

State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year

August 2006

Summary and Methods

School year 2005-06 was a time of serious challenges to state exit examinations—tests students must pass to receive a high school diploma. In California and Arizona—two states that were withholding diplomas from high school seniors for the first time based on exam performance—courts weighed the constitutionality and fairness of exit exams, as thousands of high school seniors waited to see if they would graduate with the rest of their class. California students at risk of not graduating breathed a sigh of relief when a superior court overturned the exit exam requirement, only to see it reinstated by the state Supreme Court two weeks later. In several states, policymakers debated whether to stick to their plans to withhold diplomas from students who failed exit exams, whether to exempt students with disabilities or students learning English from having to pass the exams, or whether to create or expand alternate paths to graduation for students struggling to pass the exams.

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit organization, has been conducting a comprehensive study of state high school exit exams. This is the Center's fifth annual report on this study. The information in this report comes primarily from our survey of all 25 states that currently have or are phasing in mandatory exit exams, and focuses mostly on changes that have occurred since our 2005 report, *State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder but Gaps Persist*.

Broad Conclusions

Based on our findings from this year's study, the Center reached four broad conclusions about state high school exit exams.

Conclusion 1: Growth in the number of states adopting new exit exam requirements seems to have leveled off. Still, exit exams are a force in education, currently affecting two-thirds of the nation's high school students.

- **Three more states began withholding diplomas, but one state backed off.** California, Arizona, and Idaho followed through with their plans to begin withholding diplomas based on exit exams in 2006. But Utah policymakers decided not to withhold diplomas as planned in 2006, opting instead to note on students' diplomas whether they passed or did not pass the state competency exam. As a result of these changes, 22 states required students to pass an exam to receive a high school diploma in 2006. Three additional states are phasing in exit exams, so that by 2012, 25 states expect to have these exams in place—one fewer than we reported last year, due to Utah's policy change.

- **No new states adopting exit exam requirements.** In contrast to previous years of our study, no state decided in 2006 to adopt a new exit exam requirement, beyond those states that had already made a commitment to phase in new exit exams. States that are considering adding an exit exam requirement may be waiting to see how the legal challenges in California and Arizona turn out.
- **Alternatives to exit exams.** Among the 25 states that do not have exit exams as defined by CEP, several states have chosen to use high school tests in other ways to motivate students to perform well. For example, at least 10 states mark state exam scores on students' diplomas or give out diplomas with some form of distinction to students who perform satisfactorily on state exams. Furthermore, some of the momentum for high school reform seems to have shifted toward policies for making sure students are ready for college. For example, five states currently require all students to take the SAT or ACT college entrance exams as a way to encourage more students to consider postsecondary education.
- **Exit exams still influential.** In 2006, 65% of the nation's public high school students and 76% of the nation's minority public high school students were enrolled in school in the 22 states with current exit exams. By 2012, an estimated 71% of public high school students and 81% of minority public high school students will be enrolled in school in the 25 states that expect to have exit exams in place.

Conclusion 2: Controversy about exit exams tends to settle down in the years after diplomas are first withheld.

- **Conflict in a few states.** During the past year, most of the policy debate and public opposition to exit exams were concentrated in a few states that were slated to begin withholding diplomas based on exam performance in 2006—most notably, California, Arizona, and Utah. Exit exam requirements were also a topic of debate among policymakers in Washington State, which is scheduled to begin withholding diplomas in 2008.
- **Less controversy in Idaho.** Idaho, which began withholding diplomas in 2006 but was not the target of a major lawsuit, experienced relatively less controversy in implementing its exit exam requirement. This may be at least partly because Idaho has instituted several alternate routes for meeting the exam requirement and has set its passing score for 2006 at what state officials consider to be an 8th grade level of performance. Over the next two years, the state will raise its passing scores to a 9th grade level of performance in 2007 and a 10th grade level in 2008. Also, Idaho had used the same state test for other purposes before it became an exit exam, so familiarity with the test may have helped with its acceptance.
- **Exit exams more institutionalized in other states.** In most other states with exit exams, the past year has been a relatively quiet one on the exit exam front. Generally, once a state has weathered the initial opposition to an exit exam and moved ahead with implementing it, dissent decreases and exit exams become a more accepted part of everyday high school life.
- **Factors affecting acceptance of exams.** Various factors influence the degree of conflict in a state about exit exams. For example, these exams may be more controversial in diverse states that enroll large numbers of students of color and English language learners (ELLs). In these states, disparities in pass rates among different groups of students are more glaring, have a greater impact on overall pass rates, and raise questions about whether all groups are receiving the same quality of education. Other factors affecting public acceptance of exit exams appear to be the availability of funding for remedial programs, the existence of alternate paths, the lead-in time before diplomas are withheld, and the difficulty of the exam's content and passing scores.

Conclusion 3: With few exceptions, states have moved toward greater flexibility in their exit exam policies.

- **Additional alternate paths.** Over the past year, at least three states—Arizona, Washington, and Maryland—have expanded their alternate paths for allowing struggling students to obtain a diploma. Examples of alternate paths for general education students (those who are neither special education students nor English language learners) include permitting students to meet the exam requirement by substituting scores on other tests like the SAT or ACT; taking a state-developed alternative assessment; pursuing a waiver or appeals process; receiving credit toward exam scores for satisfactory course grades; demonstrating competency by providing other evidence; and using various combinations of options. California, where policymakers have chosen not to allow alternatives for general education students, is a notable exception.
- **Accepting other states' test scores.** Nine states—four more states than last year—reported in 2006 that they allow transfer students to submit passing scores on other states' tests instead of making students pass their own exit exam. In more than half of these states, the tests in question do not have to be exit exams. Still, 15 states do not accept other states' test scores.
- **More options for students with disabilities.** In general, states have added more options for students with disabilities. Eight states have either delayed exit exam requirements for students with disabilities or exempted these students from having to pass their exit exam. All states have some type of alternate path to help students with disabilities meet graduation requirements.
- **Cumulative effect of expanded options.** Creating more flexible options for students to meet graduation requirements can ensure that students with special needs or circumstances are treated fairly and can strengthen support for the exam by raising pass rates. But too much flexibility can dilute the purpose and value of an exit exam. An exit exam system with too many ways around the basic requirement can end up looking much the same as the exam systems found in states that use test scores as one factor in graduation decisions but do not withhold diplomas based solely on a failure to pass a test. It's difficult to say whether the array of options available in some states represents too much flexibility—partly because information is not readily available on the percentage of students using various options.

Conclusion 4: Most states with exit exams require school districts to provide remediation to students who fail the exams, but these states don't always pay for remediation. The amount of state funding for remediation appears to diminish once the exam requirement has been in effect for a few years.

- **State remediation policies and funding.** Of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams, 18 states require school districts to offer remediation to students who do not pass portions of the exams. Only 14 of these states provide state funding for remediation or related student support programs, while the remaining 11 states do not.
- **Emerging pattern in remediation spending.** California, Arizona, and Washington—three states in which exit exams have just become or will soon become a graduation requirement—have boosted spending on remediation. California has almost tripled its spending on remediation during the past year,

from about \$20 million for 2005-06 to more than \$57 million for 2006-07, while Washington plans to spend more than \$28 million on remediation in 2006-07. By contrast, Indiana and Massachusetts, two states where exit exam requirements took effect a few years ago, have reduced spending for remediation. This emerging pattern could be occurring because the need for remediation diminishes as instruction becomes better aligned with standards and exams, or because media and public scrutiny of the exit exam fades over time, lessening political pressure for remediation.

Specific Findings by Topic

In addition to reaching four broad conclusions, CEP identified several key findings about specific aspects of exit exams. What follows are the most notable findings, other than those covered in the broad findings above. Readers should also review the additional key findings at the beginning of each chapter and the conclusions at the end of each chapter.

New Developments in Exit Exams (chapter 1)

- **A momentous year for legal challenges.** Lawsuits in California and Arizona have delved into such fundamental questions as students' opportunity to learn the material being tested, the fairness of exam requirements, and the responsibility of states to fund preparation and remediation programs. Although some lawsuits relating to students with disabilities have been successful, the courts have generally been reluctant in recent years to overturn exit exam requirements. As this report went to press, courts in California and Arizona were considering key cases. Depending on the outcomes, the court decisions of 2006 could continue the trend of exit exams withstanding legal challenges or could mark a shift in courts' opinions that might stall the exit exam movement in other states.

State Efforts to Help Students Pass Exit Exams (chapter 2)

- **Effectiveness of remediation.** Remediation is effective in raising pass rates on state tests, according to recent research. Although states are still trying to identify which types of remediation programs are most beneficial, some factors have emerged as influential. For example, remediation offered during the regular school day seems to be more effective than afternoon and weekend sessions. And some administrative structures, such as assigning local staff to work solely on coordinating remediation, appear to be more effective than others.
- **Variations in funding for remediation.** Many states did not or could not report how much they spent on remediation specifically for exit exams. Often this was because this spending is subsumed under broader state budget items, such as funding for programs to help students in all grades pass assessments. Among the six states that did report specific amounts for exit exam remediation, state funding ranged from more than \$2 million in Louisiana to more than \$57 million in California.
- **Importance of student motivation and attendance.** Low student motivation and poor attendance are major barriers to the effectiveness of remediation. To improve pass rates, states must find ways to improve student motivation, particularly among the lowest-performing students.

Impact of Exit Exams (chapter 3)

- **Impact on dropouts.** New studies show that exit exams may have a negative effect on graduation rates. But having to pass an exit exam to graduate is just one of many factors that influence a student's decision to drop out, and does not seem to be one of the most significant factors. One Massachusetts study found that although students who did not pass the exit exam dropped out at higher rates than other students, many students who dropped out *did* pass the exam.

- **Pass rates.** The percentage of students passing exit exams on the first try varies across states, but tends to range from about 70% to 90%. In most states, initial pass rates changed only slightly between 2004 and 2005, but a few states saw more marked increases or decreases, including reductions in the gaps in pass rates between various subgroups of students. Still, alarming gaps in pass rates remain for minority students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Trends in cumulative pass rates—the percentage of students who pass exit exams before the end of 12th grade—are difficult to discern because many states do not have or report these data and because calculations may exclude students who drop out before the last exit exam administration.
- **Impact on curriculum.** According to our state survey respondents, exit exams are encouraging teachers to spend more class time on tested subjects. A few states reported that these exams were encouraging students to take more math courses or take courses like algebra earlier.
- **Areas for more research.** Additional research is needed on the following questions related to student impacts: Do students learn more as a result of exit exams? Do exit exams improve student motivation? What strategies are effective for helping low-performing groups of students do better on exit exams and for closing achievement gaps? What types of remediation work best?
- **Use of exit exams by colleges.** Currently public postsecondary institutions in just four states use exit exams for admissions.

Test Characteristics, Development, and Use (chapter 4)

- **Increased rigor.** State exit exams are most often based on 10th grade proficiency standards; a few states align their exams to the 8th and 9th grade levels and some others to the 11th and 12th grade levels. (The grades to which each state's exit exam is aligned and other key characteristics of the exams are shown in **table 1** at the end of this summary.) Several states reported making their exams more challenging—primarily by moving from minimum competency exams to standards-based or end-of-course exams, or by increasing the scores required to pass the exams. This move toward exams based on higher grade-level standards may spur more postsecondary institutions to consider students' exit exams scores when making admissions decisions.
- **More subjects tested.** More states are adding science and social studies to the list of subjects assessed by exit exams. All 25 states with current or planned exit exams test in English language arts and mathematics, but only 11 states also test in science and only 9 in social studies. By 2012, 19 states with exit exams plan to test in science and 13 in social studies.
- **No Child Left Behind and exit exams.** Twenty of the 25 states that have or are phasing in exit exams use these exams to fulfill the high school testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). But eight of these states use different passing scores—usually lower scores—for awarding diplomas than for determining proficiency under NCLB.

Student Options for Meeting Graduation Requirements (chapter 5)

- **Retesting policies.** States give students multiple opportunities to retake exit exams before and after 12th grade, but they vary in the number of opportunities provided. All 25 states with current or planned exit exams allow students who do not pass the test on the first attempt to retake the test, and 24 states allow a number of retest opportunities after students complete 12th grade.
- **Alternate paths for English language learners and students with disabilities.** English language learners and students with disabilities tend to have the lowest pass rates on exit exams of any groups. Alternate paths to graduation for English language learners are far less common than those for students with disabilities. Only 4 of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams offer special options, other than test accommodations, for ELLs.

Study Methods

The Center on Education Policy used a variety of methods to identify issues and collect information for this year's study. In particular, we took the following steps:

- Conducted a detailed survey of states with current or planned exit exams
- Reviewed major research conducted by others on exit exams
- Kept abreast of important events related to exit exams

State Survey Methods

As our primary research tool for this year's study, CEP designed and conducted a survey of state department of education officials, usually officials from the state's assessment department. In April 2006, we contacted the chief state school officers of 26 states (including Utah) that had current or planned exit exams to request their state's participation. We asked the chiefs to designate a person to work with us in developing the state profiles for this report.

In May and June 2006, we contacted these designated officials and asked them to verify, update, and add information to survey forms for their state that the Center staff had partially filled in, based on information we had collected and reported in 2005. All 26 states that we believed met our criteria (see below) for having an exit exam responded to our survey. After reviewing Utah's survey responses and talking with officials in that state, we decided that Utah no longer met our criteria for reasons explained below. This brought the total of states with current or planned exit exams to 25.

We used the states' survey responses to develop the state profiles at the end of this report. After developing the profiles, we sent drafts back to states for review to ensure that we had accurately portrayed their testing systems. We also used state survey responses to calculate the tallies of state exam characteristics, policies, and actions that appear throughout the report.

Some states did not answer all of the survey questions, often simply because the data were not available at the state level or their policies were in flux. We have tried our best to include accurate and up-to-date information in this report, but undoubtedly some statistics or policies will have changed soon after publication because events in this field move so quickly.

Other Methods

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

Criteria for Including States in Our Study

This study focuses on mandatory exit exams. Included in the study are states that meet the following criteria:

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

We also include states that are phasing in mandatory high school exit exams that meet these two criteria. By phasing in, we mean that the state has a legislative or state board charge to have a test in place between

2006 and 2012; has already begun developing the tests; and is trying out the tests with students, although diplomas are not yet being withheld.

We have included California and Arizona, both of which withheld diplomas for the first time in 2006, as states with mandatory exit exams. As this report was going to press, major lawsuits challenging these states' exit exam requirements were awaiting action by courts, and the situation was quite fluid. Depending on how these lawsuits are resolved, the exam systems in these two states could change dramatically and suddenly.

Utah, which had adopted an exit exam requirement in 1999 and had been included in prior years' reports, changed its policy in 2006 as explained in chapter 1. Instead of withholding diplomas for the first time this year as planned, the state decided to grant diplomas to all students who met other graduation requirements even if they failed the exam, but to include a notation on the diploma saying whether the student had passed the exam. As a result of this change, Utah no longer meets our criteria for states with mandatory exit exams because it does not make the receipt of a diploma contingent on passing the exit exam. Instead, Utah has joined the category of states that offer differentiated forms of regular diplomas based on students' performance on state exams. Consequently, Utah is no longer included in this year's tallies of state survey responses that appear throughout this report, nor is it included in the state profiles at the end of this report.

This year, we added a section to chapter 1 concerning the use of high school assessments in states that do not fit our criteria for having an exit exam. These states administer high school assessments but use them for purposes other than determining whether students will graduate with a regular diploma. We include them to illustrate the range of test-based incentives that states have developed and to highlight alternatives to exit exams.

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

Table 1 Major Characteristics of State Exit Exams

State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Class of	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Alabama	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 3 rd Edition	2001	Reading, language, math, science, social studies	Standards-based	11 th	11 th	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 1 st and 2 nd Editions
Alaska	Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE)	2004	Reading, writing, math	Minimum competency	8 th –10 th	10 th	None
Arizona	Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)	2006	Reading, writing, math	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	None
California	California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)	2006	ELA, math	Standards-based	ELA (through 10 th), math (6 th –7 th and Algebra I)	10 th	None

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State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Class of	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Florida	Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)	2003	Reading, math	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	High School Competency Test (HSCT)
Georgia	Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT)	1994	ELA, writing, math, science, social studies	Standards-based	11 th	11 th	Basic Skills Test
Idaho	Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)	2006	Reading, language usage, math, science	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	None
Indiana	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)	2000	ELA (through 9 th), math (through pre-algebra and Algebra I)	Standards-based	9 th	10 th	None
Louisiana	Graduation Exit Examination (GEE)	2003	ELA, math, science, social studies	Standards-based	9 th -12 th	10 th	Graduation Exit Exam
Maryland	Maryland High School Assessment (HSA)	2009 ¹	English II, algebra/data analysis, biology, government	End-of-course	10 th	Varies	Maryland Functional Tests
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)	2003	ELA, math, science (2010)	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	None
Minnesota	Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments Series II (MCA-II)/ Graduation Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD)	2010 ¹	Reading, writing, math	Minimum competency	Writing (9 th), reading (10 th), math (11 th)	Writing in 9 th ; reading in 10 th ; math in 11 th	Basic Skills Test (BST)
Mississippi	Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)	2006 ²	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)

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State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Class of	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Nevada	High School Proficiency Examination (HSPE)	2003	Reading, writing, math, science (2008)	Standards-based	8 th -12 th	10 th	High School Proficiency Examination (earlier version based on 1994 curriculum)
New Jersey	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)	2003	Language arts literacy, math, science (2007)	Standards-based	11 th	11 th	High School Proficiency Test-11
New Mexico	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)	1990	Reading, language arts, composition, science, social studies	Minimum competency	8 th	10 th	None
New York	Regents Examinations	2000	ELA, math, science, social studies, language other than English	End-of-course	9 th -12 th	Varies	Regents Competency Tests
North Carolina	North Carolina Competency Tests and Tests of Computer Skills	1982 (math/reading); 2001 (computer skills)	Reading comprehension, math, computer skills; and starting 2010, end-of-course exams in Algebra I, English I, U.S. history, civics and economics, biology	Standards-based; end-of-course exams (2006-07)	8 th	8 th	None
Ohio	Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT)	2007 ¹	Reading, writing, math, social studies, science	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	9 th Grade Proficiency Tests
Oklahoma	Oklahoma End-of-Instruction (EOI) Exams	2012	English II, English III, Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, Biology I, U.S. history	End-of-course	High school standards	Varies	None
South Carolina	High School Assessment Program (HSAP)	2006 ²	ELA, math, science (2010), U.S. history (2010)	Standards-based	Through 10 th	10 th	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)

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State	Current Exam	Consequences Begin/Began for Class of	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Tennessee	Gateway Examination	2005	English II, Algebra I, Biology I	End-of-course	10 th	Varies	Tennessee Competency Test
Texas	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)	2005	ELA (reading/writing), math, science, social studies	Standards-based	Aligned to course content	11 th	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
Virginia	Standards of Learning (SOL) End-of-Course Exams	2004	English (writing/reading), Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry, biology, earth science, chemistry, world history to 1500, world history from 1500, Virginia and U.S. history, world geography	End-of-course	Aligned to course content	Varies	Literacy Passport Test
Washington	Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)	2008	Reading, writing, math, science (2010)	Standards-based	10 th	10 th	None

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, science, and social studies, and is considered by the state to be a standards-based exam aligned to 11th grade standards. The exam is first administered for graduation purposes in 11th grade. The current test replaced the Alabama High School Graduation Exam, 1st and 2nd Editions.

¹Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio are currently in transition to more rigorous exams. Maryland is not currently withholding diplomas, but the class of 2009 will be the first required to pass the HSA. Minnesota currently withholds diplomas based on the Basic Skills Test, and the class of 2010 will be the first required to pass the MCA-II/GRAD. Ohio currently withholds diplomas based on the 9th Grade Proficiency Test, and the class of 2007 will be the first required to pass the OGT.

²For most graduating seniors in South Carolina, 2006 was the first year that diplomas were withheld based on the HSAP; prior to 2006, students had to pass the BSAP to receive a diploma.

Note: ELA = English language arts.

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



About the Center on Education Policy

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 conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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Summary and Methods

The bottom of the page features a decorative graphic of overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in various shades of orange and brown, creating a layered, architectural effect.