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Exit Scramble

States that rushed to tie high school graduation to passing a high-stakes test now face pressure to come up with alternatives, even as critics warn against a dilution of standards.

By **Michele McNeil**

A decade-long push by states to make high school students pass an exit exam before getting their diplomas has stalled as politically sensitive student-failure rates contribute to a growing public backlash against high-stakes testing.

Though 26 states have adopted such mandates—most of them since 2000—that number has remained static since last year, according to a report scheduled for release this week by the **Center on Education Policy**, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization that has tracked the trend for the past seven years.

And for nearly a dozen states, compliance deadlines that once seemed far off have begun to bite, leading Arizona, Alabama, Maryland, and Washington, among others, to soften their mandates by offering alternative paths to a diploma, or by also weighing factors such as a student's grade point average.

In addition, states including Indiana, Massachusetts, and Texas are turning to end-of-course exams in individual subjects, such as algebra and English, rather than one comprehensive test designed to measure mastery of state standards.

While such moves may please those who want more flexibility in graduation requirements, some in the standards-and-accountability movement worry that states may water down their requirements in the face of political pressure.

"States are beginning to face the music and to face the actual fact that nontrivial numbers of kids are being told they aren't going to get a diploma," said Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the **Thomas B. Fordham Institute**, a Washington think tank that favors strong systems of standards-based accountability.

In the sheer number of students affected, the push for high-stakes exit exams has shown marked success since 1982, when North Carolina became the first state to withhold diplomas from those who failed to pass a mandatory state test.

Although just over half of all states have exit-exam requirements, those states tend to be the most populous and urban, and will encompass 74

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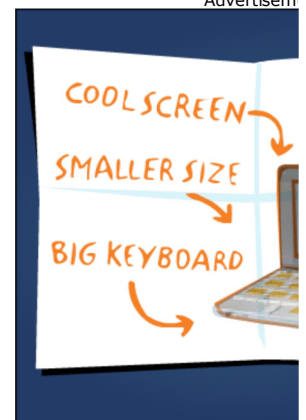
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percent of the country's high school students once the tests are fully implemented in 2012, according to the new CEP report.

An even greater percentage of the nation's minority students, or 84 percent, will have to pass such tests to graduate, reflecting the demographics of the states with exit exams. California, New Mexico, and Texas, for example, have exit exams and have general populations that are more than 50 percent minority, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

And despite political sensitivities, states aren't giving up on the idea of exit exams, especially as policymakers try to strengthen the high school curriculum and make students more competitive in a global workforce. Connecticut and Pennsylvania, for example, are aggressively pursuing new exit exams, even in the face of stiff opposition.

Much of that opposition is rooted in the failure rates that other states have experienced. Even though there's no national average of success or failure on such exams—in part because data collection is lacking—the CEP has found a wide range of experiences among states.

Georgia had passing rates in the high 90 percent range for white students taking the English and math tests for the first time in 2007, and a slightly lower rate for minority students. Oklahoma reported that 78 percent of white students, and 50 percent of black students, passed the math test the same year. In English, 76 percent of white students and 47 percent of white students passed.

Limited Track Record

Experts who monitor exit exams lament the dearth of research and data about how they affect student learning and the fate of students after high school.

"This is a very significant movement in education, and it's understudied and it's underreported," said Jack Jennings, the CEP president and a former longtime aide to congressional Democrats on education policy. "For a movement that affects a vast number of kids, there's very little research done."

Case in point: The center, for the first time this year, asked states with exit exams to cite the percentage of their students who failed the test but graduated anyway with a diploma in 2007 by using an alternative path. Fewer than half the states were able to report such data.

Because of the reach of the exit exams, the CEP report makes three recommendations:

- More money should be put into research on the effect of exit exams on dropout rates, student achievement, and graduation rates among low-income and minority students.
- States should collect and report data on how many students pass the tests after multiple tries, not just initially, along with the number of students who obtain a diploma through alternative means.
- If states move to end-of-course exams to increase rigor and better

States With Mandatory Exit Exams

By 2012, a slim majority of states will require high school students to pass an exit exam in order to graduate, although the number of states adding that mandate has slowed in recent years.



SOURCE: Center on Education Policy

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coordinate between high school and college and work, more attention needs to be given to such alignment in developing the tests.

"The rhetoric of these tests doesn't always match the reality," Mr. Jennings said.

Mr. Finn, the Fordham Institute president and an assistant U.S. education secretary in the Reagan administration, said the struggle for states is to strike a balance between enforcing a rigorous policy and understanding students' needs.

"I really do think a kid shouldn't have his entire life blighted because he can't do well on a particular kind of test," Mr. Finn said. "Yet at the same time, you allow too many alternative paths and too many exemptions and you dilute the meaning of having a graduation test."

States Seek Flexibility

With a 2009 deadline looming in Maryland for the first class to graduate with the exit-exam requirement, state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick last year faced passionate pleas from parents and some legislators to relax the requirements.

"We really did have a fight on our hands," said Ms. Grasmick, a proponent of the testing requirement. "Parents see the diploma as the critical credential—that their students attended school, so they ought to be able to get one."

The Maryland graduation requirements are end-of-course exams in math, English, biology, and government and stem from a 15-year overhaul of the state's assessment system.

Acknowledging high failure rates among Maryland students—as few as one in five students passed in some low-income high schools—the state board of education in October adopted a **"bridge plan"** that lets students complete rigorous projects in subjects they've failed instead of passing the exams. Those projects are to be administered locally but developed and monitored by the state.

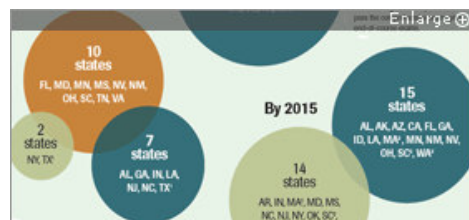
Some members of the board, newly appointed by Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat who took office in 2007, had fought unsuccessfully to have the requirement dropped entirely for the class of 2009.

The "bridge plan" was controversial, too, as some district superintendents favored the stiffer requirement. Montgomery County, Md., schools Superintendent Jerry Weast, for one, wrote a letter to *The Washington Post* calling it an "escape hatch" that created a "mirage of accountability."

In Arizona, a policy that allowed students who failed the exam to graduate if they met certain grade requirements was set to expire this year. But opposition persisted, fueled by fears that too many students would be denied diplomas, so the legislature in May extended the law indefinitely.

Also in May, the Alabama board of education approved an emergency rule allowing students to graduate if they passed just three sections of the exit test, rather than all five, as long as two of the three sections were math

Types of Exit Exams States Are Using or Plan to Use



SOURCE: Center on Education Policy

and reading.

And in Washington state, low passing rates on the math portion of the exit test prompted the legislature in March to eliminate that section in favor of an exam that students will take as they complete each course. The year before, the legislature had voted to delay implementation of the math portion after only about half of the class of 2008 passed it, according to local media reports.

Uphill Fight

Pennsylvania's experience illustrates the political hurdles that states face even when top education policymakers are determined to push ahead with exit exams.

That state's board of education in January unanimously approved a plan to implement end-of-course exams required for graduation starting with the class of 2014. The proposal had been part of a **December 2006 final report** by the Governor's Commission on College and Career Success.

But strong opposition from school districts, the state affiliates of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, and children's advocates prompted the legislature in June to step in. Lawmakers ordered a one-year halt to the statewide mandate, though local school boards can implement exit exams if they choose.

"It moved very quickly, and there was a lot of pushback from school boards and a lot of individuals," said Rep. James R. Roebuck Jr., the chairman of the state House education committee and a Democrat from Philadelphia. "But we do recognize that there's got to be some sort of way to adequately assess kids and figure out if they are ready for college and ready for work."

Pennsylvania Department of Education spokeswoman Sheila Ballen said the state is still forging ahead with plans to develop a model curriculum and diagnostic tools that will accompany the exams once they're put in place. The tests, she said, are "definitely not off the table."

Opposition remains. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association objects to state intervention in what members see as the local responsibility of deciding who gets a diploma. The group wants the testing mandate stopped altogether.

"This tells us they think the state test is the only test that will prove that a student is ready to graduate. You can't say that," said Tim Allwein, an assistant executive director of the school boards' association. "I think local control is part of the reason [for our opposition], but I think there's apprehension [about] how this affects our students."

End-of-Course Alternative

Even as states like Pennsylvania try to get their tests off the ground, some states that are already tying diplomas to an exam are shifting to end-of-course tests such as those in Maryland's.

Typically, exit exams are comprehensive tests, usually given for the first time in the 10th grade, that measure competence in several subject areas all at once. End-of-course exams, which tend to be more politically palatable, can be more easily linked to course content and be used more directly to increase rigor in coursework, Mr. Jennings of the Center on Education Policy said.

By 2015, at least 14 states will be using end-of-course exams for graduation, compared with just two states six years ago, according to the CEP report. At least three states—Massachusetts, South Carolina, and

Washington—are switching to a combination testing system in which students must pass a traditional exit exam, plus end-of-course exams in specific subjects.

But the CEP report outlines hurdles states confront in switching to end-of-course exams.

Multiple exams can be more costly and more time-consuming to develop, it says, and the results more difficult to return to districts in a timely manner. Educators also face challenges providing remedial help to students who fail a test but earn a passing grade in the class and advance to the next level.

Varied Performance

Whatever such tests are called, the passing rates vary greatly by state, and often depend on how high or low states set the cutoff scores.

Within states, there also are gaps in passing rates for students of different races. In 2006 in North Carolina, for example, 94 percent of white students passed the English part of the exam on the first try compared with 80 percent of black students; in math, 93 percent of white students passed compared with 40 percent of black students, according to CEP reports.

And a high failure rate can carry legal risks. In California, several students in the class of 2006—the first class required to pass an exit exam—sued the state. That lawsuit was resolved last year when the legislature allocated \$70 million to tutor and counsel failing students. ("[California Offers Long-Term Help on Exit Exams](#)," Oct. 24, 2007.)

The exit-exam requirement in 2006 coincided with a "substantial" increase in the dropout rate that year, according to a January 2008 report by the Alexandria, Va.-based Human Resources Research Organization. The study found a dropout rate of 14.8 percent in 2006, up from 12.6 percent in 2005.

In all, nearly 9,000 more California seniors dropped out in 2006 than in the year before, when the test wasn't a graduation requirement, the report said.

Weighing Options

All states with exams offer alternative paths to a diploma for students with disabilities, and 18 of the 23 that have fully phased in their exit-exam requirements also offer alternatives for general education students.

But it's unclear how many students nationally are taking advantage of such alternatives, said Mr. Jennings, who cites flaws in state-level data collection.

States often report initial passing rates on a test, but not the cumulative passing rates after multiple tries. Some states don't know, or don't report, how many students graduate through means other than an exit exam.

Mindful of the experience in other states, the Oregon state school board decided in June to start out with an exit exam that serves as one of three ways to get a diploma.

Beginning with the class of 2012, students must pass the exit exam, pass another standardized test (the SAT college-entrance test is one alternative being considered), or satisfactorily complete a locally scored test, work sample, or individual project.

By giving students three options rather than just one exam as the hurdle, the seven-member board was able to get the support of the education community, including the state teachers' union, said the chairman of the

state board, Duncan Wyse.

"We recognized that we want to have high standards," Mr. Wyse said, "but that students can demonstrate proficiency in a variety of ways."

Coverage of pathways to college and careers is underwritten in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Monty Neill wrote:

Thanks for this useful summary.

However, in mid-1990s, 16 states had exit exams, so 10 have added or plan to add them since.

What research there is pretty solidly proves that implementing exit exams increases the dropout rate, and there is some evidence that the tougher the test, the stronger the negative impact on the grad rate.

I'd also note that in some, if not many, states with exit exams, the alternatives for students with disabilities lead to a less-than-equal diploma - often what amounts to a certificate of attendance that will not enable a student to enroll in post-secondary programs or access federal financial aid.

Overwhelmingly, the harmful consequences fall on students of color, low-income students, English language learners and students with disabilities. Students without diplomas are more likely to be impoverished, in prison, have unstable families. The social cost outweighs any known benefits.

The purported benefits of these tests are, moreover, essentially unproven. The gains in state test scores can largely be explained as score inflation, and there is an absence of evidence beyond the crudest correlations (often explained by socio-economic status) that the tests lead to improved college performance.

What benefits might in theory accrue (more access to stronger courses for low-income students, for example) can be attained without the tests. They won't in either case be attained if states do not put up the funding they generally have not (consider the likely algebra I fiasco in CA., or the algebra II fiasco likely in TN).

End of course tests can make somewhat more sense than generic graduation tests if: 1) they count as final exams, e.g. 20 percent of a grade, not as sole hurdles; 2) alternatives exist for those who don't test well; and 3) states work with districts to create high-quality assessments that are not simply the mostly multiple-choice standardized tests that now exist but that include a variety of sources of evidence. Once such assessments exist, they might lead to improve exams or districts might prefer the richer possibilities of validating classroom-based work. Better, however, would be for states to avoid the pitfalls of graduation tests and move directly to questions of how to improve curriculum, instruction and assessment.

The questions are not technical, they are issues of political will and of funding.

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Al Peabody wrote:

Agreed - the questions are of political will and funding. BUT, the H.S. diploma has continued to be "dumbed down" to the point that many exiting school with a diploma are unable to do work expected of a "H.S. graduate" (ask any employer!). The "attended school" diploma is mere recognition of this sad fact. The passage of a reasonable test at least assures a certificated H.S. graduate has SOME level of capability, all-be-it pretty low here in Ohio. Ours is a "10th-grade" test and given the level for "passage", I feel it assures barely a 9th-grade level of achievement. Sad for honoring such a person with a diploma. But at least it's something! As you might expect, I am firmly for SOME standard - - and a test is one way of assuring that. THEN, if the graduation rates fall, it is a clear signal that something has to change in the education process that will

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