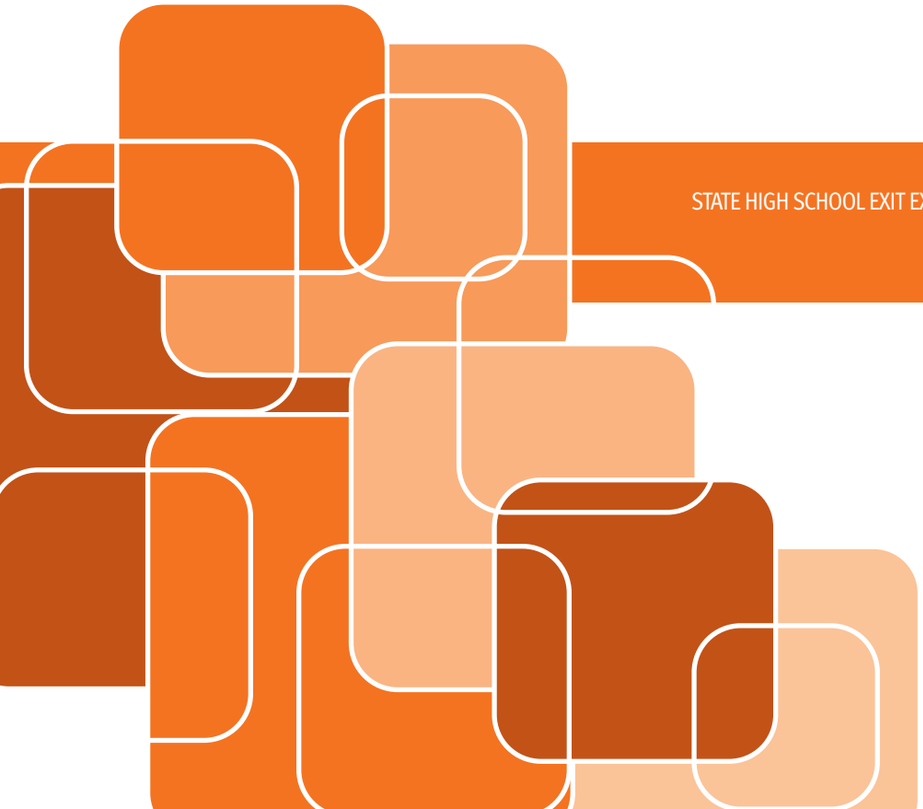

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For more on state high school exit exams, read the Center's latest report on exit exams, *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*, and other reports available on our Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

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Exit Exams POLICY BRIEF 3

High School Exit Exams

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STATE HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS: Gaps Persist in High School Exit Exam Pass Rates

In August 2006, the Center on Education Policy released its fifth annual report on state exit exams. This policy brief, one of a series, highlights a finding from the report, *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*. To learn more about the Center's work or to download the entire report, please visit the Center's Web site at www.cep-dc.org.

Center on Education Policy ▪ January 2007

STATE HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS: Gaps Persist in High School Exit Exam Pass Rates

A central issue in debates about the fairness and effectiveness of exit exams is the disproportionately lower pass rates of some subgroups of students. Data from the Center on Education Policy's 2006 report on exit exams continue to show gaps in pass rates for students of color, English language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

Over the past two years, the greatest improvements in pass rates—both for all students and for specific subgroups—have occurred primarily in states that have only recently begun, or will soon begin, withholding diplomas based on exam performance. This is not surprising, since states tend to devote more funding to remediation when the exit exam first counts for graduation, and then to reduce this funding as the exam becomes a more routine part of school life and as curriculum, tests, and standards become better aligned to the exams.

The table below shows changes in the percentage of students passing exit exams on the first try for a sample of states. The patterns of changes between 2004 and 2005 are inconsistent, both for students overall and for particular subgroups. States that had gains in overall pass rates often had even greater gains among minority subgroups, which suggest a moderate move toward closing the gap. But states that had losses in overall pass rates often had greater losses among minority subgroups, suggesting a move in the wrong direction. In most of the states not shown on the table, the patterns were even more variable. What stands out across states, however, is the persistence of gaps in initial pass rates, particularly among English language learners and students with disabilities.

Unless states truly understand the factors that lead to success, it will be difficult to close the pass rate gaps for ethnic minority students and other subgroups. Toward this end, the Center will begin to examine in its 2007 exit exam report the strategies states are using to close these gaps in test performance. The Center has already begun to conduct case studies of school districts in three states to understand better what districts are doing to close these gaps. The findings from these state and local research efforts will appear in the Center's sixth annual report on high school exit exams, to be released in August 2007.

Changes Between 2004 and 2005 in the Percentage of Students Passing Exit Exams on the First Try in a Sample of States

	All Students			White			African American			Latino			English Language Learners			Free or reduced-priced lunch eligible			Students with disabilities		
	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.	2004	2005	Diff.
Gains and Losses in Reading/English Language Arts																					
Arizona	59%	72%	13	76%	85%	9	49%	64%	15	37%	56%	19	12%	31%	19	37%	54%	17	17%	30%	13
Idaho	90%	90%	0	93%	93%	0	80%	80%	0	67%	68%	1	57%	43%	-14	81%	74%	-7	50%	45%	-5
Maryland	53%	57%	4	65%	71%	6	35%	39%	4	40%	46%	6	15%	17%	2	30%	35%	5	12%	16%	4
Massachusetts	89%	89%	0	93%	94%	1	78%	76%	-2	69%	69%	0	48%	45%	-3	75%	76%	1	65%	69%	4
Texas	87%	87%	0	92%	93%	1	82%	82%	0	81%	80%	-1	42%	34%	-8	79%	79%	0	56%	58%	2
Washington	65%	73%	8	70%	77%	7	43%	54%	11	41%	53%	12	17%	29%	12	46%	56%	10	15%	23%	8
Gains and Losses in Mathematics																					
Arizona	39%	67%	28	53%	80%	27	23%	54%	31	20%	52%	32	10%	34%	24	21%	50%	29	6%	23%	17
Idaho	86%	78%	-8	88%	81%	-7	76%	56%	-20	66%	53%	-13	62%	30%	-32	77%	56%	-21	45%	27%	-18
Maryland	59%	54%	-5	73%	71%	-2	35%	30%	-5	50%	42%	-8	36%	29%	-7	38%	34%	-4	19%	16%	-3
Massachusetts	85%	85%	0	90%	90%	0	68%	64%	-4	63%	61%	-2	61%	55%	-6	68%	69%	1	59%	61%	2
Texas	85%	72%	-13	91%	83%	-8	73%	54%	-19	78%	61%	-17	59%	35%	-24	76%	59%	-17	55%	38%	-17
Washington	44%	48%	4	49%	52%	3	16%	20%	4	20%	24%	4	10%	12%	2	25%	28%	3	6%	6%	0

Table reads: On the Arizona reading/English language arts exit exam administered in 2004, 59% of all students taking the test received a passing score on their first attempt. On the same exam administered in 2005, 72% of all students taking the test received a passing score on their first attempt, a gain of 13 percentage points.

Note: The gains or losses shown in the Difference columns of the table are the percentage point differences in pass rates between 2005 and 2004. A negative number in the Difference columns means that pass rates declined between 2004 and 2005. Data for Asian and Native American students are available in the 2006 report, *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*.

Source: Center on Education Policy, exit exam survey of state departments of education, June 2006, item 31.