



**NEWS RELEASE** Embargoed, Not for Release Before Wednesday, August 16, 2006, 9:30 a.m. Eastern

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## **Growth in Use of Exit Exams Stalls, As States Adjust Existing Requirements To Create Greater Flexibility for Students**

### ***Tests Remain “A Force” In Education, Report Finds, But Gaps In Pass Rates Persist for Key Student Groups***

WASHINGTON – August 16, 2006 – For the first time, growth in the number of states requiring students to pass an exit exam in order to earn a high school diploma has stalled, according to a report from the independent, Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy, which also tracks significant changes in how exit exams are being implemented nationwide.

According to the report, no state legislature adopted a new exit exam requirement in 2006 although Maryland, Washington, and Oklahoma are following through on plans set earlier to phase in exit exams. Of the four states scheduled to begin withholding diplomas based on exam performance this year, Arizona and California did so only after facing significant legal challenges, while Utah backed down from its earlier plans to do so. Idaho began withholding diplomas in 2006 with less conflict and controversy than other states experienced.

Meanwhile, most of the 25 states that currently require or are phasing in exit exams have moved to create greater flexibility and support to help struggling students meet the exam requirements. The report also notes that of the other 25 states, five now ask all students to take the SAT or ACT college entrance exams, reflecting the push to make college readiness a central focus of high school reform efforts.

The new report underscores that exit exams remain a force in education, currently affecting two-thirds of the nation’s 15 million public high school students. By 2012, the report estimates that exit exams in 25 states will affect 71 percent of the nation’s public high school students and 81 percent of minority high school students.

Although the research is not entirely conclusive, new studies suggest that exit exams may have a slightly negative effect on graduation rates, but these exams do not seem to rate very high on the list of factors influencing a student’s decision to drop out. Exit exams do seem to be having a significant impact on curriculum. In a survey conducted by the Center for the report, state education officials reported that students are being encouraged to take more courses in tested subjects, including reading, writing, mathematics and science.

“States at the center of the exit exam controversy are those now beginning to withhold diplomas, and they are trying to help struggling students without weakening the integrity and purpose of the assessments,” said Jack Jennings, president & CEO of the Center. “It is likely that the stalled growth

in the use of exit exams is in part due to the fact that other states are waiting to see how legal and political battles play out before making their own decisions.”

Generally, the percentage of students passing exit exams on the first try ranges from about 70-90 percent in most states and has changed only slightly since 2004. And while several states have reduced the gaps in pass rates between various subgroups of students, alarming disparities in exam performance still persist for minority students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

Cumulative pass rates, which show the percentage of students who eventually pass the exams by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, range from 87-95 percent in the six states that reported this information. In addition, serious gaps for key student subgroups remain even after multiple testing opportunities. However, cumulative pass rates may not be very reliable, according to the report, because states use different methods to calculate them and may exclude students who drop out before the last exam administration.

### **States Offer Greater Flexibility, Support**

During the last year, three states, including Arizona, Maryland and Washington, expanded options for struggling students to earn a diploma by permitting students in some cases to substitute scores from tests such as the SAT and ACT; take an alternative assessment; pursue a waiver or appeals process; earn exam credit through course grades; and use other evidence of competency. California serves as a notable exception, however, by allowing no alternatives for its general education students – in part due to a concern that greater flexibility might weaken the purpose of the exams.

Idaho created multiple routes for students to meet the exam requirement and set its passing score for 2006 at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level of performance, with the intention to raise it to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level – the most common level of proficiency for exit exams in the U.S. – over the next two years. These policies may have helped lessen controversy about withholding diplomas this year.

Meanwhile, a pattern has emerged in state efforts to provide remediation for students, with greater emphasis being provided in states now beginning to withhold diplomas. According to CEP’s report, California has tripled its spending on remediation during the past year (from \$20 million to more than \$57 million) and Washington plans to spend more than \$28 million on remediation in 2006-07, in advance of its plans to begin withholding diplomas in 2008. In contrast, Indiana and Massachusetts – states that have had exit exam requirements in place for several years – have recently reduced spending for remediation.

Overall, 18 of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams require their school districts to offer remediation courses for students who do not pass portions of the exit exams – while only six states actually require these students to attend remediation courses, and only 14 states provide state funding for remediation or related student support programs.

*Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, 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. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.*

States High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year, along with CEP’s previous annual reports on exit exams and other publications, are available at the Center’s Web site: [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org).