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State High School Tests:

Changes in State Policies and the Impact of the College and Career Readiness Movement

December 2011

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Executive Summary and Study Methods

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy has collected and reported data on state policies that require students to pass a state assessment in order to receive a high school diploma. The state policies associated with these assessments, also known as high school exit exams, have undergone a number of changes over the past ten years. For example, states have changed the graduation requirements attached to these assessments, the types of assessments they use, the subjects tested by these assessments, and the purposes that the assessments are intended to serve.

However, exit exams are not the only assessments that states mandate for all high school students. In some states, a different assessment is administered in high school to meet federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) than the assessment administered as a graduation requirement. Additionally, some states require students to take college entrance exams, such as the SAT or ACT, and some states (sometimes the same states) require high school students to take exams that assess a student's readiness for college and career, such as the PSAT or ACT's PLAN or EXPLORE assessments. For CEP's 2011 study on state high school assessments, we surveyed all 50 states on policies pertaining to all high school assessments, including high school exit exams, college entrance exams, and college and career readiness (CCR) assessments.

Part 1 of this report provides an overview of state high school exit exam policies and discusses recent changes in these policies. Part 2 describes what we learned from our state survey regarding college entrance exams and college and career readiness assessments. We address the current national and state focus on college and career readiness and the extent to which this focus has affected state high school assessment policies. Part 2 also addresses state-led efforts in improving college and career readiness, such as the Common Core State Standards movement and the two state consortia developing assessments aligned to these standards, and how these efforts may impact state high school assessment policies. The bulleted points that follow summarize CEP's key findings from this year's study.

Key Findings

Changes in State High School Exit Exam Policies

- **Twenty-five states have current or planned polices that require students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma.** An additional five states require students to take an exit exam, but not necessarily pass it, in order to receive a high school diploma. Another state has planned exit exam policies, but has not decided whether or not students will have to pass the exams in order to graduate.

- **Three states requiring high school exit exams (Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee) have changed their policies so that students no longer have to pass an exam in order to receive a diploma.** Instead, a student's score on an exit exam now counts as a percentage of the student's final grade in a course required for graduation.

- **More states administer or plan to administer end-of-course exams than comprehensive exams, as 19 states had current or planned policies to administer end-of-course exams in the 2010-11 school year.**

- **Eighty-four percent of students of color, 78% of low-income students, and 76% of all public school students nationwide were enrolled in the 30 states with state high school exit exam policies in 2010-11.**

- **Due to policy changes in some states, fewer students were required to pass high school exit exams in order to receive a high school diploma in the 2010-11 school year than in the 2009-10 school year (65% of all public school students nationwide in 2010-11 compared to 74% in 2009-10).**

State High School Assessment Policies and College and Career Readiness

- **Twenty-seven of the 31 states with current or planned exit exams are participating in one or both of the state consortia to develop common assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards intended to measure college and career readiness.** Of these 27, at least 16 plan to replace their current exams with consortia assessments and at least 16 of the 27 states expect the consortia assessments to be more rigorous than their current assessments.

- **High school exit exams are currently used by potential employers or postsecondary education institutions in only one state (Georgia), despite many states citing assessment of college readiness (8 states) and career readiness (10 states) as a purpose of those assessments.**

- **Eleven states require or plan to require students to take a college entrance exam (the ACT or SAT) in high school; however, none of these states require their students to meet a specific passing standard on the exam.** Many of these policies are new, with 5 of these states implementing them in the 2009-10 school year or later.

- **Sixteen states administer, or at least offer to all students, assessments that are intended to assess students' readiness for college and/or a career.** Nine of the 16 states administer one of (or a combination of) assessments developed by ACT. Five of the 16 states administer the PSAT for this purpose, and an additional two of the 16 administer state-developed assessments for this purpose.

Study Methods

Similar to previous years of this study, CEP designed and conducted an annual survey of state department of education officials that asked about current and planned high school assessment policies. 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 2010 and 2011. In June 2011, we asked these designated officials to verify, update, and add information to their state's survey.

Different from previous years of this study, we sent surveys to all 50 states in 2011. The information presented in this report was verified by 38 states with policies related to the high school assessments covered in this report (high school exit exams, college entrance exams, and college and career readiness assessments). All states with high school exit exam policies responded to our survey except for Texas.[1]

We used states' survey responses to develop detailed profiles about state high school assessment policies in each state with these policies, and states reviewed the profiles for accuracy. We also used the survey responses to analyze trends in state exam features, policies, and actions that appear throughout this report. The state profiles are available on CEP's Web site at ***www.cep-dc.org***.

Some states did not respond to all 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 policies will undoubtedly have changed soon after publication because events in this field move quickly.

In order to capture a broader perspective of these state policies, and because state exit exam policies have undergone significant change since our 2010 report, CEP revised the definition of high school exit exam policies used in previous reports. **Box 1** explains the two types of high school exit exam policies discussed in this year's report. Three states (Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee) were categorized differently in this year's report because of major policy changes in those states. Additionally, two new states were included in this year's report (Delaware and Missouri) that did not previously meet CEP's definition of an exit exam state.

Box 1 **Definitions of State High School Exit Exam Policies**

Prior to this year's report, CEP considered a state an "exit exam state" only if it required students to pass, not just take, state exit exams to receive a high school diploma, even if the students had completed the necessary coursework with satisfactory grades. However, as states continue to change their graduation requirement policies associated with these assessments, we decided to add a second type of "exit exam state," which requires students to take an exam, but not necessarily pass it, in order to graduate. The following definitions of state high school exit exam policies were used in this year's report:

Type 1—The state requires students to pass, not just take, state exit exams to receive a high school diploma, even if students have completed the necessary coursework with satisfactory grades. In some instances, students may be allowed to substitute a different assessment for the exit exam; however, students must still meet a passing standard set by the state on that assessment. Exit exams are a state mandate rather than a local option; in other words, the state requires students in all school districts to pass exit exams, rather than allowing districts to decide whether to make the exams a condition of graduation.

Type 2—The state requires students to take state exit exams to receive a high school diploma, although students may not have to pass these exams to receive a diploma. For example, exam scores may be combined with course grades. The exams are a state mandate rather than a local option; in other words, the state establishes the exit exam requirements for students in all school districts, rather than allowing districts to decide exit exam requirements for themselves.

[1] Texas was unable to respond to our survey due to reductions in staff at the Texas Education Agency. Policy experts from the Texas High School Project at the Communities Foundation of Texas helped to verify the information about Texas in our report.

We did not include state exit exam policies in this study if they allow local school districts to develop and score their own assessments for this purpose. The state of Oregon is a unique case. Oregon allows local school districts to develop their own performance assessments to meet the requirements of the state policy; however, school districts are required to use official state scoring guides for these assessments, and the state indentifies the minimum achievement standards. As a result, Oregon has been included in our study as an exit exam state since 2010. (Please see Oregon's state profile at ***www.cep-dc.org*** for more detailed information.)

It should also be noted that in some states, certain student populations, such as English language learners or students with disabilities, are granted exemptions or alternate paths to graduation. CEP's 2009 report, S*tate High School Exit Exams: Trends in Test Programs, Alternate Pathways, and Pass Rates* provides a more in-depth discussion of alternate paths to graduation. For more information about specific characteristics of state high school exit exam policies, see **table 1** or the state profiles on CEP's Web site at ***www.cep-dc.org***. In addition, for more information on the history and evolution of the use of high school exit exams, see Warren and Edwards' 2005 report, *High school exit examinations and high school completion: Evidence from the early 1990s* and Warren and Kulick's 2007 report, *Modeling states' enactment of high school exit exam policies.*

In Part 2 of this report, we discuss state policies regarding college entrance exams and college and career readiness assessments. We included state policies in this discussion that either require all students to take these assessments or that require all students be offered an opportunity to take these assessments. State policies regarding the PSAT were only included in this report if this assessment is used by the state to assess students' readiness for college and/or a career.

Table 1 **Major Characteristics of State High School Exit Exams in 2010-11**

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*	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 (2014–15)	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	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
California	California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)	2006	ELA, math	Comprehensive	ELA (through 10th), math (6th–7th and Algebra I)	10th	None
Delaware	Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (DCAS)	Not applicable	Algebra II or Integrated Mathematics III, English II, biology, U.S. history	End-of-course	10th	10th	Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP)
Florida	Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)*	2003	Reading and math	Comprehensive	10th	10th	High School Competency Test (HSCT)
	FCAT 2.0 and Florida End-of-Course (EOC) Assessments	2014	Reading (2011) Algebra 1 (2012) geometry (2013) Biology 1 (2013) U.S. History (2014) Physics (2015)	End-of-Course	Varies	Varies	FCAT
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
Indiana	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)	2000	ELA, math	Comprehensive	9th, including pre-algebra and Algebra I	10th	
	End-of-Course Assessments (ECAs)*	2012	Algebra I, English 10	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)

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
Louisiana	Graduation Exit Examination (GEE)	2003	ELA, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	9th–12th	10th	
	End-of-Course Exams*	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	2009	English 2, algebra/data analysis, biology	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)
Missouri	End-of-course Assessments	Not applicable	English I, English II, Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, biology, government, American history	End-of-course	Varies	Varies	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
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)*	2013‡	Reading, writing, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	Content and performance standards in grade 9–12	11th	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)
New York	Regents Examinations	2000	ELA, math, science, social studies	End-of-course	9th–12th	Varies	Regents Competency Tests
North Carolina	North Carolina End-of Course Assessments	Exit standards eliminated in 2011; EOCs now count for a portion of students' final course grade†	Algebra I, English I, biology, U.S. History and civics and economics	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

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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, ACT, PLAN, WorkKeys, Compass, ASSET, or SAT); and samples of student work.	Varies	Varies	None
Rhode Island	New England Common Assessments Program (NCAP) and two performance-based assessments	2012	Reading, math	Comprehensive	9th-10th	11th	None
South Carolina	High School Assessment Program (HSAP)	2006	ELA, math	Comprehensive	Through 10th	10th	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)
Tennessee	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

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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)*	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 (began transition to end-of-course in 2011)	10th	10th	Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)*

Table reads: Alabama currently administers the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE), 3rd Edition, 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 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, July 2011

* Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, New Mexico, Texas, and Washington will transition to new exams. See state profiles found online for detailed information.

† Graduation requirements associated with end-of-course exams in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee have changed. Please see the state profiles found online at www.cep-dc.org for detailed information.

‡ Requirements to pass New Mexico's SBA/HSGA were temporarily suspended in school year 2011-12 for financial reasons.

Part 1:
Changes in State High School Exit Exam Policies

Graduation Requirements: Twenty-five states have current or planned polices that require students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma. An additional five states require students to take an exit exam, but not necessarily pass, in order to receive a high school diploma.

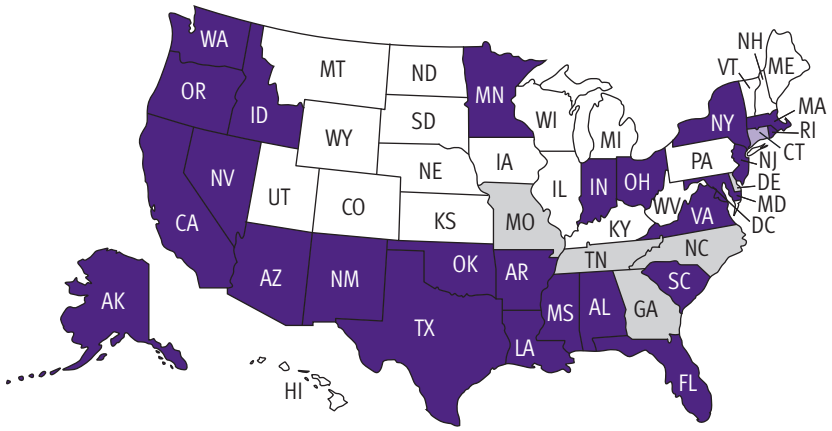
Figure 1 shows the 30 states that currently require or plan to require students to take but not necessarily pass an assessment in order to graduate. Figure 1 also includes Connecticut, which has plans for an exit exam but has not yet decided whether students will be required to pass it in order to graduate. In 25 of the 30 states, students are (or soon will be) required to pass the assessment in order to graduate. Five of the 30 states with exit exam policies require students to take the assessment, but not necessarily pass the assessment, in order to graduate. For example, three states of the five states (Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee) use end-of-course exams to account for a percentage of a student's final grade in a course required for graduation. The other two of the five states (Delaware and Missouri) administer or plan to administer end-of-course assessments in order to assess mastery of the state curriculum, but do not require students to meet a passing standard in order to graduate.

It is important to note that three states (Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee) previously required students to pass the state exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma. However, since the 2009-10 school year, these states have changed their policies to now require that a student's score on the exit exam count for a percentage of the student's final grade in a course required for graduation. Alabama plans to also make this change for the graduating class of 2015.

Types of Assessments: More states administer or plan to administer end-of-course exams than comprehensive exams, as 19 states had current or planned policies to administer end-of-course exams in the 2010-11 school year.

States are continuing the trend of moving away from comprehensive assessments in favor of end-of-course (EOC) assessments. As explained in CEP's 2010 report on high school exit exams, comprehensive assessments typically assess multiple subjects on one exam and are taken by all students at one grade level. However, EOC exams are administered to students as they complete each specific course for which there is an exam and assess mastery of the curriculum in that course.

Figure 1 **Map of State HSEE Policies**



Students must pass an exit exam in order to graduate:

AL*, AK, AZ, AR, CA, FL, ID, IN, LA, MA, MD, MN, MS, NV, NJ, NM, NY, OH, OK (2012), OR (2012), RI (2014), SC, TX, VA, WA

Students must take, but not necessarily pass, an exit exam in order to graduate:

DE, GA*, MO, NC*, TN*

Has yet to determine graduation requirements:

CT (2020)

Note: Asterisks (*) indicate states that have changed the graduation requirements within their exit exam policies since the 2010 report. Alabama will change its graduation requirements for the graduating class of 2015 so that students will no longer be required to pass the exit exam to graduate. The score on the exam will then count as a percentage of a student's final grade in a course required for graduation.

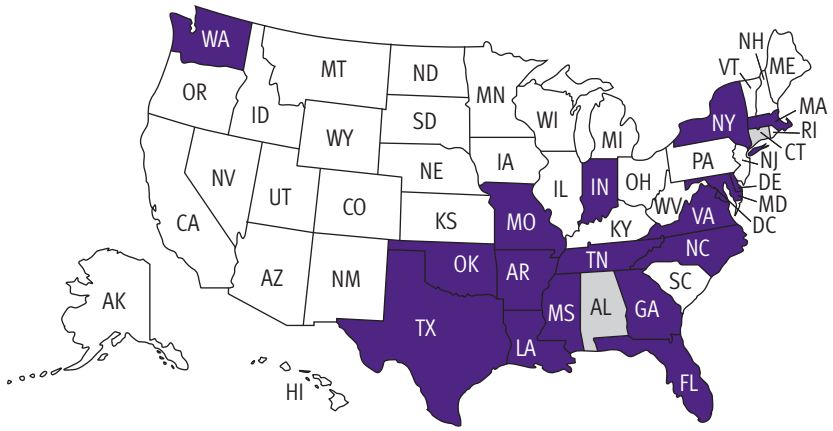
Note: Parentheses indicate year the state will begin withholding diplomas.

Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

In 2002, only two of the 18 states with exit exam policies at that time were administering EOCs (New York and Texas). By 2008, this number had grown to four of the 23 states with exit exam policies, and by 2010 seven of the 28 states with exit exam policies were requiring passage of EOC exams. Data gathered from states in 2011 indicate that 19 states are either currently administering EOC exams or have plans to transition to EOC exams in the near future (see **figure 2**).

CEP's 2008 report, *State High School Exit Exams: A Move Toward End-of-Course Exams*, specifically addressed the increasing numbers of states adopting EOC exam policies. For this 2008 report, CEP asked state education officials and school district administrators about why their states were moving to EOC exams. All of the representatives for the six states included in the study cited increasing academic rigor and alignment between state standards and curriculum as motivating factors for these policies. Interviewees also felt EOC exams provided better assessments of content mastery than comprehensive exams and that EOC exam data could be used to inform classroom instruction.

Figure 2 **Map of Types of HSEE Assessments**



States currently administering EOC exams:

AR, DE, FL, GA, IN, LA, MD, MA, MS, MO, NC, NY, OK, TN, TX, VA, WA

States planning to administer or transition to EOC exams:

AL (2015), CT (2015)

Note: Parentheses indicate year the state will begin administering EOC exams.

Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

Subjects Tested: States administering end-of-course exams typically test students in more subjects than states with comprehensive exams.

As previously mentioned, states with exit exam policies administer either comprehensive assessments that assess multiple subjects within one exam, or they administer a different end-of-course (EOC) assessment for each subject required for graduation. All 15 states that administered comprehensive exams in the 2010-11 school year (see table 1) tested their students in at least English language arts (ELA) and math. Some states (including Alabama, Nevada, Ohio, and Washington) also test students in science with comprehensive assessments.

All of the states with EOC exam policies also administer these assessments for English language arts and math. These EOC exam states administer an English II assessment more often than any other ELA assessment, and an Algebra I assessment more often than any other math assessment. However, compared to the 15 states using comprehensive exams, states with EOC exams test students in more subjects, such as science and social studies. States with EOC exams test biology more than any other science subject and U.S. history more than any other social studies subject. States with EOC exams, compared to states with comprehensive exams, also test students in more than one ELA, math, science, or social studies subject. For example, some states administer EOCs in English I, English III, Algebra II, geometry, physics, chemistry, economics, world history, world geography, and/or technology. See table 1 for a listing of which states test in which subjects and courses.

Purpose: The most common purpose of state exit exams is to assess students' mastery of the state curriculum.

Over the 10 years that CEP has surveyed states on high school exit exam policies, states have explained that these policies serve a variety of purposes, such as assessing mastery of the state curriculum or meeting a state mandate. Findings from CEP's 2011 survey indicate that states most often cited the assessment of students' mastery of the state curriculum as a purpose of their state high school exit exam policies. On our survey, states could list any number of reasons for the state's policy. Ten of the 31 states with these policies also indicated that these policies are intended to assess student readiness for entry-level employment, and eight states said these policies are intended to assess student readiness for postsecondary education. Additionally, eleven states cited identification of students at risk of not graduating high school as a purpose of their exit exam policies.

Part 2 of this report further explores the influence of the national focus on college and career readiness for high school graduates and how this focus has impacted high school assessment policies. Specific attention is paid to the impact of state adoption of the Common Core State Standards on high school exit exam policies.

Impact: Though more than 84% of students of color, 78% of low-income students, and 76% of all public school students nationwide are impacted by state high school exit exam policies[2], fewer students were required to pass these exams in order to graduate in the 2010-11 school year compared to the 2009-10 school year due to state changes in graduation requirements.

Table 2 shows the percentage of the nation's students, particularly students of color and low-income students, who are enrolled in public schools in states that administered exit exams in the 2010-11 school year. Although a large majority of these students continue to be impacted by these state policies, it is important to note that the percentage of students required to pass an exit exam in order to graduate has decreased from 74% in the 2009-10 school year to 65% in the 2010-11 school year. This decrease is, in part, a result of the states that have changed their graduation requirements. For example, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee no longer require students to pass an exit exam in order to graduate. Instead, scores on end-of-course exams now account for a percentage of a student's final grade in a course required for graduation.

Although some of the graduation requirements attached to these state policies have changed, the high proportions of students of color and low-income students affected by these policies should not be overlooked. These student populations are likely to be disproportionately affected by high school exit exam policies compared to their peers, as supported by the research described in **box 2**.

[2] Some student populations, particularly English language learners and students with disabilities, are offered alternate paths to graduation in place of meeting the exit exam requirement. However, those populations are not excluded from these percentages. Please see state profiles at www.cep-dc.org for more information about how many students in each state use these alternate paths to graduation.

Table 2 **Percentage of Public School Students Enrolled in States with High School Exit Exam Policies**

	Percentage of Students in Exit Exam States	Percentage of Students Required to Pass an Exit Exam	Percentage of Students Required to Take, but Not Pass an Exit Exam
All Students	76%	65%	10%
White	69%	58%	11%
Latino	87%	83%	4%
African American	82%	63%	19%
Asian/ Pacific Islander	81%	75%	5%
American Indian/ Native Alaskan	80%	75%	5%
All Students of Color	84%	75%	10%
Free/Reduced Lunch	78%	67%	12%
ELL	86%	81%	5%

Table reads: Seventy-six percent of public school students in the U.S. are enrolled in states with high school exit exam policies. Sixty-five percent of students in the U.S. are required to pass an exit exam, and 10% of public school students are required to take, but not necessarily pass, an exit exam.

Note: Not all rows sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2009-10 enrollment data and Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state education departments, July 2011.

Box 2 Research on Effects of High School Exit Exam Policies

Research studies on the effects of high school exit exam policies are difficult to conduct for a number of reasons. For example, many factors affect graduation rates, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the specific impact of exit exam policies on graduation rates. Exit exam policies also vary greatly from state to state, as do characteristics of the student populations affected by these policies. Because of the number of students of color and low-income students, who typically graduate high school at lower rates than their peers, enrolled in states with exit exam policies, we have summarized below some of the research studying these specific student populations in selected states.

Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) found that low-income students and students of color experienced more difficulty passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in 2009 (Human Resources Research Organization, 2010). HumRRO also found that English language learners specifically have significantly more trouble passing the CAHSEE than their peers. These findings are supported by Reardon, Atteberry, and Arshan (2009), who reported that the requirement to pass an exit exam had a largely negative impact on low-performing students in California.

Similarly, Papay, Murnane, and Willett (2010) reported that failing the math portion of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) increased the probability of dropping out for low-income, urban students. Ou concluded in his 2009 study that black and Hispanic students as well as students from low-income families were more likely to drop out of high school after barely failing the first administration of New Jersey's High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). Dee and Jacob (2006) reported that the most significant negative effects of Minnesota's Basic Skills Test (BST, which was replaced in 2010) on 10th and 11th grade dropouts were concentrated in school districts with lower poverty levels.

In addition to the state-level research presented above, the National Research Council (NRC) drew attention to the possible lack of positive effects, and likelihood of negative effects, of these policies for all students in its 2011 report, *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*. In this report, the NRC concluded that high school exit exam policies, as currently implemented, decrease the rate of high school graduation without increasing student achievement. The NRC reported an estimated decrease in graduation rates of 2 percentage points nationwide when averaged over the population. These findings should not be taken lightly, considering CEP has found that over three-quarters of public school students in the United States are enrolled in states with exit exam policies.

However, the NRC report has come under recent criticism from Dr. Eric Hanushek, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and member of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. In Dr. Hanushek's 2011 report, *Grinding the Antitesting Ax: More bias than evidence behind NRC panel's conclusions*, he argues that the NRC excluded many well-regarded studies that show "little impact of exit exams on dropout behavior or graduation outcomes." Dr. Hanushek also feels there are limitations to the studies the NRC uses to draw its conclusions.

The research presented above is certainly not a complete review of all of the research on the effects of state high school exit exam policies. It is also important to note that there is little research on the effects of more recent high school exit exam policies, such as some of the newly implemented end-of-course exams. The majority of the existing research is limited either to policies in one specific state or to policies implemented prior to the move to more recent end-of-course assessments. For more information, please also see Warren and Grodsky (2009) and Grodsky, Warren, and Kalogrides (2009).

Part 2:
State High School Assessment Policies and College and Career Readiness

In recent years, the United States has seen a number of state-led and nationally led movements in improving college and career readiness among high school graduates. In 2009, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored a state-led movement to establish a rigorous set of standards that would prepare students for college and career more consistently from state to state. These standards were released in 2010 and are now known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As of November 2011, 45 states and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS, a rigorous set of learning standards in English language arts and mathematics. In further support of this movement, the federally funded Race to the Top program provided funds to two state consortia to develop assessments aligned to these standards. As of November 2011, 23 states and the District of Columbia were participating in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and 28 states were participating in the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), with some states participating in both.

In President Obama's 2011 state of the union address, he reiterated a goal he set at the beginning of his presidency that "by the end of the decade, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world." The President's emphasis on postsecondary education is evident in his administration's education policy initiatives, such as the Race to the Top program mentioned above, which encourages states to adopt a set of rigorous learning standards aimed at preparing high school graduates for college and careers.

The Department of Education (ED) further emphasized the administration's focus on college and career readiness when it released guidance for state education agencies to apply for flexibility regarding specific requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in September of 2011. For example, in order to obtain ESEA flexibility, states must demonstrate they have established college and career readiness expectations for all of their students as well as annually reporting on the college-going and college credit-accumulation rates for all of their students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Finally, one of the most obvious examples of the focus on college and career readiness at the federal level appears in the naming of the bill to reauthorize ESEA that was approved by the Heath, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee in October, 2011. The title of the bill was "Ensuring College and Career Readiness for All Students" and requires states to adopt college and career readiness standards.

The state and national focus on college and career readiness could have a significant impact on state high school assessment policies. In CEP's 2011 survey on state high school assessment policies, we looked specifically at how college and career readiness initiatives have impacted state high school exit exams as well as other assessments administered to high school students. We asked states if and how these assessments are used by potential employers and/or postsecondary institutions. We also looked specifically at how these assessment policies might be replaced or altered in light of states' participation in one or both of the two state consortia that are developing common assessments aligned to the CCSS. Part 2 of this report describes those findings.

Replacing Exit Exams: Twenty-seven of the 31 states with exit exams reported participating in one or both of the state consortia to develop common assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards and measuring college and career readiness. Of these 27, at least 16 states plan to replace their current exams with consortia assessments, and at least 16 of the 27 states expect the consortia assessments to be more rigorous than their current assessments.

Findings from CEP's 2011 survey show that 27 states with exit exam policies are participating in one or both of the state consortia developing common assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math and are designed to assess college and career readiness. Of those states, 15 are members of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), 9 are members of SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, and 3 are members of both consortia. This high level of participation in the movement towards college and career readiness standards and assessments could mean that high school assessment policies will see significant change in the near future.

Of the 27 states with high school exit exam policies participating in the development of common assessments, 16 indicated on their surveys that they plan to replace their current high school exit exams with assessments developed by their consortium in English language arts and math. The remaining 11 states did not respond to this question or said that this decision had not yet been made. However, eight states said they would continue their exit exams in subjects not tested on the consortia-developed assessments, even if they replace their exit exams in English language arts and math (the two subjects for which both consortia are developing assessments).

We also asked states belonging to one or both of the assessment consortia if they felt that the new consortia-developed assessments would be more rigorous, less rigorous, or about the same as their current exams. Sixteen states said that the consortia-developed assessments would be more rigorous than their current high school exit exams. One state (Delaware) responded that the new assessments would be about the same as their current assessments, and another state (Arkansas) responded that the new assessments would be "no less rigorous" than their current assessments.

Uses of Exit Exams Beyond High School: High school exit exams are currently used by potential employers or postsecondary education institutions in only one state (Georgia), despite many states citing as a purpose of those assessments college readiness (8 states) and career readiness (10 states).

As discussed in Part 1 of this report, eight of the 31 states reported that these exam policies are intended to assess student readiness for postsecondary education. Therefore, we asked states if their exit exams are used by postsecondary education institutions for admission purposes, for course placement purposes, to grant students exemptions on course placement exams, or to grant students any form of postsecondary course credit for their performance on the exit exam. Only one state (Georgia) described a statewide policy related to any of these postsecondary uses for exit exams. (See **box 3** for further explanation of Georgia's policies.) Florida described a pilot program allowing students with certain scores on the FCAT to skip placement testing at some colleges or allowing dual enrollment, but neither of these practices are statewide at this point.

Dr. David Conley, Professor at the University of Oregon and CEO of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, explained some of the challenges associated with using high school assessments, such as exit exams, for postsecondary purposes in e-mail correspondence with CEP. He explained that states simply have yet to figure out how to link their state exams with postsecondary education. He thinks that part of the problem is the reluctance in postsecondary education to cede control or discretion over admissions policies, which thereby limits the use of state test data for such purposes. Dr. Conley believes that "the admissions bridge

Box 3 **Postsecondary Education Uses of High School Exit Exams in Georgia**

As of spring 2008, with the launch of the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) based on the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), colleges and universities within the university system of Georgia have permitted students scoring at the advanced proficiency level or higher on the English language arts test to enroll in credit-bearing courses without taking additional tests. Students who do not score at the advanced proficiency level may need to take additional tests, and, if not successful, are placed in remedial, noncredit-bearing courses. With the launch of the GPS-based GHSGT in mathematics in spring 2011, students scoring at the advanced proficiency level or higher may enroll in credit-bearing courses without having to take additional tests.

Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

is going to have to be crossed at some point, and the only way that will happen productively is if state postsecondary institutions become much more involved in the design of state assessments systems and the reporting of data from such systems."

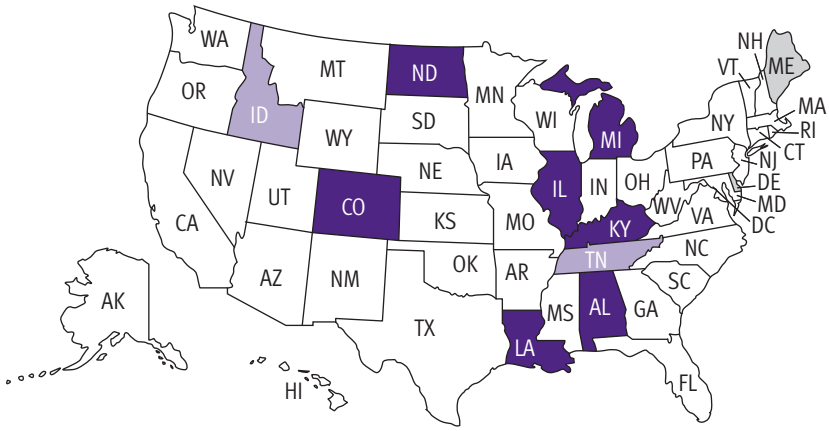
Another of the challenges that states face in using high school assessments for postsecondary education purposes may be the lack of alignment between K-12 and higher education standards and expectations. Jordan Horowit, the senior director for special projects with the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS), explains that the movement from purely academic standards in high school to college and career readiness standards will do little to improve college readiness without an understanding of what postsecondary institutions expect of first-year students (Horowit, 2011). He says that postsecondary institutions must be able to clearly define and explain what is expected of entering students before state college and career readiness standards can be a true predictor of college success (Horowit, 2011). Complete College America (CCA), a nonprofit working with states to increase the numbers of Americans with college degrees, lists among its recommendations for states to meaningfully improve college completion rates the need for states to standardize their placement policies (Complete College America, 2010). According to CCA, most states currently allow for a variety of definitions of college and career readiness, which are all measured by varying placement exams with different cut scores. In other words, without a clear definition for what state-developed assessments, such as exit exams, should be assessing for college success, postsecondary institutions cannot use these assessments for purposes such as admissions, course placement purposes, or granting course credit.

College Entrance Exams: Eleven states have current or planned policies to require students to take a college entrance exam (the ACT or SAT) in high school. Many of these policies are new, with five of these states implementing them in the 2009-10 school year or later.

An increasing number of states have implemented polices related to administering college entrance exams, such as the ACT or the SAT, to high school students. **Figure 3** shows the states with current or planned policies that require students to take the ACT or SAT in high school.

All 11 states with college entrance exam policies administer these exams to students free of charge in the 11th grade and during the regular school day. These policies appear to have gained popularity in recent years, as 5 of the 11 states described above have implemented their policies in the 2009-10 school year or later. It may be that the national emphasis on assessing college and career readiness could be motivating this movement, as all five of the states implementing or considering these policies since the 2009-10 school year cite assessment of college and career readiness as at least one purpose for the policy.

Figure 3 **Map of States Administering College Entrance Exams to High School Students**



States requiring students to take the ACT:

AL (2014), CO, IL, KY, LA (2012), MI, ND

States requiring students to take the SAT:

DE, ME

States requiring students to take the ACT or the SAT:

ID (2012), TN

Note: Parentheses indicate year the state will begin administering college entrance exams.

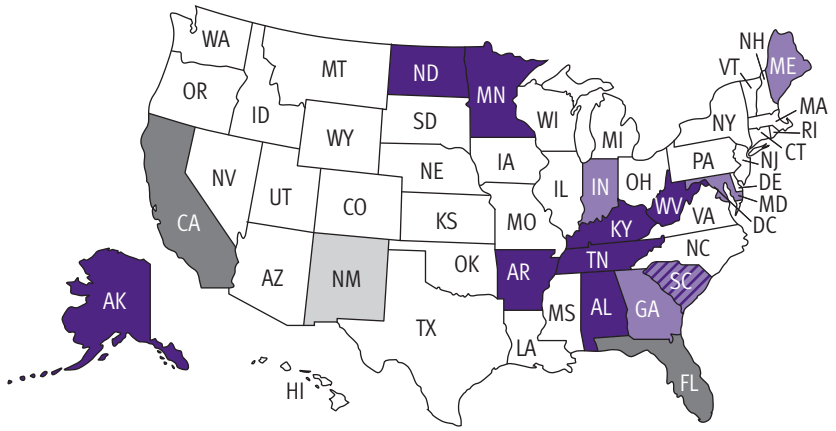
Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

College and Career Readiness Assessments: Sixteen states administer, or at least offer to all students, assessments that are intended to assess students' readiness for college and/or a career. Nine of the 16 states administer one of (or a combination of) assessments developed by ACT. Five of the 16 states administer the PSAT for this purpose, and an additional 2 of the 16 administer state-developed assessments for this purpose.

Policymakers and policy analysts use the term "college and career readiness assessment" to describe a number of different assessments administered to high school students. As noted above, many states administer college entrance exams, such as the SAT or ACT, for the purpose of determining whether or not students are prepared for college and career. In our 2011 state survey, CEP asked if states are administering assessments other than college entrance exams or high school exit exams to assess college and career readiness.

The survey findings indicate that 16 states have current or planned policies that either require or give students the option to participate in college and/or career readiness assessment programs (see **figure 4**). In 9 of the 16 states with current or planned college and career readiness assessment policies, these assessments are one of (or a combination of) the assessments developed by ACT known as EXPLORE, PLAN, and WorkKeys. According to ACT, the results from the EXPLORE assessment, typically administered in the 8th or 9th grade, can help students plan their high school courses, prepare for the ACT, or choose a career direction. The PLAN assessment is administered in the 10th grade and test results are intended to help students determine if their remaining courses in high school are the best choices to prepare them for college and to provide information on options after high school. The WorkKeys assessments are administered at varying grade levels; ACT suggests that students first take them as early as the 9th grade and then again in the 11th and 12th grades. According to ACT, WorkKeys assessments inform students and future employers about students' preparation for the workforce.

Figure 4 **States with College and Career Readiness Assessment Policies**



States administering ACT's PLAN, EXPLORE, and/or WorkKeys assessments:

AL (*E,P,W*), AK (*W*), AR (*E,P*), KY (*E,P,W*), MN (*E,P*), ND (*W*), SC (*E,P*), TN (*E,P*), WV (*E,P*)

States administering the PSAT for CCR purposes:

GA, IN, MD, ME, SC

States administering state-developed CCR assessments:

CA, FL

CCR assessment not yet determined:

NM

Key: *E* = EXPLORE *P* = PLAN *W* = WorkKeys *CCR* = College and Career Readiness

Note: South Carolina is striped because it offers the option of either the PSAT or the PLAN assessment to all 10th grade students.

Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

In 5 of the 16 states, the PSAT is used to assess college and career readiness. Georgia, Indiana, Maine, and Maryland offer all 10th grade students an opportunity to take the PSAT for free, and South Carolina offers the option of either the PSAT or the PLAN assessment to all 10th grade students. The College Board explains that in addition to helping students prepare for the SAT, the PSAT can provide feedback on strengths and weaknesses in skills necessary for college study. Although Georgia and South Carolina are not the only states that administer the PSAT to all of their students, they were the only two states that reported using the PSAT to assess college readiness.

Two of the 16 states administer their own state-developed college and career readiness assessments. California provides students with an optional extension of the state assessment, which is intended to inform students and postsecondary institutions of a student's readiness for college. Results on this extended assessment, called the Early Assessment Program (EAP), are used by postsecondary institutions in California for placement purposes and as an opportunity for students to earn exemptions for course credit. Florida has developed its own state high school assessment (Postsecondary Education Readiness Test, or PERT) intended to improve the college and career readiness of high school graduates and to reduce the percentage of those graduates needing postsecondary remediation in reading, writing, and mathematics after high school. See **box 4** for more information about California's EAP and Florida's PERT. In one of the 16 states (New Mexico), school districts have been exempted from the state requirement to administer a CCR assessment since the 2009-10 school year for financial reasons.

Box 4 **College and Career Assessments in California and Florida**

California's Early Assessment Program (EAP)

California offers eligible students the opportunity to participate in the Early Assessment Program for English and mathematics. The EAP may help students earn an exemption from the English and/or mathematics placement tests required for freshmen entering California State University and participating California Community College campuses. An exemption in this case means that students who attain a certain score on the exam would not have to take the required placement tests prior to enrolling in courses for credit at these postsecondary institutions. Students who are enrolled in the 11th grade and are taking the California Standards Test (CST) for English language arts have the option of taking the EAP for English, which is administered as an extension of the CST. Students who are enrolled in the 11th grade and are taking the CST for Algebra II or the CST for summative high school mathematics have the option of taking the EAP for mathematics, which is administered as an extension of the CST.

The California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) also provides information about college and career readiness. There are three levels of passing the CAHSEE: 1) pass (competent in ELA and/or mathematics based on the CAHSEE standards); 2) proficient; and 3) advanced. The ELA part of the CAHSEE is aligned with the California ELA academic content standards through grade 10. The mathematics part of the CAHSEE is aligned with the California mathematics academic content standards through the first part of Algebra I.

Students who achieve a status of "Ready for California State University (CSU) or participating California Community College (CCC) college-level English courses" or "Ready for CSU or participating CCC college-level mathematics courses" are not required to take placement exams for those subjects at CSU or participating CCC campuses. However, students who receive a status of "Conditional Pass" are required to take additional courses in mathematics prior to graduating high school.

Florida's Postsecondary Education Readiness Test

The objective of administering the PERT to high school students is to improve the college and career readiness of high school graduates and reduce the percentage of those graduates needing postsecondary remediation in reading, writing, and mathematics after high school.

Legislation passed in 2011 mandated placement testing for students who score within specified levels of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading and mathematics. PERT is administered in the 11th grade to students scoring below the FCAT cut score that signifies students are college-ready. These students are required to complete postsecondary preparatory instruction while in high school. The PERT is also optional for any student wishing to earn exemption from postsecondary education placement tests.

Source: Center on Education Policy, high school assessments survey of state departments of education, July 2011

Discussion and Synthesis

The findings of CEP's 2011 survey of state high school assessments raise a number of questions associated with these policies. First, are states requiring too much testing at the high school level? **Table 3** lists all of the states with policies mandating one or more of the types of assessments discussed in this report and whether or not they administer additional exams to meet NCLB requirements. Eighteen states have two or more different state-mandated high school assessments, and six of those 18 states have three or more mandated high school assessments. Opponents of standardized testing would argue that standardized assessments, especially high-stakes assessments, have numerous negative effects on students without improving student achievement. They list negative effects such as narrowing of the curriculum and potentially increasing grade retention and dropout rates. However, others would argue that the standardized testing movement has increased academic standards and the expectations of high school graduates, most recently in expecting students to graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college or a career. These proponents would argue that testing is not the cause of grade retention and dropout rates, but rather an indicator that these students are receiving an inadequate K-12 education.

Table 3 **States with Mandated High School Assessments**

State	High School Exit Exams	Additional NCLB Assessment†	Mandated College Entrance Exam	Mandated College and Career Readiness Assessment
Alabama*	✓		✓	✓
Alaska	✓	✓		✓
Arizona	✓			
Arkansas*	✓			✓
California	✓			
Colorado		✓	✓	
Connecticut*	✓			
Delaware*	✓	✓	✓	
Florida*	✓			✓
Georgia*	✓			
Idaho	✓		✓	
Illinois		✓	✓	
Indiana*	✓			
Kansas		✓		
Kentucky		✓	✓	✓
Louisiana*	✓		✓	✓
Maine		✓	✓	✓
Maryland*	✓			
Massachusetts*	✓			
Michigan		✓	✓	
Minnesota	✓			
Mississippi*	✓			
Missouri*	✓			
Nevada	✓			
New Jersey	✓			
New Mexico	✓			✓
New York*	✓			
North Carolina*	✓	✓		
North Dakota		✓	✓	
Ohio	✓			

continues ➤

State	High School Exit Exams	Additional NCLB Assessment†	Mandated College Entrance Exam	Mandated College and Career Readiness Assessment
Oklahoma*	✓			
Oregon	✓			
Rhode Island	✓			
South Carolina	✓			
Tennessee*	✓		✓	✓
Texas*	✓	✓		✓
Virginia*	✓			
Washington*	✓			
West Virginia		✓		✓

* These states administer end-of-course exams, meaning they administer more than one high school exit exam.

† All states administer an assessment to meet NCLB accountability requirements. However, states indicated in this column administer an assessment for NCLB accountability that is separate from the assessments described in the other three columns.

Source: All of the policies described above were verified by state department personnel, except in Texas, where policy experts from the Texas High School Project at the Communities Foundation of Texas verified this information for CEP.

Secondly, are states testing the "right" things? As mentioned in Part 1 of this report, states vary a great deal on the types of assessments they administer and the subjects and/or standards that they assess. Part 2 discussed the challenges in aligning high school and postsecondary expectations. However, the Common Core State Standards appear to be a step in the right direction. In 2011, the Educational Policy Improvement Center surveyed a national sample of nearly 2,000 instructors of 25 course categories from two- and four-year institutions. The survey examined the degree to which these instructors found the CCSS to be applicable to and important for success in their courses. In general, the instructors rated the CCSS as applicable and important (Conley et. al., 2011). However, the study's lead author, Dr. Conley, notes that state testing that is limited to academic content knowledge in English and math will not generate sufficient information to improve college and career readiness for most students. In e-mail correspondence with CEP, he explained that "success beyond high school requires more than meeting a cut score; it requires flexibility and adaptability as a learner and the ability to be a strategic thinker, combined with a sound foundation of content knowledge."

Finally, what is the future of state high school assessment policies, especially in light of the movement towards the CCSS and common assessments? Part 2 of this report discussed states' plans to replace their current high school math and ELA exit exams with assessments developed by one of the two federally funded state consortia. Will states that adopted the CCSS also change their college entrance exams and college and career readiness assessments? With a state assessment that measures students' college and career readiness, as both the PARCC and SMARTER Balanced assessments intend to do, will there be a need for mandated ACT and SAT testing or for existing college and career readiness assessment policies? In other words, can states, or will states, eliminate or consolidate their assessment policies in order to streamline their assessment system tied to the CCSS?

CEP's 2011 survey of state high school assessments reveals a number of changes in these policies. One could infer that some of these changes may be influenced by the national and state focus on preparing high school graduates for college and career. However, the extent of this influence, as well as the ways in which these policies will continue to change, remain to be seen.

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