How have high school exit exams changed our schools?

Some Perspectives from Virginia & Maryland

About the Center on Education Policy | 2
Synthesis of Findings and Themes | 3
Case Study Purposes and Methods | 7
Virginia County Public Schools | 9
Maryland County Public Schools | 19
Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

Keith Gayler, the Center’s associate director, conducted the case studies and wrote this report. Dr. Brenda Neuman-Sheldon, a consultant to the Center, assisted Mr. Gayler by carrying out some of the interviews. Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant, edited the report. In addition, the Center would like to thank all the district and school administrators, teachers, and students who took part in our study.

Finally, we also want to express our gratitude to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that supported this project. We also drew on general resources from The George Gund Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation.

Statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Center.

© 2005 Center on Education Policy
Synthesis of Findings and Themes

As part of a multi-year national study of state exit examination policies, the Center on Education Policy conducted case studies of local implementation of high school exit exams in two school districts in the winter of 2004-05. One district was located in Virginia, which currently requires students to pass a series of end-of-course exams to graduate. The other district was located in Maryland, which is phasing in a series of end-of-course exams that will become a graduation requirement for the class of 2009. The districts participated on the condition they would not be identified by name.

Our case studies were based on interviews with students, teachers, principals, counselors, testing coordinators, and district administrators. We looked at programs and policies being implemented by districts and schools to respond to exit exam requirements. We explored how these exams have changed school environment, classroom instruction, and student actions. We examined the resources and supports available to help prepare teachers and students for the exams, and we asked about the benefits and drawbacks of the state exit exam policies.

Several main findings and themes emerged from one or both districts.

Both Districts

NOTICEABLE IMPACT. Exit exam policies have brought significant changes to both districts in areas such as instructional content and methods, allocation of resources, staffing patterns, and school climate.

DEDICATION TO MAKING POLICY WORK. Teachers and principals in both districts, even those who disagreed with the exit exam policy, seemed to be committed to helping students pass the exams and were making significant efforts to accomplish this goal. In only one school did those we interviewed express a defeatist attitude about what could be done to help students meet the requirement.

STUDENT AWARENESS. Although students in both districts were generally aware of the exit exam requirements and some of the remediation options open to them, some students didn’t know or were misinformed about key aspects of exit exams, including
the content likely to be covered on the tests themselves and the full range of resources and testing options available to help them pass.

**DISTRICT SUPPORTS.** In both states, teachers and principals noted that the district was playing a critical function in brokering services and supports to help prepare teachers and students for the exams. Key supports for teachers included professional development and curriculum maps outlining content and skills to be covered throughout the school year before tests are given. Supports for students included screened materials from the state and other providers, such as online resources, study guides, and other preparation materials.

**STAFFING ISSUES.** In both districts, schools had changed staffing patterns to assign some of their strongest teachers to teach tested subjects and to make staff available for remediation. In at least some instances, resources were being pulled away from other areas to cover the demands of exit exams.

**IMPACT ON INSTRUCTION.** Exit exams are affecting how and what teachers teach in both districts. Teachers have revised their instruction to emphasize topics and skills likely to be tested and to spend more time reviewing information and test-taking skills, especially as testing time approaches. On one hand, this has brought greater focus to instruction by eliminating some extraneous activities and tightening the curriculum. On the other hand, some students and teachers complain that instruction has become too focused on reviewing discrete facts, with little time for discussion, in-depth learning, or creative lessons, and that some students are being left behind as teachers push ahead to cover all the topics on district curriculum maps and pacing guides. Some teachers also expressed concern that non-tested content and skills, from literary analysis to foreign languages, are being given short shrift.

**CLASSROOM ASSESSMENTS.** Teachers and administrators in both districts reported revising in-class assessments to more closely resemble the format and substance of exit exams. For example, teachers in the Virginia district began using in their classrooms more multiple-choice items with a format similar to those on the state Standards of Learning (SOL) exams, while the Maryland district developed quarterly and mid-course assessments that closely tracked that state’s High School Assessments (HSAs). Assessments across subject areas in the Maryland district used more writing prompts because of changes in the state tests.

**IN-SCHOOL SOLUTIONS.** Both districts appeared to be devoting the most time and energy to in-school remediation and test prep classes, rather than after-school or summer school programs, on the grounds that students are more apt to attend classes during regular school hours.

**RELATIONSHIP OF EXIT EXAM AND COURSE FINALS.** Our conversations in both districts elicited concerns from staff about the relationship of the end-of-course exit exam to the final exams for the course. Staff wondered why one test could not fulfill both roles and expressed concern that once students took the exit exams, many seemed disengaged, and classroom time seemed less productive. Still, teachers recognized the need for exit exam results to be available before the end of the year for graduation purposes.
RESOURCE NEEDS. Officials and staff in both districts emphasized the need for more resources to cover additional costs related to exit exams, especially the costs of transportation for students taking retests and of instructional time lost due to additional tests and retests.

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS. The benefits of exit exams cited by both districts included encouraging educators and others to talk about student performance, promoting greater cooperation among teachers (including regular education and special education teachers), and making resistant teachers actually teach the curriculum. The drawbacks of exit exams brought up in both districts included a decreased emphasis on higher-level skills, less time for valuable activities and subjects not covered on the exit exams, and the push to cover more content at the expense of less depth in that content.

Virginia

PRESSURE OF CURRENT REQUIREMENT. Teachers and students in Virginia, where students are already being held to exit exam requirements, reported feeling high stress levels from the SOL mandates. The stress seems to be especially great for teachers, who voiced concerns about their jobs being on the line and about the overall impact of the exams on their instructional practices and school climate. Students also described the classroom atmosphere in courses with SOL exams as “intense”—referring to the rapid pace of instruction, the continuous review of factual knowledge, and the palpable stress shown by teachers and administrators. The serious impact of the exit exams in Virginia may stem from two key aspects. First, Virginia is farther along than some states in using end-of-course exams as a graduation requirement. Second, the state is also using SOLs to assess adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and to determine whether schools are accredited under the state accountability system, which means the tests have consequences for teachers and administrators, as well as students.

VARIETY OF STUDENT SUPPORTS. Schools in the Virginia district had put in place a relatively wide variety of supports to help students pass exit examinations and felt strongly that they knew what supports were most effective, such as in-class remediation rather than after-school programs. This may be a result of Virginia’s longer history with end-of-course exams as well as the fact that diplomas are already being withheld in the state.

EXAM CONTENT AND SCORING. A common complaint among teachers in the Virginia district pertained to the lack of specificity from the state about topics to be covered on the exit exams from among the broad range of content in the state standards. Many teachers also felt that except for writing, the SOL tests emphasized factual knowledge over long-term skills and competencies. Some teachers also said they had little understanding of how the tests were scored, and several desired more feedback from the test results about student strengths and weaknesses.

DISTRICT SUPPORTS FOR SUCCESS. The Virginia district has taken several steps to promote success on exit exams. The district supports remedial courses, including summer programs, to help students pass the exams. The district has undertaken efforts to
develop a better understanding among parents and community people about the goals and importance of the SOLs. The district has secured “cutting edge” professional development for its teachers. Teachers gave high marks to the district’s efforts to collect, disseminate, and make judgments about the quality of test preparation materials and related resources.

Maryland

LESS PRESSURE IN A PHASE-IN STATE. Although the HSAs had already influenced practices in Maryland, few students and teachers said they felt pressured or nervous about their performance on the exams. This is probably because diplomas will not be withheld based on exit exam results for a few more years. However, since Maryland will use the HSAs for accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act for the first time using 2005 results, the pressure on teachers and administrators may increase in years to come.

TRANSPARENCY OF TESTING SYSTEM. Teachers in the Maryland district generally felt they had a clear sense of what was likely to be on the exit exams. They were also involved in test scoring, which helped to create trust in the system. This transparency in test development and scoring seemed to make a difference in terms of teachers’ acceptance of the testing system.

QUALITY OF ASSESSMENTS. Teachers in the case study district generally expressed support for key aspects of the Maryland exit exam system, including its emphasis on constructed response test items, which they felt encouraged students to learn more than simple factual knowledge, and the priority on testing writing across the curriculum. Many teachers felt that they, too, were learning new skills and changing instruction for the better. Some English teachers, however, thought that the writing and English skills tested were too low and limited to writing short responses.
Case Study Purposes and Methods

High school exit examinations are a growing reform effort in the United States. In 2005, students in 20 states will have to pass these exams to receive a high school diploma. By 2009, 25 states plan to have these exams in place, affecting over 70% of public school students. The research literature surrounding these exams is still relatively sparse, and information on implementation is difficult to come by. In an attempt to fill this gap and meet the policy community’s needs, the Center on Education Policy began three years ago to report on state exit examinations, focusing our research primarily at the state level. But a need remains for timely information about what school districts and schools are doing to implement exit exams.

To this end, in December 2004 and January 2005, the Center conducted two district-level case studies to provide examples of what administrators, teachers, and students say has been done to implement exit exams in their districts. These case studies are qualitative in nature and are not representative of the experiences of all districts, or even of all schools or individuals within the districts we studied, but they do provide some concrete examples of what these policies look like at the ground level.

Our research questions were broad, but this was an exploratory study that aimed to describe to the wider education community what is taking place in a few districts and to inform our future, more in-depth research projects. The basic research questions that guided our work were as follows:

■ What kinds of programs and policy changes have been put in place or are being planned at the district and school level as exit exams are being phased in?
■ What major changes have administrators, teachers, and students made in how they act or learn as a result of exit exams?
■ What resources are available to districts, schools, teachers, and students to implement or prepare for their state’s exit exam requirement?
■ What do individuals in these districts believe have been the benefits or drawbacks of exit exams for themselves and for the system as a whole?

The case studies relied on multiple sources of information and perspectives to examine how exit exams are being implemented in each district. Within each district, we spoke with students, teachers, principals, district officials, counselors, and testing coordinators in either individual interviews or focus groups. The interviews (district administrators, principals, counselors, and testing coordinators) and focus groups (teachers and
students) were organized around a series of open-ended questions. Schools and participants were chosen with the assistance of district and school administrators. We aimed to include schools representing a range of achievement levels and policy options and to include teachers from various instructional areas and students with different achievement levels. We spoke with students who had minimal exposure to the exit exams as well as seniors who had to pass the tests to graduate, and with teachers who taught the subjects tested by exit exams as well as those who did not.

There are several limitations to the study, but its purposes are limited as well. The main limitation is that districts and interviewees were not chosen randomly and are limited in number. Since we are not claiming that our results are representative, however, this is less problematic than it would be for a more far-reaching study. The other major limitation is that some groups affected by exit exams are not included in the study; these include parents, community members, and students who may have left school due to exit exam requirements.

The two districts studied agreed to participate on the condition that they not be identified in the final report, so that individuals would feel more comfortable discussing their reactions to high school exit examinations. For the purposes of this report, we will simply refer to them as Virginia County Public Schools and Maryland County Public Schools.
Virginia County Public Schools

Virginia County Public Schools (VCPS), as we will call our first case study district, is a relatively large, relatively diverse, and mostly suburban district in Virginia. Student performance on the state’s series of high school exit examinations is also roughly average, better than the state average in some subjects and below average in others. In other words, it is a typical district in many ways.

As with all districts in the state, students in the class of 2004 were required to pass a series of Standards of Learning (SOL) end-of-course examinations to receive a diploma, two in English and any four of the ten tests in mathematics, science, and history/social science. The tests consist of multiple-choice questions and a response to a writing prompt on the English:Writing test. Roughly 95% of students in the state’s class of 2004 passed all six exit exams. Students take these exams after completing the corresponding courses. Most students begin taking exit exams in the ninth grade. The state also uses its SOL tests at all tested grades, including its English and math high school exit exams, to determine whether schools and districts have made adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act and to accredit schools under the state accountability system.

As part of our study we visited four high schools in VCPS and spoke with 8 to 15 students and 7 to 14 teachers in each school, as well as principals, testing coordinators, assistant principals, and counseling staff when they were available. We also spoke with the superintendent and other district level staff. Here is what they told us.

Students

When asked about the SOLs, their importance, and their impacts on personal decision-making or the classroom, student perceptions varied widely.

Basic Knowledge about the SOLs

For the most part, students were well informed about the requirements of the SOLs and the options available to them. A few students thought that if they failed the SOL for a particular class, they would have to retake the entire class, and while that was offered as a means of remediation in some schools it was not a requirement. Also, students are given a choice of SOLs to pass to meet the requirement, but some students thought they had to pass a specific set of tests. One student thought the SOLs just impacted
course grades, but most students knew how many tests they had to take and that these tests were required for graduation. Many students knew of the certificate of completion option for students who met all the graduation requirements except for passing the SOLs. Most students also knew some remediation options were available to them in their school, whether an after-school program, summer school, or remedial classes during the school day.

The areas students seemed to know the least about were supports available to them from the state, less common testing options, and test content. Few students mentioned the availability of online resources developed by the state to help them prepare for the SOLs, or if they did know of them, they did not use them, preferring to use any materials provided to them by their teachers. Also, none of the students we interviewed was aware that students who continued to fail the SOLs in some cases could substitute scores from other tests, such as the Advanced Placement tests, to meet the requirement. The knowledge gap that troubled students most, though, was a feeling that they did not know what content would be covered on the SOLs because the range of facts that could be tested was so wide. They often expressed a sense that the test assessed “random facts” and covered a small part of what they actually covered in class, so preparation was very difficult. Several students said they felt as if they had “to memorize facts all time” to prepare for the SOLs. As one student noted, “We simply don’t feel like what is on the test matches what we were taught.”

Changes in the Classroom

Most students said they had seen effects of the SOL exit exams in their classrooms. In particular, most students mentioned that they spent a great deal of class time preparing for the SOLs. Students mentioned spending anywhere from one week to a month on cramming prior to the SOLs—time spent reviewing facts and practicing test-taking skills. For instance, one student said that a teacher told her, “If you take more than 30 seconds on a test question, you should skip it or guess.” Preparation was not limited to the time just before exams. Many students said that teachers frequently incorporated items from previous SOLs in their class discussion and classroom tests. Teachers had often developed preparation materials for students to use throughout the year, including “lists of things that could be on the test,” or had asked students to keep “SOL notebooks” in which students would write down throughout the year things that might be on the tests. Many students said their classes had become repetitive because of the test prep work and that there “was no time for fun stuff in class anymore,” in the words of one student.

The other major change in the classroom that students noticed was one of atmosphere. Several students said that SOL classes were “intense.” When asked what they meant, one student said there was no time for group discussion anymore, and several students explained that they had to cover so much in class that the teachers would have to go on to new subjects even if students said they had not understood what had happened the day before. One student went so far as to say that class boiled down to, “Why do we learn it? Because it’s on the SOL. Why do we teach it? Because it’s on the SOL.” Students also recognized how much stress teachers were under and felt this contributed to an intense classroom environment. “It looks bad for the teachers if we fail,” explained one student. A student in another school reported that a teacher told her, “If you don’t
pass the SOL, it’s my job.” Students in another school knew that their school had not been fully accredited under Virginia’s accountability system because of its SOL scores and had often heard teachers express concern about this.

Opinions about Fairness and Other Issues

Many students mentioned test pressure or nervousness about passing the exit exams as a problem. Older students who had failed exams in the past were the most concerned about their ability to graduate, while younger students were more upbeat. Older students had complaints about the quality of remediation programs, especially those conducted in large group settings, and wanted more one-on-one help and test guides and other materials. One student said, “The after-school program here is only as good as the teacher you get.” When we asked another student if he expected to pass an upcoming test he said, “I’ll pass, but not because of anything the school does but because I want to.” Several older students at three of the four schools said that they had friends who had dropped out at least partly due to the SOLs. They also worried about how much they would remember from a class if they had to retake a test multiple times. In other words, they saw their chances of passing a test by retesting as diminishing over time as they got farther and farther away from when they first covered the material.

In general, younger students who had minimal exposure to the exit exams said they thought that there were adequate supports available to them. “There is plenty of help if you need it or ask for it,” noted one student. Another said, “Have confidence in yourself, and you’ll be okay.” Students pointed to after-school programs and summer school as places where they would likely go for help first, but some were concerned that transportation for these classes could be problematic, as could the costs of summer school.

Another set of concerns about the exams had to do with fairness and relevance. Several students were worried that the “SOL is not made for everybody” and that “not everyone tests well.” One student asked, “Why are these [the SOLs] important to us? Colleges don’t care. We know they don’t use them for anything.” Another declared that “this isn’t related to what we do after high school.” Many students also expressed frustration that they could pass a course and the course’s final exam but not pass the SOL. One asked, “How can I do well in a class and not pass the SOL? That just doesn’t seem right. Why can’t our final exam and grade be enough?”

Some students did have positive things to say about the exams. Several students agreed that they pay more attention in class and study harder because of the exams. “I expect more out of myself because of the tests,” noted one student. Another said, “It helps you pay some attention in class and shows you how much you have learned over the year.”

Teachers & the Classroom

The teachers we interviewed expressed concerns about the content, scoring, and reporting of the state exit exams. Many had strong views about the impact of the tests on their own teaching and the overall school environment. Our interviews with teachers also shed light on supports available to students.
The Test Itself

One common teacher complaint about the SOLs pertained to the lack of specificity from the state about the particular topics that would be covered on the exams. As one teacher remarked, “Saying that the French and Indian War will be on the test is not enough for me to go on.” Teachers from other schools agreed about the lack of specificity of what will be on the exams. When we asked another group of teachers about the level of detail they receive, one said, “George Washington,” implying that she did not understand exactly what she should teach students about the first President to prepare them for the test. Another teacher said that because of poor test specifications, guessing what will be on the tests is “like playing roulette.”

Teachers also expressed concerns about scoring and reporting. Several teachers said they did not understand how the tests were scored, and some added that this lack of understanding caused them to worry about the exam’s validity. “I’ve been told that items are weighted [some worth more points than others], but with the range of scores that I’ve seen, they have to be,” said one math teacher. “I want to know how they come up with these scores.” While a few teachers did think that the test reports themselves were helpful in changing instruction and “giving you a sense of what students did in previous years,” many would like improved feedback. In particular, many teachers mentioned that the state provides great feedback on the writing test in its reports to students, but that teachers do not get that report. When we asked another group of teachers how the score reports were useful to them, one teacher responded, “You get to keep your job if enough students pass.”

The skill level of the test was also a great concern to teachers. Many were concerned that the tests, except for writing, emphasized knowledge over skills, which they believed doesn’t serve students well in building long-term skills and competencies. One teacher said, “We are not coming up with critical thinkers anymore.” Another said, “In science and social studies, we are teaching minutiae. Critical thinking and data analysis are gone. The SOL is at the knowledge level. People are not rising above it.” While other subject area teachers mentioned that at least the writing test was skills based, many English teachers thought that the writing test represents “a dumbing down.” As one English teacher explained, “It’s too much personal narrative writing. Literacy analysis doesn’t happen until later, and it’s critical thinking that people need.”

Teaching to the Test

The majority of teachers who taught SOL classes said that to some extent they teach to the test, which means a wide range of classroom changes. Teachers said that they wrote their own classroom assessments to look like SOL questions, which are multiple-choice except for the writing test. Teachers in English said they wrote writing prompts that resembled the SOL prompts, and teachers in other subjects reported cutting down on writing questions on their tests and constructing more multiple-choice items.

Teachers also reported making changes in instructional practices, such as spending less class time in labs and hands-on instruction. One teacher said, “We take the fun stuff out.” The pace of instruction has changed as well. Many teachers reported sometimes leaving behind students who haven’t gotten a concept and moving on to another topic.
to “stay on pace with the pacing guide” for the class. As one teacher explained, “There are pacing guides that tell you approximately where you should be at a certain time. Sometimes you have to move on.” Many teachers also reported taking content out of the curriculum to make time to teach test-taking skills. Finally several teachers reported that they feel pressured by the district to focus on planning lessons and collecting evidence that SOLs have been covered rather than teaching. One teacher said, “Every day we have to write down what SOL objectives we covered to cover ourselves if the tests come back bad.”

Teachers also said they spent more time teaching the content that is tested. One teacher said, “If it’s not on the SOLs, don’t teach it.” When asked for examples, an English teacher said, “SOL 11.1, [the state standard about] persuasive speaking, is not tested so I don’t teach it,” and a math teacher added, “We don’t do proofs in geometry anymore because they are not on the SOLs.”

Finally, teachers reported making instructional changes over the course of the year due to the SOLs. Specifically, many teachers reported having two or three weeks of remediation or cramming before test administration during which no new material was covered. After the SOLs, many teachers said that learning and teaching basically come to a halt until the end of the year because both teachers and students are burned out and because students can be exempted from the final exam for the class if they pass the SOL. Teachers also reported that problems with attendance and performance in the classroom rise during this period.

Supports

Teachers mentioned that the district gave them various supports to help them prepare their students for exit exams, including warm-up activities for the beginning of class, released items from past exams, curriculum guides, and suggestions of websites to look to for help and assistance. The district also provided teachers with professional development on standards-based instruction. These supports were helpful for the most part, but many teachers relied more on materials they had developed themselves. What many teachers said they needed most were textbooks with better alignment to the SOLs or more helpful curriculum guides that “were not just a reiteration of the standards.”

Opinions and Other Concerns

Teachers reported feeling a lot of pressure due to the SOLs, including threats to their job security, loss of academic freedom, a change in the school’s culture, and a general concern for students’ futures and whether the new focus served students’ long-term interests. The accountability demands of NCLB seemed to be as much or even a larger cause of this pressure than the fact that these tests were exit examinations. The impact of the exit exams on their work lives dominated the discussions, as noted above.

Teachers also talked about how the emphases of the school had shifted. “The whole world revolves around the SOLs,” observed one teacher. Another said, “Ninety percent of our conversations as teachers are about SOLs.” Several teachers in subjects that were not tested also expressed this sentiment and said they felt their subjects received less
attention in the school. One business teacher said, “We are not as important because we don’t have an SOL.” A world language teacher said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, and it might be a curse. But world language teachers would like an SOL test to give us equal footing and to show that we are needed.”

Some teachers did like the fact that the SOLs were a graduation requirement, including one who said, “It’s good to hold children accountable.” At the same time, teachers had heard of students dropping out due to the SOLs.

When pressed, teachers were able to come up with some benefits to the exit exams. For example, teachers mentioned that special education teachers have better working relationships with subject area teachers than in the past. “Relationships are building to help get [special education] students across these paths,” observed one teacher. Others also mentioned that less motivated teachers had been forced to “stay on track” and focus on the curriculum. As one teacher said, “It keeps teachers from teaching only about Paris, which some would.” Other teachers said that interdepartmental cooperation had grown and that teachers were sharing the work load to develop segments of the curriculum.

While positive statements were limited and many teachers expressed only concerns about the SOLs, the teachers we interviewed agreed that they were professionals who would rise to the challenge and help students. One teacher said, “We don’t agree with them [the SOLs], but schools are evolving to meet the challenge and teachers are being creative.” Other teachers in the room shook their heads in agreement.

Schools

The principals, counselors, and testing coordinators that we interviewed shared many of the same concerns as teachers and were able to shed additional light on changes in school level programs, interactions between staff and students, and possible postsecondary impacts.

Organizational Responses

Staff roles and assignments are changing as a result of exit exams. Two of the four schools we visited reported changing their staffing patterns because of SOLs; specifically, both had shifted better teachers to teach the SOL classes. The stress of teaching SOL classes has caused problems, however, including the loss of at least one teacher who specifically mentioned that he left because of the pressure of the SOLs. One special education teacher is getting out of special education because she feels she spends more time administering and preparing students for SOLs than on teaching. She also said that special education teachers “feel like they pull down the scores in the building.” Counselors are seeing changes in the nature of their work because of the SOLs. One high school counselor said, “We are accountants now—keeping track of credits and test scores rather than building relationships with students and helping them plan for life after high school.” Another counselor remarked that “we have gone from being guidance counselors to being paper pushers.”
Schools also mentioned developing many remedial courses, such as algebra and English readiness classes, to help students prepare for the exams. Often eighth grade SOL scores are the trigger for putting students into these classes. One principal reported placing a lead teacher and a special education teacher in these classes, which puts a strain on special education resources but has been effective for students. Schools also mentioned creating courses such as Earth Science II, which covers the same material as Earth Science I. By giving the course a different name, however, students who take the class still receive science credit for completing the course, which they would not receive if they simply retook Earth Science I to prepare for the retest. Even though students still get credit, one principal lamented the fact that “the tests often limit the number of electives students can take, so they miss out on arts and courses that could help them get a job. The segment who can’t pass the tests really [misses] out.” Another principal agreed, noting, “Work study programs are gone. Personal living and finance are gone because these things don’t meet the standards, but they do meet the needs of students.” The addition of these remedial courses also translates into larger class sizes in other courses.

Resources are being shifted in other obvious ways. The number of students taking retests of exit exams in some schools is almost as large the number taking the exam for the first time. The logistics of keeping track of everyone, pulling students out of class, and staffing the retests have been disruptive and expensive. In addition to the costs of staff time, the costs of transportation for remediation are also considerable. One principal admitted that resources were being pulled away from physical education, health, and world languages to pay for these activities. In addition, money is being spent differently in SOL classes than in other classes. One person said, “In English, we buy SOL coaching books instead of literature now.”

Other changes include giving students a final exam exemption if they pass the SOL for a class. Teachers generally expressed negative opinions of this change, as outlined above, but one principal saw it as an extra incentive for students to pass the test. Another interesting but unformalized response was initiated by a test coordinator and a teacher in one school. They had a student who got very nervous when testing so they gave the student his SOLs at a different time than the other students with just one teacher. The teacher said, “He didn’t have an accommodation. It was the right thing to do, and we just did it. I don’t care if we get in trouble.” Staff in another school noted that they were spending time addressing requests from parents for accommodations for their children who didn’t pass the tests.

**Concerns and Opinions**

Principals generally had very strong opinions about what kinds of remediation were most helpful, whether the tests were useful reform tools, and what concerned them most for the future. But opinions varied widely, especially about the worth of the tests.

In general, in-school remediation and classes were viewed as the best way to help students because “you don’t give students a choice if it’s in the school day,” as one principal explained. Staff members don’t have to struggle with motivating students to come. Summer school was generally considered to be more effective than after-school programs; one principal went so far as to say that “after-school is a PR [public relations] program.” Many administrators mentioned the need for high school reading teachers and profes-
sional development in reading across the curriculum because “all the tests are reading tests in some ways.” The development of online testing has been an important help because it makes retests less stressful for students, so retest pass rates are higher than expected.

Administrators have seen some positive impacts of SOLs. The exams have encouraged students to attend remediation and listen in class and encouraged teachers to spend more time with below-average students. Districts and schools have tightened up the curriculum and are following common standards. The exams have also encouraged more cooperation between English and special education teachers and between social studies and science teachers and have provided a wake-up call to older teachers who realize based on test scores that they have not been putting forth enough effort in the classroom. Still, the principals’ list of concerns and negative impacts is much longer.

The state is phasing out the option of locally awarded credits, which permits districts to grant credits for passing the SOL to students who score above 375 rather than the official state pass score of 400. Starting with the class of 2007, students will not have this option, which has allowed many students to receive diplomas who otherwise wouldn’t have. Staff members are very concerned that this will increase the number of students not graduating.

Principals also talk about what has been lost; in particular, creative units and cooperative learning in classes have “gone by the wayside” in the words of one administrator. Teachers are having difficulty convincing students that what they are teaching is important in and of itself, not just for SOL purposes. One principal was very upset that the nature of students’ relationships with teachers had changed. He said, “The SOLS have further institutionalized schools. We remediate instead of learn about students.” All counselors and principals talked about the high level of stress and nervousness about the SOL tests, not only among students but also among teachers. Educators feel the tension in the air about getting students to graduate, making sure the school is accredited, and keeping their jobs.

Negative impacts on high-achieving students and postsecondary outcomes were also concerns. For instance, students can receive an Advanced Studies Diploma if they pass an advanced series of SOLs. However, counselors have seen students who would typically take these classes cut back on them if they experience trouble with any of the advanced tests. As one counselor pointed out, “Why should they take those classes if they aren’t going to get an Advanced Diploma?”

Finally, students have been delaying preparing for and taking the SATs because they are focused on passing the SOLs. Counselors report that students are taking the SATs much later in high school, not registering until they finish their SOLs, and getting lower scores than have been typical in the past.

District

Most school officials and teachers agreed about the primary ways in which the district has helped to support success on the SOLs. The superintendent agreed for the most part with their assessment and acknowledged the tradeoffs and unintended consequences that the SOLs have brought about in the district.
First, the district helped to build a better understanding in the community about the goals and importance of the SOLs. Second, the district provided professional development to teachers and was able to secure the “most cutting edge” professional development from the state because of “its good relationship with the state,” according to one principal. The district also developed countywide tests in mathematics to help support instruction and took the lead role in developing and running the summer school program. In a function that interviewees found especially important, the district helped to collect materials and resources that others had developed for the SOLs and provided these resources to schools and teachers along with an assessment of their usefulness. The district’s efforts to sort through the ever-expanding array of programs and resources were seen as a huge time saver, and people trusted the district’s judgment of the quality of the materials. In addition, interviewees noted that the district provided targeted assistance when schools requested it, such as extra funds for after-school programs or a resource teacher in math for a school having problems meeting accreditation criteria. Overall, the teachers and especially the principals we interviewed saw the district’s primary function as being their advocate.

There were few exceptions to this overall positive impression. Some teachers felt that the district was too focused on improving test scores rather than instruction and sent a message that “if it’s not on the SOL, don’t do it.” A few others simply questioned the ability of any central administration to really help schools and teachers, including one principal who said, “Districts can’t do much to help. It’s on us to make the difference and improve teacher and student time. That’s the key, and real funding is what is necessary to do it.”

The superintendent felt strongly that the district had an important role to play in setting clear goals for instruction and achievement, but he acknowledged difficulties. He said that the goal is to expose all students to the same challenging content and that the district can help by removing barriers, providing resources, and supporting alignment. He even personally calls senior students and their parents when students have not attended remediation. He believes that more students are showing improvement because of these efforts.

Some of the challenges, according to the superintendent, are to acknowledge and deal with unintended consequences, such as making sure that high-achieving students continue to be supported and challenged and maintaining support for subjects that are not tested, such as the arts, physical education, and health.

State

We did not explicitly ask about state supports during the course of our case study, but we asked what supports were available and what had been most useful. The state supports mentioned as most helpful were some online testing resources and professional development. Generally, our interviewees gave the district rather than the state credit providing for these supports, not because teachers did not realize who supplied them but because they saw the district securing these resources quickly and providing teachers with information on the quality of the resources so they didn’t have to sort through them on their own.
Most comments about the state were unsolicited and were negative. They mostly focused on technical problems with the exam or lack of appropriate materials. For example, teachers have found many typos on the exams. Some teachers have received memos about test items that did not have a correct answer among the choices listed and were told that they could not tell students about those items unless the students asked specifically. They also noted the need for more released test items in social studies, a good textbook to match state standards, and materials for students with disabilities such as test guides in Braille or oral practice tests for students who need that accommodation. Unless students received preparation similar to the actual testing situations or accommodations, teachers feared that the usefulness of the accommodations would be diminished.
Maryland County Public Schools

Maryland County Public Schools (MCPS), as we will call our second case study district, is a relatively small district in Maryland that is relatively diverse economically but not ethnically. The district’s students perform above the state average on three of the four subject areas covered by the state’s series of high school exit examinations.

As with all counties in the state, students in the class of 2009 will be required to pass the High School Assessments (HSAs), which include end-of-course examinations in English II, algebra, biology, and government, to receive a diploma. Since some students take these examinations as early as eighth grade and current eighth graders are the class of 2009, results on these exams already count toward graduation for a small group of students. The HSA test data from spring 2005 are being used for the first time in Maryland to make adequate yearly progress calculations under the No Child Left Behind Act. In prior years, the state used the tenth grade Maryland State Assessment (MSA) to measure English proficiency under NCLB, but it recently changed to using the English II HSA for these calculations. Scores from the MSA in geometry will continue to be used for mathematics AYP calculations in high school. Thus, HSA and NCLB accountability will overlap for the first time, possibly creating more tension around the exit exams.

The HSA tests consist of multiple-choice, short answer, and writing prompt/essay questions. The short answer questions are commonly referred to as brief constructed response items (BCRs), and the longer writing items are known as extended constructed response items (ECRs).

As part of our study, we visited three high schools in MCPS and spoke with 6 to 13 students and 6 to 14 teachers in each school, as well as with principals, testing coordinators, assistant principals, and counseling staff when they were available. We also spoke with 7 district level staff members. Here is what they had to say.

Students

When asked about the HSAs, their importance, and their impacts on personal decision-making or the classroom, student perceptions varied widely but echoed many sentiments we heard from teachers in the district.
Misperceptions

Older students for the most part knew that they were not required to pass the HSAs to graduate, but students held a surprising number of misperceptions. First, a large number of students, especially younger high school students, were unclear about whether they are required to pass the exit exams to graduate. When asked if they had to pass them, one student said he was told, “You just have to pass this, but I don’t know if it’s [for] graduation or to do well in the class.” Another said, “I think it’s a requirement for ninth graders this year,” which is not the case. Yet another student clearly thought that the HSAs were a requirement for grade promotion, saying, “I must have passed because I’m in the tenth grade.” Some students were unclear about which tests were HSAs. Several students thought that the mid-course assessments developed by the district for the courses tested by the HSAs were in fact the HSAs. One group of students agreed that what they knew about the HSAs at this point was a mix of rumors and truth. Several students said they wished that teachers would talk more about the HSAs to help clear up the confusion. When told of these problems, one principal stated that he knew that many students were confused, which the school had tried to clear up, but that students did try harder as a result of this uncertainty, which he saw as an unintended benefit.

Changes in the Classroom

Most students said they had seen impacts of the exit exams on their classrooms, although the impacts were not always explicitly attributed to the HSAs. Students were very familiar with brief and extended constructed response items (BCRs and ECRs) and had seen these as early as eighth grade and across all subject areas, including health. While the exams had an impact across the curriculum, students felt that the greatest impacts related to how civics was taught and how mathematics was tested. In particular, students said that civics teachers “have to rush to help us memorize everything that will be on the test.” Several students mentioned that math tests now had a great deal of writing on them but that math teachers had not done as much to prepare them for writing as other teachers had; this is reflected in the district’s below-average performance on the Algebra I HSA.

Students mentioned a range of efforts to prepare them for the exams. Many students noted that the week or two before tests were devoted to “cramming” or “review” sessions to prepare them for the exams. But one student said, “Some teachers mention it all the time. Some teachers don’t say anything.” For the most part, students saw the preparation as a positive influence. “We have to review for our final exams [for course grades not the HSAs] anyway.” Looking at old tests, working through teacher-developed study guides, and reviewing material in class were cited as the most useful approaches. A few students also mentioned that teachers were using the results of quarterly tests to identify areas of student weakness and then “cover everything we had missed.”

The negative impacts most often mentioned by students were that the tests are “like a competition between teachers” rather than about students and that testing itself takes up a great deal of time when students would rather be in class. In addition, administering all the tests so closely together compounded this problem and left many students feeling “burned out.”
Positive comments about the effects of the exams were as common as negative, if not more so. One student said that the HSAs “kept teachers honest.” When asked what she meant, she said that now teachers can’t just teach things that interest them the most, so she didn’t feel that she was missing out on information other students might be getting. Several students liked the additional writing exercises and the chance to express themselves.

**Opinions on Fairness and Other Issues**

Few students mentioned test pressure or nervousness as a problem. When asked why not, one student said, “These tests don’t feel any different; [it’s] just that they’re harder and bigger.” Most of the students’ concerns about the exams pertained to fairness and relevance. When asked about the fairness of withholding diplomas due to these exams, many students said that the tests had content on them that they never covered in class, and they expressed concern for other students who will face the same problem in the future. Students voiced little opposition to the idea of an exit exam per se. One student said, “I think it’s good that they [the tests] count for something other than how the school is doing.”

Relevance was the largest concern among students. Many students said that semester exams and final exams given for the purposes of course grades were taken much more seriously than HSAs, because as one put it, “we only have so much energy so we’re going to focus on the ones [tests] that count.” Many students thought they would care more about the HSAs if these were also the final exams for classes.

**Teachers and the Classroom**

The teachers we interviewed gave the HSAs and their impacts a mixed review, reporting some clear benefits as well as some negative impacts and concerns about the future. Overall, teachers were fairly optimistic about the exams improving student achievement.

A significant change noted by most of the teachers we met with was that the HSAs do push writing across the curriculum, and most viewed this as a benefit. Some teachers, however, especially English teachers, were concerned that only certain kinds of writing were being pushed. In particular, one teacher said that the “ECR and BCR testing styles had crept into the classroom” and worried that “larger writing assignments will go away since shorter things are emphasized.” Teachers also remarked that the writing on the HSAs was more about “interpreting literature and comprehension than good writing,” in the words of one educator. The different rubrics for grading ECRs and BCRs were a topic of concern to English teachers because spelling counts toward the score on ECRs but not BCRs, which creates confusion among students about what is important.

The quarterly and mid-term assessments developed by the district to prepare students for the HSAs seemed to be a mixed blessing to teachers. Many teachers liked the additional feedback and professional development that accompanies these assessments, while others resented the extra work required to grade these assessments. In addition, a
small group of teachers said that they didn’t feel as if they had the expertise to grade the assessments or precisely interpret the results.

The teachers also noted that the actual administration of the HSAs is chaotic because the rest of the school “goes on around them.” The tests take teachers away from instruction of other students who are not tested. Many said that the exams ended up being “a week of nonproductive time,” as one teacher characterized the situation. Teachers were not hopeful that this could be changed or dealt with.

Still, there does not seem to be a high level of stress about the HSAs at this point, since they are not yet a graduation requirement for most students. Teachers said that students and parents do not yet seem too concerned about the exams, and teachers report having a good sense of what is going to be assessed on the exams. One teacher said, “This hasn’t been dropped on us. We know what is going to be on the tests—the Core Learning Goals and the Voluntary State Curriculum.”

Concern about getting students to pass the exams was palpable, but most teachers seemed confident that this was an achievable goal with enough funding and future planning. They were unsure whether resources would be available for remediation, and if they weren’t, several teachers expressed concern that upper-level classes would lose resources as the emphasis shifts toward getting more students over the HSA hurdle. At this point, teachers seemed as concerned about the standards being too low for students as they were about students not being able to pass the exams. As one teacher said, “I don’t see a ninth grade exam as an exit. With so many chances to take the test and remediation, it’s going to throw everything off when the focus is on learning ninth grade material [rather than high-level content].” Another teacher voiced concern that students who are bright and can pass the test with minimal effort may feel license to slack off in class.

When asked how much impact the HSAs were having on their classrooms, most teachers said that the exams “don’t take over their classrooms.” This was especially the case for English teachers, who said they liked the fact that the English test was more skills-driven than content-based. Teachers across the curriculum believed that the most dramatic impact in classrooms has come from the curriculum maps developed for social studies and biology, which consist of detailed plans for what teachers should cover and when. So much material must be covered in a certain amount of time that “kids don’t have time to digest,” said one teacher. “There’s too much that I have to go through too fast.” Another teacher commented that her kids are begging her to slow down the pace, and she can’t do that because of the timeline, adding, “You can’t slow down enough for them.” Covering more material, but at less depth, also feels like a narrowing of goals to many teachers.

In addition to the general positive opinion of more writing across the curriculum, teachers also noted the benefits of “thinking more about assessment and how all their students are doing.” Many felt, however, that the preliminary SAT (PSAT) and advanced placement (AP) examinations provide more helpful feedback to them about individual students.
Schools

The principals, counselors, and testing coordinators had some concerns about the HSA requirement and were very interested in learning about what other districts and states were doing to prepare for exit exams. Despite this uncertainty, they primarily talked about benefits and what their schools were doing to ensure that they were ready to help students graduate.

Organizational Responses

Schools have begun undertaking several approaches to improve achievement on the HSAs. One school has instituted an “intervention day” during which four teachers meet with a struggling student to develop a learning plan, using a case management approach. One school has developed a full-year “academic literacy class” for incoming ninth graders identified as struggling readers. At one school, students who are struggling take an accelerated algebra class concurrently with Algebra I. Another school offers accelerated classes for students who have failed the first semester of an HSA class; the classes are held in the afternoon during the second semester to help the students catch up. These classes are not required, but they prevent students from falling too far behind. Two schools applied for and received a small learning community grant expressly to help prepare “kids who are in trouble” to pass the HSAs, according to one principal.

Two schools plan to assign their best teachers to teach HSA classes, which their principals agreed would affect other course offerings. The principal at the other school we visited, however, felt very strongly that even first-year teachers should teach HSA courses. “It’s important,” he said. “It’s a gauge for who is ready for tenure. We also don’t want to shortchange the AP classes by putting all the best teachers in the HSAs classes.” He also felt that having more teachers teach the HSAs “created a little healthy internal competition for teachers,” although he had heard from colleagues in other states of instances where such competition had gotten out of hand.

One novel approach we heard about to help improve student performance on the HSAs had to do with test administration. Instead of dividing students alphabetically and testing them in large groups, one school kept classes of students together for testing purposes. The principal and a vice-principal said that this practice had helped to keep students focused on the test. With a smaller group, test administrators have a better sense of who is in the class, and students know they cannot hide their actions from their teachers. This practice takes more people and resources, but school officials report seeing huge payoffs.

Concerns and Opinions

Principals’ concerns varied. One principal said bluntly that under the current exit exam system “two or three percent probably won’t pass” no matter what is done to help them. Another principal voiced concern about community engagement and HSAs. In particular, he thought that the availability of data without appropriate context or sense of root causes could cause friction with the community, adding that “data is a dangerous thing
in the wrong hands.” He believed the issue could be overcome but would require additional communication with parents and the community. Another data concern mentioned in every school was that HSA data were received too late to help with instructional planning or to be much more than a summative tool. Principals also mentioned dropouts as a concern. The time and money associated with administering the test and retests and paying for transportation were significant concerns.

For the most part, principals and school officials felt the HSAs are having a positive impact—the curriculum map, the quarterly and mid-course assessments, and the essential curriculum have been good “diagnostic and instructional tools,” as one principal noted. Another principal said, “I think they are good assessments, and they’re a springboard for conversations about how our students are doing. They get us talking.” A colleague echoed this sentiment that collaboration has grown by observing, “The teachers have a lot more professional development together now, centered around the curriculum maps. The teachers get together and grade mid-course assessments. They are in a better position to assess where some of the weaknesses are.” But this principal also said that overall, the HSAs are “not affecting the daily life of the school all that much,” although she expected to see more changes next year when the eighth graders who must pass the HSAs are in her school. Teachers mentioned similar changes in their classrooms, but saw them as a more significant influence on how their classrooms operated from day to day.

That is not to say that principals don’t have suggestions for improving testing. Spreading out the HSAs over a greater time span would help keep students from burning out, some felt. Receiving HSA scores sooner to enable school staff to use the results for course grades would give extra meaning to the tests for students. One principal also thought that students should see district administrators like the superintendent visiting the school during testing so students would know that people are paying attention to the results and get the sense that the tests are important even if they don’t count for graduation yet.

District

The district is using a variety of strategies to lay the foundation for improved performance on the HSAs. All the district officials we met with—including subject area instructional supervisors and officials in the district’s academic support office, special education, and secondary curriculum—expressed a very consistent message about what the district was doing and what schools and teachers should be doing. First, the district has strongly encouraged all teachers, not just those teaching the four end-of-course exam courses, to focus on developing and using ECRs and BCRs for their classroom assessments. As one official said, “Forget about true/false anymore.” Second, the district has developed curriculum maps, as noted above, so that teaching is better aligned with the state-developed Core Learning Goals. Third, the district has developed quarterly and mid-term assessments for the HSAs classes so that teachers will have feedback on how achievement is progressing over the course of the year. Teachers have been given professional development on how to score the assessments, and the district has analyzed test items to help change instruction in response to achievement. Training teachers to grade
the tests is also meant to help teachers learn how to give students better feedback on their writing.

District officials hope that teachers will pay more attention to the Core Learning Goals and move away from relying on textbooks. District officials report that the Voluntary State Curricula help teachers “fill in the blanks on what to teach to meet the assessment goals.” Officials see a mostly positive response. One interviewee said, “Standards-based instruction has increased as teachers have realized that tests aren’t going away. Most teachers, but not all, are opening up to [these ideas].”

Some decisions are being left to the future when the district and schools have a better sense of student needs, which will likely change once students have to pass the HSAs for graduation purposes. The district expects it will have to redesign summer and evening courses so they are “not more of the same thing but a real way for students to catch up,” as one official explained. Also, some students will have to reenroll in classes if they fail an HSA. The district also hopes to work more with a coalition of other districts to develop programs and formative quarterly and semester tests and share expertise and costs. The district has begun to share these formative test items with others, but local officials believe more could be done.

District officials expressed concern about how to design programs to help two particular groups of students: those who must retake an exam late in high school and may face difficulties getting timely feedback, and those who are on a fast track and take the HSAs in middle school. Options for helping these students include extending summer school to students who have completed their senior year and making sure that middle grade teachers know what HSAs look like.

While mathematics achievement is a focus in the district because of below-average achievement, officials acknowledged that social studies also poses some difficulties for teachers and schools. In particular, people agreed that the Voluntary State Curriculum in social studies is “so detailed that there is little time to do things like field trips to see government in action” and voiced concern that the curriculum is “a little overspecified so depth can get lost.” One official put it in even starker terms: “The downside is that the test defines the curriculum and has drawn a box around what must be studied.” Another issue involves student service learning, currently a state requirement for graduation for all high school students. Service learning takes place during the social studies course tested by HSAs and takes time away from test preparation. Principals and social studies teachers also mentioned this point in their interviews. The district is considering incorporating the service learning requirement into another course.

State

Maryland’s exit exam system received final approval from the state board in 2004, and the state is developing many of the supports that it committed to at that time. We did not explicitly ask about state supports in our case study, but we did ask what supports were available and which had been most useful. District officials suggested several ways the state could support implementation, and the resources that were available were generally viewed quite positively.
Several teachers and administrators mentioned that state-provided professional development on how to score the writing sections of the HSAs was very helpful because teachers learned what good writing looked like, at least in terms of the HSAs, which led to improved instruction. The Voluntary State Curricula, the Core Learning Goals, and the assessment limits (a list of topics from which test items may be developed) have been generally well received because they provide guidance and examples about what will be on the high school assessments. The exception is in social studies; most interviewees agreed the list of topics that could be assessed was too large to allow for in-depth instruction. All assessment items developed for the High School Assessments will be drawn from the assessment limits, but not every topic in the assessment limits will be tested on every form of the test. Released items and tests were also mentioned as a helpful resource.

At this point, district officials pointed to test construction and administration as the area where they could use the most help. As mentioned above, the district has developed quarterly and mid-course tests as formative assessments to help guide instruction and remediation throughout the school year before the HSAs are administered. District subject area specialists mentioned that help in developing items for these exams or an item bank for test design would be beneficial, especially in a smaller district like MCPS. A machine scorer that enabled results to be returned more quickly to teachers and schools would help improve instruction as well.
Concluding Thoughts

When one teacher heard that we were visiting her school to conduct this research, she interviewed all her colleagues in her department, wrote a three-page memo on how exit exams were impacting their classrooms, shared the findings with her fellow teachers to make sure that she accurately captured what they said, and then gave the document to us because she wanted to make sure that policymakers, staff in other districts, and the public really understood how these exams had impacted teaching and instruction. The Center on Education Policy also believes that what she and everyone else in this study had to say should be shared as well.

Our two case studies provide a brief, first glimpse into how students, teachers, schools, and districts are responding to exit exams and what people who are affected daily by these exams feel about them. It doesn’t tell the whole story of exit exams across the country, in other states with other tests, or even in other districts in Maryland and Virginia. It does paint a powerful picture of deep concerns and hard work, of significant change for the better and the worse as exit exams have been adopted. These findings also point to the need for more systematic research into impacts so that we can provide conclusions that represent the breadth of what is taking place across the country, that move beyond interviews to include significant time examining instruction, and that provide insights into best practices as people struggle with how to meet these requirements. Exit exams impact more than half the students in high schools across the country, and these students and the people who work to help them every day deserve better research and solutions, more support to meet these tough new goals, and a chance to share their stories.
How have HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS changed our schools?

SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM VIRGINIA & MARYLAND