



NEWS RELEASE

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New CEP Report on High School Exit Exams Shows Improvement in Passage Rates, Greater Use of Exams for NCLB, and Growth of Alternate Paths to Graduation

Report Offers Recommendations on How to Improve State Policies

WASHINGTON, D.C. – November 5, 2009 – A new study released today by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) finds that although high school exit exam policies are increasingly complicated and diverse across states, there is a general trend in increases in initial passage rates by students. Also, more states use exit exams for accountability under NCLB, and have designed varied alternate pathways to graduation.

The report, *State High School Exit Exams: Trends in Test Programs, Alternate Pathways, and Pass Rates*, draws from CEP's eight-year study of high school exit exams to identify long-term trends in state policies and student performance. To gather data for the report, CEP surveyed all 26 states that currently have or plan to have mandatory exit exams for high school seniors and interviewed officials in three states.

The report is divided into three topics of study. The first part of the report describes the evolution of policies governing state exit exams and examines long-term changes in the types and amount of technical assistance and financial support related to exit exams that states provide to school districts, educators, and students. The second part focuses on this year's special topic – alternate pathways to graduation that states offer students who are struggling to pass exit exams. CEP also analyzes trends and gaps in students' exit exam pass rates.

One aspect of state exit exam policy area that has changed since CEP started its research in this area is the use of exit exams for NCLB accountability. In 2002, two states used their exit exams to meet NCLB's high school testing requirements. By 2009, 24 of the 26 states with exit exams use these tests for NCLB purposes. Among 24 states, 14 use the same cut scores for passage on exit exams and NCLB proficiency, and 9 use lower cut scores for passage on exit exams than for NCLB proficiency. Fifteen states use student performance on the first administration of the tests for NCLB accountability purposes.

The report also highlights a growing trend among state to establish alternate pathways to graduation for students who are struggling to pass exit exams. Alternate pathways help students who have difficulty passing exit exams but who can demonstrate mastery of high-school-level knowledge in other ways. The report describes the various alternate pathway designs, such as alternative assessments and diplomas, flexible cut scores and waivers. According to the report, 22 of the 26 states now offer specific alternatives for students with disabilities but some states have alternative options for English language learners.

The report looks at the initial pass rates for the 16 states that reported at least three consecutive years of data. CEP found that, in reading, 11 of the 16 states showed an average annual growth in the proportion of students passing the test in reading and 13 states showed average annual growth in mathematics. CEP also studied the passage rate gaps between African American and Latino students and white students, as well as between students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and all students. The report finds that although many states narrowed the gaps in initial pass rates between the various student subgroups over the years, the gaps remain large in both subjects.

“High school exit exams are increasingly becoming part of the school experience for America’s youngsters” said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of CEP. “States are using these exams to raise the rigor of high schools, and CEP’s research shows that students are passing the exams at greater rates.”

CEP offers recommendations for states to improve their exit exam policies, including increasing funding to remedial programs, creating better communication to students and parents about alternate pathways to graduation, increasing oversight of alternate pathways designed for students with disabilities, and collecting data on cumulative pass rates. CEP also proposes a research agenda that should be pursued to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of exit exams.

State High School Exit Exams: Trends in Test Programs, Alternate Pathways, and Pass Rates, individual state profiles, previous reports, and other information from CEP are available online at www.cep-dc.org.

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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. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.