduation requirement:

CT [2018], DE, HI, MO, PA, SD

National Policy Initiatives Could Impact Exit Exams

Proponents and critics of high school exit exams disagree on how exit exams impact the curriculum standards taught in schools. Proponents argue that exit exams encourage more rigorous curriculum standards and allow a high school diploma to hold more weight with colleges and employers. Meanwhile, critics feel that these exams can actually cause a state to lower its standards to prevent a sharp decline in graduation rates.

David Conley, professor at the University of Oregon and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research, believes that states often stop short of measuring important skills that are difficult to assess on exit exams with traditional types of assessments but are important for college and career readiness (Richardson, 2010). Skills such as writing a research paper, completing a lab-based experiment, or critiquing a source document often show what students are actually learning in the classroom, but these are not currently measured within the testing format that states typically use for exit exams. As a result, states can and do neglect to assess the more cognitively complex standards they have set for their students, according to Conley.

Dr. Robert Warren, professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, feels that states have developed a pattern of lowering standards to an extent that exit exams do not benefit those students who pass them while possibly harming those students who fail them (Urbina, 2010). Furthermore, Warren says that although exit exams may prevent some students from graduating, the lowering of standards prevents these exams from providing a true assessment of college and career readiness for students that do graduate.

Common Core State Standards

The national movement urging states to adopt a common set of standards could impact what standards high school exit exams assess. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) sponsored the development of The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in order to establish a rigorous set of standards that would prepare students for college and career consistently from state to state. Proponents of the standards feel that consistent curriculum standards across all states will improve continuity for students who often move from school to school across the nation. The CCSS may also help education stakeholders understand how students and schools perform relative to students and schools in other states. Further, proponents believe that common standards are necessary for international competitiveness (Mathis, 2010).

Although the Common Core State Standards were not developed by the federal government, the Obama administration has endorsed them. When states applied for the billions of dollars available through the competitive grant program known as Race to the Top, states that adopted the CCSS received advantages on their Race to the Top applications over those that had not adopted the CCSS. Additionally, President Obama has proposed tying receipt of Title I funds to state adoption of the CCSS (Mathis, 2010).

According to CEP's survey of states with exit exams, we found the following:

- 23 of the 28 states with exit exams have adopted the CCSS in both English language arts and mathematics (see **Table 3**).
- As of November 2010, Alaska, Texas, and Virginia have decided not to adopt either set of the CCSS standards.
- At least 13 states with exit exams reported in their state surveys that they would either realign their exams to the new standards or replace their exams with new assessments aligned to the new standards..

David Conley states that the CCSS were developed with the right goals in mind—to connect K-12 standards with postsecondary education—and that as long as the standards are consistently revisited and updated according to students' educational needs, the standards can lead to better curriculum development and more valuable assessments (Richardson, 2010).

Table 3 States With Exit Exams and the CCSS

	States with exit exams in 2009-10
States with exit exams that have adopted the CCSS as of December 15, 2010	AL, AR, AZ, CA, FL, GA, IN, LA, MA, MD, MN (ELA only), MS, NC, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, RI, SC, TN (23)
States with exit exams replacing or realigning exit exams to CCSS	AR, AZ, FL, LA, MA, MD, MN, NV, NM, NC, OH, SC, WA[1] (13)

Note: Seventeen additional states have adopted the CCSS, but did not have exit exams in 2009-10 (CO, CT, DE, HI, IA, IL, KS, KY, MI, MO, NH, PA, UT, VT, WI, WV, WY)

[1] WA has provisionally adopted the CCSS

Race to the Top Assessment Competition

Accompanying the movement to adopt the CCSS, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) held a grant competition in 2010 focused on the development of new state assessments as part of the Race to the Top program. Consortia of states of 15 or more competed for $350 million in federal money to develop assessments intended to better measure what students have learned, how they progress over time, and how prepared they are for college and careers. In September 2010, ED awarded a combined $330 million to two state consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.

The PARCC and SMARTER Balanced applications have a number of similarities, as well as varying approaches to developing innovative assessments. Both applications include plans for performance-based interim assessments conducted throughout the school year as well as end-of-year summative assessments. The end-of-year assessments would be administered via computer under both applications.

PARCC's plan focuses on college and career readiness and developing assessments that will use technology to provide educators with a better measurement of how students apply rigorous content at various points throughout the school year. The SMARTER application emphasizes flexibility for schools and educators with customizable parts within assessments that will measure higher-order thinking skills. The SMARTER Balanced group plans to use "computer adaptive" technology in its summative assessments, which adjusts scoring and difficulty according to student ability during the test.

CEP found the following based on the data we collected this year:

- 23 of the 28 states with exit exams have joined at least one of the two consortia, and some have reported that the assessments developed through this grant program could replace their exit exams (see **Table 4**)
- Six states with current exit exam policies (Alabama, Georgia, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) are members of both state consortia.
- Both states with and without exit exams have joined each consortium. It has yet to be determined if a consortium as a whole will decide if the new assessments will have graduation requirements, or if each state will have the option of determining its own policies in this regard. This decision could dramatically increase or decrease the number of states with exit exams.

Table 4 **States Involved in Assessment Consortia as of December, 2010**

	States with exit exams in 2009-10	States without exit exams in 2009-10
States involved in PARCC	AR, AL,AZ, CA, FL, GA, IN, LA, MD, MA, MS, NJ, NY, OH, OK, RI, SC,TN (18)	CO, DC, DE, IL, KY, ND, NH, PA, (8)
States involved in SMARTER Balanced	AL, GA, ID, NM, NC, NJ, OH, OK, OR, SC, WA (11)	CO, CT, DE, HI, IA, KS, KY, ME, MI, MO, MT, ND, NH, NV, PA, SD, UT, VT, WI, WV (20)
States involved in both consortia	AL, GA, NJ, OH, OK, SC (6)	CO, DE, KY, NH, ND, PA (6)

ED's guidelines for the grant program stipulate that the assessments must be fully operational by the 2014-15 school year; therefore, the potential impact on state exams could occur sooner than later. However, many assessment experts are quick to point out that both of these programs must clear a number of obstacles before they are ready for full implementation. Scott Marion, associate director of the Center for Assessment in New Hampshire, points out that a clearly defined purpose for the assessment systems has yet to be defined, mostly because Congress has yet to reauthorize No Child Left Behind (Robelen, 2010). Getting that many states to agree on anything is difficult, and the assessment programs still have a number of details on which states must come to a consensus, such as testing windows and test accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners.

How Will Common Standards and Assessments Impact Exit Exams?

The adoption of the CCSS in exit exam states indicates commitment from states to aligning assessments to rigorous standards focused on college and career readiness. However, the movement also raises a number of questions regarding how the CCSS will impact states' ability to use high school exit exams as a method of raising high school student achievement. Examples of these questions are outlined below:

1. *Will the adoption of CCSS produce better assessments, and therefore better exit exams?*

As stated previously, David Conley feels that current exit exams limit the skills they assess with traditional testing formats. In other words, current exams tend to only assess what they can easily measure (Richardson, 2010). The PARCC assessment consortium plans to incorporate more performance-based assessments, such as those that students are not able to complete within one school day, a testing format that may allow new assessments to measure more rigorous standards. But what about states that do not implement new PARCC or SMARTER assessments in 2015? Mathis (2010) warns that CCSS will narrow assessments and ultimately curriculum around easily testable skills for states without the capacity and resources to produce new and innovative assessments.

2. *If states realign or replace high school exit exams based on the CCSS in English language arts and math, what does that mean for states that test in other subjects, such as science and social studies? Will states continue assessments in these subject areas?*

A number of states, especially those with end-of-course exams, assess students in subjects outside English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, the two subjects covered in the CCSS. When states realign their assessments or implement new ones, it is unclear what these states will do with assessments for subject areas other than ELA and math. Furthermore, the common standards initiative operates under the assumption that standards based on skills needed for college and career readiness are indicative of a comprehensive education. However, these skills often omit social and emotional learning or learning for citizenship.

In order to best meet the needs of all students with a variety of interests and abilities, Noddings (2010) feels that the emphasis should be on differentiation, not standardization. Noddings suggests that states and school districts offer a greater variety of courses and improve the quality of each of those courses, an effort that she feels is derailed by common standards. The future of state assessments and/or exit exams in subjects outside of ELA and math could indicate whether or not standardization will come at the cost of differentiation.

3. *How do we know that increased standards, and therefore realigned or replaced exit exams, will translate to improving student achievement?*

Allensworth, Nomi, Montgomery, and Lee (2009) studied the effects of a Chicago policy that mandated college preparatory courses for all students, both before and after the policy was implemented. They found that although inequalities in course content were reduced, failure rates increased, course grades slightly declined, test scores did not improve, and the ninth graders in their study that were required to take Algebra and English I were no more likely to attend college. The authors concluded from their research that instruc-

tional content may be less important than quality of instruction. They suggest that "more attention be paid to how students are taught and to the quality and depth of the tasks in which students are engaged rather than the content of what they are taught."

As this study implies, it is unclear whether standards reform will ultimately increase student performance or better prepare them for college and career. The authors do not address variables outside of quality instruction, such as student motivation, that affect student achievement. It may be that standards reform is a platform upon which to build further reform efforts that could lead to increased student performance.

4. *Will more students, especially typically underserved students, fail to meet performance requirements on newly aligned or replaced high school exit exams based on CCSS? And if so, will states withhold more diplomas due to performance on exit exams? In other words, will higher standards increase drop-out rates?*

As discussed in chapter 1, some research on the impact of exit exams has shown a possible negative impact on graduation rates for typically low-performing students. Therefore, one concern of new assessments based on the CCSS initiative is that more rigorous standards and assessments for some states may increase the consequences for some students. Noddings (2010) believes that in standards reform, some students will inevitably fail. If not, then standards will be thought of as too low and will be raised. However, the good news out of the research by Allensworth et al. in Chicago (2009) was that a policy requiring all students to take college preparatory courses instead of remedial courses did not increase the drop-out rate among the students in the study. The number of students in the lowest-ability group in their study that earned credit in English I increased by a third, and the number of these students that earned credit in Algebra I increased by 10%. Meanwhile, graduation rates did not decline.

5. *How will increased standards and new assessments and/or exit exams impact typically low-performing schools, especially schools in improvement?*

As mentioned above, Mathis (2010) cautions that "when not accompanied by a substantial influx of capacity-building and resources that reach teachers and students, the punitive elements of [standards-based accountability policies] overwhelm the elements that have the potential to enrich learning." Research by DeBray, Parson, and Woodworth (2001) supports Mathis' concern. They found that higher-performing schools in Vermont and New York responded to increased standards and accountability pressures by making curriculum changes, boosting professional development, and improving teacher evaluation. Low-performing schools, however, lacked the capacity for productive change, and as a result, "superficial compliance that focused on the tests was not accompanied by schoolwide initiatives to improve curriculum and instruction" (as cited in Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

In states with exit exam policies, students attending consistently low-performing schools or schools in restructuring are still held to the same graduation and exit-exam requirements as students in successful schools. If the research above is correct, how will these schools be able to prepare their students to meet these requirements without the ability to meet the demands of more rigorous standards and assessments with improved curriculum and quality instruction?

6. *What are the long-term benefits for students, if states realign exit exams to the new CCSS?*

As with any educational reform effort, the underlying hope is that students will be better off in the long-term than before. Unfortunately, Allensworth et al.'s research in Chicago shows that although low-performing students who were required to take college preparatory courses were not adversely affected, neither did they benefit from the more rigorous coursework any more than from remedial courses. Additional research is needed to know if what Allensworth et al. found in Chicago would also apply on a broader, more national scope. Should their findings apply to students across the country, what long-term benefits should we hope

for from exit exams aligned to college and career-based standards? Further research should also address the great variety of factors, in addition to content and quality of instruction, that impact student achievement.

7. *Are states willing to adopt the goal of college and career readiness for all students?*

The CCSS were developed with the central mission that every student graduates high school prepared for college and career. However, not all states operate their public school systems under that assumption for the purpose of college and career readiness, and not all educators, parents, or community members believe college and career readiness should be the central mission of a high school education. Some feel public schools should address citizenship or meaningful living, for example, and that an education is an end in itself. Others believe many students should not go on to college or any formal education beyond high school and should enter the workforce where they would learn by experience (Conley, personal correspondence).

8. *Although states will continue to operate under different policies and serve a wide variety of student populations, will common standards and assessments aligned to these standards allow for more comparability between states?*

As discussed in chapter 1, a number of factors impact student success and the way student success is measured from state to state. Graduation rates are affected by requirements other than exit exams; for example, some states require senior projects or credits for community service. Also, some states enroll a disproportionate number of students who traditionally graduate at lower rates, such as student of color or low-income students. Measuring student performance against the same yardstick in each state (as many hope the CCSS will allow) may not automatically mean fair or accurate comparisons from state to state.

Additionally, states may not implement the new assessments in the same way. For example, some states may chose to attach graduation requirements to the new standards and some may not. Also, states may not use the same cut scores for graduation requirements or for accountability purposes. The cut score decision drastically affects how a new assessment is used, as it directly establishes which students, teachers, and schools will be labeled passing and failing.

9. *Similarly, how will adoption of the CCSS allow for more transparent international comparisons? What can be learned from these comparisons?*

NGA and CCSSO believe that the CCSS effort they have coordinated will help students in the United States compete on an international level. The development committees were said to have been informed by some of the most effective models from around the world. The CCSS Validation Committee, comprised of experts in national and international standards development as well as subject matter experts in the areas represented by the CCSS, concluded that the standards were comparable to the education expectations of other leading nations.

What remains unknown, however, is the degree to which these standards will ultimately be a useful means to help education stakeholders understand how American children compare with students from other nations with high educational standards. And if these comparisons are intended, how will the CCSS allow for these comparisons given the number of varying characteristics between American students and students from other countries?

10. *What happens in the meantime?*

As previously mentioned, federal regulations for the assessment grants under Race to the Top establish that the assessments will be fully functional by the 2014-15 school year. What is unclear is what states that have adopted the CCSS will do with them over the next five years while they wait for these new assessments.

Funding Pressures Impact Exit Exams

As states continue to tighten their budgets in a number of educational programs, exit exams are also feeling the effects. Several states indicated on CEP's surveys that funding pressures at both the state level and local level had impacted how funds are allocated for and spent on programs related to high school exit exams. In two states, California and Idaho, more local flexibility was allowed so that local school districts could make best use of what limited funding was available. In four additional states (Louisiana, Massachusetts, Nevada, and South Carolina), programs associated with high school exit exams were cut completely.

California

According to the California State Department of Education, the State of California apportioned $72 million to local school districts to pay for remediation services directly associated with helping 11th or 12th graders pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) during the 2008-09 school year. School districts could provide remediation in the form of: individual or small group instruction; purchasing, scoring, and reviewing diagnostic assessments; counseling; designing instruction to meet specific needs of eligible students; and/or appropriate teacher training to meet the needs of eligible pupils. In 2009-10, the department of education reported that $52 million was apportioned for these purposes. Senate Bill 4 of the 2009-10 Third Extraordinary Session, however, allows for budgeting flexibility to local school districts. With this flexibility, school districts may use their CAHSEE Intensive Instruction and Services funding for any educational purpose. This flexibility will remain until 2012-13, or until this bill is amended.

Idaho

In the 2007-08 school year, school districts in Idaho were given $350 from the State of Idaho per student who scored in the below-basic range on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) for two consecutive years. In subsequent school years, however, the per-student allotment was rolled into the general discretionary fund to allow for more funding flexibility, according to the Idaho department of education.

Louisiana

In both the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, $2,039,824 was allotted for remediation for students who did not pass the Graduation Exit Examination (GEE) in Louisiana. All schools in Louisiana received funding based on their number of "remedial units," which is an unsatisfactory achievement level in English language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies. According to the Louisiana department of education, due to budget cuts there is no longer funding available for GEE remediation. The state remediation funds have been cut from the state department of education's budget.

Massachusetts

In October 2006, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in Massachusetts voted to include history and social sciences as part of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), beginning with the graduating class of 2012, in addition to requirements in English language arts, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering. Pilot tests in history and social sciences were administered in 2007 and 2008 and were scheduled to be fully implemented in the fall of 2009. Due to budget constraints in FY2010, however, the state education commissioner recommended the postponement of the history and social sciences component of the exit exam, and on February 24, 2009, the Board voted to waive the U.S. history requirement as a competency determination for the classes of 2012 and 2013, according to the state department of education.

Nevada

The Nevada Millennium Scholarship is open to students who pass all the High School Proficiency Examinations (HSPEs) and meet grade point average requirements. The scholarship can be used within the Nevada state university and community college system and is worth a maximum of $10,000. Students graduating in 2009 and 2010 must have a minimum GPA of 3.25 and have completed a minimum of 4 credits of English, 4 credits in Math (including Algebra II), 3 credits in science, and 3 credits in social studies & history as part of their high school course work, and have passed the HSPE to be eligible for the Millennium scholarship. The maximum amount is still $10,000; however, due to budget constraints the program is currently underfunded and may not continue beyond the next few years, according to the Nevada department of education.

South Carolina

In the 2007-08 school year, South Carolina reported that it spent $82 million on intervention and assistance to schools with ratings of "below average" or "unsatisfactory" on the South Carolina state report card. The department of education reported this year that due to budget reductions, funding was reduced to $63 million for the 2008-09 school year, and further reduced to $60,430,445 for the 2009-10 school year. Due to the increased number of eligible schools and the reduction of funds available for intervention and assistance, the schools that did receive funding for remediation received the minimum dollar amounts specified for the past two years. Schools with ratings of "below average" received $75,000 per school, and schools with ratings of "unsatisfactory" received $250,000 per school.

States Report Varying Calculation Methods

Each year, CEP asks states with exit exams to report initial and cumulative pass rates on their exams, which are included in the state profiles available at CEP's Web site at www.cep-dc.org. For the first time, CEP asked states this year to explain the calculation methods used to determine these pass rates. We learned that most of the states with exit exams that were able to provide pass rate data use one of two general methods for calculating these rates. Ten states (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Washington) use a student enrollment figure as the denominator when calculating pass rates. For example, Alabama administers the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) to students for the first time in the 11th grade. To calculate initial pass rates, the number of students enrolled in the 11th grade on the day the test is administered is used as the denominator. Similarly, Oklahoma uses the number of students enrolled in each course to calculate initial pass rates on its end-of-course exams.

On the other hand, 11 states (Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia) calculate pass rates based on the number of students that actually take the exams. Indiana, for example, uses the number of valid assessments scored as the denominator, and Minnesota uses the number of tests administered during the first exam administration to calculate initial pass rates. Therefore, it is possible that some students are excluded from these types of calculations for a number of reasons, such as an absence from school the day the test was administered or because they are exempt from the exam due to their classification as a student with disabilities or as an English language learner.

More accurate calculations may need to include how many students *should* have taken the exam to prevent misleading interpretations of the data or any sort of data manipulation. Without further information, it is impossible to know how accurate these pass rate calculations are. Additionally, historical evidence from Massachusetts, New York, and Texas suggest it is important to explicitly understand which students are or are not included in pass rate calculations (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Warren and Jenkins (2005)

estimated that during the 1990s, scores reported for Florida's high school exit exam reflected only about 80% of the students who should have taken the exam.

To be clear, CEP is not implying that states are manipulating exit exam pass rates. However, the varying calculation methods from state to state further complicate our ability to make state-to-state comparisons or draw conclusions about high school exit exams and student achievement from these pass rates.

Chapter 3: Other Emerging Trends in States With and Without Exit Exams

Introduction

For this year's report, CEP also researched policies in the 22 states that do not require high school students to pass an examination to receive a high school diploma. This chapter outlines the trends in state graduation requirements and assessment policies in these 22 states and compares them with policies in the 28 states with exit exams.

Key Findings

We found three main trends in high school testing policies that have emerged in states that do and do not require students to pass exit exams to graduate:

- **End-of-course (EOC) exams are growing in popularity even in states that do not require exit exams for graduation.** At least five states without exit exam policies currently administer or plan to administer end-of-course exams for a variety of purposes. This is in addition to the 17 states with exit exams that tie end-of-course exams to graduation requirements.

- **States with and without high school exit exams are moving toward policies that require students to take college entrance exams.** At least eight states without exit exams require students to take the ACT, SAT, or Work Keys college entrance exams. In addition, three states with exit exams will soon require students to also take a college entrance exam.

- **States with and without exit exam policies use or are considering adopting portfolio-based assessments or senior projects as part of the state high school testing system.** At least three states that do not have exit exam policies use samples of student work for assessment purposes.

End-of-Course Exams Used for Various Purposes

As discussed in chapter 2, many states with exit exams are transitioning from traditional comprehensive exams to end-of-course exit exams (EOCs). Unlike comprehensive exams, EOCs are often administered as students complete each course and assess mastery of the curriculum taught during that specific course.

States without exit exams are also administering or plan to administer EOC exams but do not require students to pass these exams to graduate. Our research uncovered five such states that use EOC exams for various purposes:

- **Missouri** requires its high school students to take state-developed EOC exams in Algebra I, biology, English II, and government, but does not require students to reach any particular level of proficiency on these exams to graduate. School districts may also choose to administer EOC exams in American history, English I, Algebra II and geometry. Missouri's EOCs are used to assess students' mastery of the state's academic standards. The exams consist of multiple-choice questions and longer "performance events" that assess tasks such as conducting experiments, expressing an argument, or writing extended pieces. Missouri plans to use these exams for accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act pending federal approval, according to the Missouri department of education.

- **Delaware** is administering EOC exams for NCLB accountability purposes beginning in the 2010-11 school year.

- **Connecticut** plans to implement new EOC exams for the graduating class of 2018. The state has not yet determined whether these exams will be used for accountability only or whether they will be linked to graduation (see chapter 1).

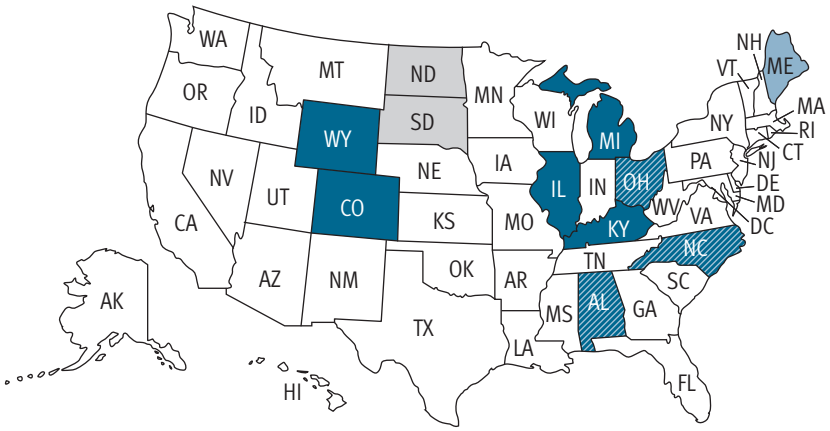
- Although **South Dakota** does not require students to pass an EOC exam to graduate, scores on the state's EOC exams make up a portion of a student's final grade in some courses required for graduation.

- In **Pennsylvania**, passing the state's EOC Keystone exams is one of three options students may choose to fulfill graduation requirements. Beginning with the class of 2015, Pennsylvania students may demonstrate proficiency in English composition, literature, Algebra I, and biology by taking Keystone exams that will count for one-third of their final course grade. In 2017, the exam requirements will expand to include an additional math and a social studies course. As an alternative to taking the Keystone exams, local school districts may choose to administer a locally developed assessment or a national assessment (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams).

Some States Require College Entrance Exams

At least eight states without high school exit exam policies require students to take a college entrance exam, such as the SAT, the ACT, or the Work Keys assessment (also developed by ACT). These include Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wyoming. In addition, three states with exit exam policies in 2009-10 (Alabama, Ohio, and North Carolina) will soon also require students to take a college entrance exam (see **Figure 4**). Typically, states simply require students to take college entrance exams without having to achieve a certain score. Furthermore, at least three states (Illinois, Maine, and Michigan) use a college placement exam for NCLB accountability purposes, sometimes in addition to other accountability measures.

Figure 4 States Requiring Participation in College Entrance Exams 2009-10



States that require the ACT or Work Keys:
AL, CO, IL, KY, MI, NC, OH, WY

States that require the ACT or Work Keys or the SAT:
ND, SD

States that require the SAT:
ME

States that also have exit exams:
AL, NC, OH

Why College Entrance Exams?

State officials cite several reasons for requiring students to take a college entrance exam. In general, states want to assess the extent to which students are prepared for college. For example, North Carolina, which used EOC exams as exit exams, is considering requiring all 11th graders to take the ACT to better assess how well schools are educating students and to identify which students are not prepared for college (Bonner, 2010).

Similarly, Colorado, Kentucky, and Wyoming, none of which uses exit exams, require all high school students to take the ACT as a way to encourage more students to apply to college and provide additional information about college readiness to teachers and administrators. Wyoming uses ACT results to determine which students qualify for a state scholarship program (CEP, 2008).

Proponents of college entrance exam requirements feel these tests provide insight into college readiness that other high school assessments do not. However, recent evaluations of the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary success suggest that college entrance exams may not predict college success or sufficiently gauge college readiness across all key dimensions (Conley, 2007).

The ACT vs. the SAT

States that require students to take a college entrance exam tend to favor the ACT and the ACT-developed Work Keys exam over the SAT. Maine is the only state that requires all high school students to take the SAT. By contrast, eight states require the ACT or the Work Keys assessment (developed by ACT). Two additional states (North Dakota and South Dakota) require students to take a college entrance exam, but allow students to choose the SAT, ACT, or Work Keys.

The interest in the ACT among states with college entrance exam requirements may reflect the growing popularity of the ACT in general. Over the past two decades, the number of ACT test-takers has increased to the point that in 2010 it was roughly equal to the number of SAT test-takers, slightly more than 1.5 million students. In 10 states (North Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi,

Arkansas, and Louisiana) at least 80% of 2010 high school graduates took the ACT (ACT, 2010). Furthermore, all colleges that still require college entrance exams now accept the ACT as a substitute for the SAT.

Observers cite several reasons for this growth. Unlike the SAT, the ACT allows students to choose which test scores are sent to universities, makes the writing section optional, and does not deduct points for incorrect answers (Schaeffer, 2010). Chairman Bill Harrison of the State Board of Education in North Carolina said that his state chose the ACT because it measures what students have learned in their core content courses while the SAT measures aptitude (Bonner, 2010). However, recent content analysis shows that the two exams cover similar, yet not identical, course content.

Concerns With Using College Entrance Exams as High School Assessments

As mentioned above, three states use college entrance exams for accountability purposes. Maine replaced its previous high school exam with the SAT and uses it to meet NCLB testing requirements in high school math and English. Michigan and Illinois use the ACT, along with other measures, to help fulfill the NCLB high school testing requirement (CEP, 2008).

Some organizations, such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling (2008), have raised concerns about using entrance exams for accountability purposes. They note that the 1999 Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing developed by the American Educational Research Association caution that college entrance exams are not appropriate for assessing high school performance because they are not linked to a particular instructional curriculum. In other words, these experts feel that high school accountability assessments should be criterion-referenced, or based on a specific set of standards, rather than norm-referenced, or based on a student's performance ranking relative to other test-takers in the group, as most college entrance exams are.

When states choose to use a college entrance exam for accountability purposes, experts strongly suggest that states work closely with ACT and the College Board (which produces and markets the SAT) to modify the college entrance exams to align with state standards and curriculum. Illinois, for example, worked closely with ACT to ensure that the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) assessed Illinois standards and stayed consistent with the intended outcomes of the Illinois assessment system. Illinois also established that neither the ACT nor Work Keys would be used alone to make high-stakes policy decisions (Noeth, Rutkowski, & Schleich, 2010).

College Entrance Exams and Students of Color

Performance on college entrance exams has historically varied by race and ethnicity, with students of color often performing well below the national average (Noeth, Rutkowski, and Schleich, 2010). From 2006 to 2010, the average ACT composite test scores increased for Asian American and white students as a group, while average composite scores showed little change or have declined for African American and Latino students, two groups that historically have scored lower on the exam (ACT, 2010). In 2010, the average composite test scores on the ACT were 6.5 scale points lower for the African American group than for the Asian American group (16.9 compared with 23.4).

Similar gaps exist between students of color and white students on the SAT. In 2010, African Americans recorded a mean score of 429 points and Latino students a mean score of 454 points on critical reading, while white students had a mean score of 528 (Wolfe, 2010). Although evaluations of the ACT and SAT have indicated that they both assess performance with little or no bias, this evaluation research was based on a population of only college-bound students (Noeth, Rutkowski, and Schleich, 2010). Because some states are requiring all students to take college entrance exams, more evaluation is needed to explore reasons for the varied performance of diverse student populations.

Increasing Use of Senior Projects and Portfolios

States with and without exit exam policies are using samples of student work, including portfolios or senior projects, for assessment purposes.

Portfolios or Projects in States Without Exit Exams

At least three states that do not have exit exams use assessments based on portfolios or senior projects:

- Recent legislation in **Connecticut** requires all seniors, beginning with the graduating class of 2018, to enroll in a one-credit "demonstration project" to receive a diploma.
- In **Hawaii**, students working toward receiving an advanced Board of Education Recognition diploma must enroll in a one-credit senior project course. The state is also considering a proposal to require all students to complete a senior project to obtain either a Recognition diploma or a general diploma.
- Although not a state mandate, **South Dakota's** High School 2025 plan, which is a broad set of recommendations to enrich the high school curriculum, includes opportunities for high school students to complete a relevant and rigorous capstone experience by the end of their senior year, such as an entrepreneurship experience, youth internship, or pre-apprenticeship. Students who complete a senior experience will receive credit for creating a portfolio, product, research paper, and presentation related to the capstone experience.

Portfolios or Projects in States With Exit Exams

Several states with high school exit exam policies use portfolios of student work as alternate paths for students with special needs or students who repeatedly fail the exit exam:

- **Massachusetts** permits a student with an individualized education plan (IEP) to submit a portfolio of student work that displays knowledge and skills at grade-level expectations for a 10th grader. As in most states, portfolios are assessed at the local level by content experts or educators who have been trained by the state.
- **Alaska** and **Oklahoma** also provide a portfolio option specifically for students with disabilities.
- In **Maryland** and **Nevada**, any student who has repeatedly failed the state exit exam may use the portfolio option.
- **Oregon's** new exit exam policy allows students to submit a "collection of evidence" instead of state assessments to fulfill the Essential Skills component of the state graduation requirements.

Two states have new exit exam policies that require a portfolio or project assessment in addition to a traditional exit exam.

- **Ohio** recently decided to replace its Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) with a three-part assessment system that will require high school students to complete a senior project. The specific details of the senior project have yet to be determined, but the state department of education has said it could involve anything from producing a specific product or portfolio of evidence to participating in community service. The new high school exit policies will go into effect in school year 2014-15.
- **Rhode Island's** new exit exam policy is also a three-part assessment system. In addition to state assessments in reading and math and completion of required coursework, students in Rhode Island will be required to complete exhibitions and portfolios.

Although some states have recently adopted portfolio- and experience-based assessments, the idea is not a new one. Vermont and Kentucky have long used portfolio assessments, as described in **Box 2**.

Box 2 **Portfolio Assessments in Vermont and Kentucky**

In school year 1991-92, Vermont established a voluntary Portfolio Project, which included math and writing portfolios for students in grades 4 and 8 (Abruscato, 1993; Lawton, 1997). The project sought to preserve student work as it was created in the hope that teachers could learn how to create more meaningful learning experiences from them (Abruscato, 1993). The most obvious challenge was scoring, as there was no simple way to generate a numerical score. The Vermont Portfolio Assessment Benchmark Committee, consisting of teachers, administrators, and state department personnel, established a set of rubrics for evaluating the portfolios. Concerns eventually arose, however, that teachers were "teaching to the rubric"—in other words, focusing classroom instruction only on the knowledge and skills rewarded in the scoring rubrics (Stecher & Hamilton, 2009). In the late 1990s, Vermont replaced its Portfolio Project with a new assessment system.

In school year 1991-92, Kentucky implemented a new assessment system based on multiple measures, which included writing portfolios for students in grades 4, 8, and 12 (Lawton, 1997). These portfolios had to include writing samples from all core content areas and originally counted for 14% of the total assessment score (later amended to 11%). The portfolios were scored at the school level by trained teachers (Berryman & Russell, 2001).

Unlike Vermont's system, which was not considered high stakes, Kentucky's system was used to determine whether schools would receive cash awards for improved student performance or would be subject to penalties, such as state supervision, if they failed to raise achievement (Lawton, 1997). These high-stakes provisions created problems. As a result of a computer error by the testing contractor, some students received incorrect scores that resulted in some schools being denied monetary awards. Many believed this error was indicative of a more general lack of knowledge about how to best administer and score portfolio assessments (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). In addition, teacher involvement in preparing the portfolios and accommodations for students with disabilities varied widely across the state, which further contributed to a lack of confidence about the accuracy of the portfolio assessments. Since then, Kentucky has twice replaced its assessment system with a new one—first in 1998, and later in 2010. However, the writing portfolio is still used as part of the current testing system, according to the state department of education.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Portfolio Assessment Policies

Portfolio-based assessments have several advantages over more traditional types of assessments. Portfolios can give students an opportunity to display their best work and identify their strengths and weaknesses through personal reflection and sharing with others. In addition, local teachers who score portfolios can gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between curriculum and assessment. Lizabeth Berryman, an English teacher from Kentucky, felt that, "scoring portfolio pieces could be a way to rethink teaching and learning, define weaknesses, and establish an instruction plan for a department or schoolwide effort" (Berryman & Russell, 2001, p. 78). In addition, according to case studies by David Russell, "the portfolio assessment was broad enough that it made room for new things in the curricula of various disciplines, instead of crowding things out, as external assessments so often do" (p. 80). In addition, students made gains in writing on independent evaluations of student writing and gains in math on the state-level National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) under Kentucky's portfolio assessment system (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997).

Portfolio assessments, especially those that have high stakes, may cause problems in implementation or disadvantages as a method of assessment. Portfolios that are assembled based on state-determined criteria or standards may not actually contain a student's best work. For example, a student may not be able to include

his or her three best pieces of persuasive writing if the portfolio must include only persuasive, narrative, and expository writing (Dudley, 2001).

Dudley also points out that the scoring process for portfolios can be a monumental task that makes it difficult for scorers to stay both interested and consistent. For example, it took from 20 to 60 minutes to score each portfolio assessment under Kentucky's 1991 system (see Box 2), and this was doubled because each portfolio had to be scored by two local scorers. To score a class of 20 students would therefore take 60 to 200 hours (Gong, 2009).

When states use portfolios as alternate assessments, they must also ensure that the criteria used to score the portfolios are as equally challenging as the traditional high-stakes exams and aligned with the same desired outcomes (Conley, personal correspondence). Without this explicit and careful alignment, portfolios can become incomparable to outcomes of traditional exams or fail to produce the intended outcomes of the assessment.

Conclusion

States continue to use high school exit exams as a policy lever for school reform. The increased proportion of the nation's public school students enrolled in states that administer these exams illustrate the momentum of these policy decisions. However, until all states can provide reliable and consistent longitudinal data systems, researchers will continue to struggle with identifying how exit exams impact student achievement and high school completion rates. This research becomes increasingly important, as there are some indications that exit exams may have higher consequences for students of color and students from low-income families.

Exit exams are not the only graduation requirements impacting students across the country. States without exit exams require participation in end-of-course exams, college entrance exams, and other non-traditional assessment formats such as portfolios and senior projects. Although states may not set minimum performance standards for these requirements, they may still impact high school student achievement.

The Common Core State Standards and the common assessments designed to align with those standards will likely have a significant effect on the future of high school exit exams and other graduation requirements. A number of questions remain, however, that will determine the extent to which state high school policies will change, as well as whether or not these changes will signal improved student achievement, more college access for all students, or long-term advantages for students in general.

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Appendix: Graduation Rate Definitions

Leaver Rate:

G = A / A+B+C+D+E

G is the graduation rate
A is the current year graduates
B is the current year 12th-grade dropouts
C is the prior year's (11th-grade) dropouts
D is two years' prior (10th-grade) dropouts
E is thee years' prior (9th-grade) dropouts
Note: GED graduates or other "completers" are not included

Adjusted Cohort Rate:

G = A / B + C – D

G is the graduation rate
A is the number of on-time graduates in year n
B is the number of first-time 9th graders in year (n-4)
C is the number of incoming transfer students on the same schedule to graduate in year n
D is the number of documented "legitimate" transfers, students who have emigrated, and students who are deceased

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