

About the reading

In 1999, the California state legislature passed the Public Schools Accountability Act. Part of the legislation created a new exit test that all students must pass in order to graduate from high school. Governor Gray Davis says the test will ensure that all students who graduate from high school will leave with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college or in the work place. Critics say that the test will discriminate against certain groups of students and may cause an increase in the drop out rate. As you read this article, be thinking about the new high school exit examination. Is it fair?

“The New California High School Exit Exam”

by Carry Rone

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In the past three decades, reports published in the national press have claimed that test scores for U.S. students are declining, that high school graduates are unable to fill out job applications and read simple directions, and that entering college freshman need remedial math and writing just to meet entry level course requirements. Comparisons of U.S. students to the students of other industrialized nations have been equally harsh.

Are these charges real? The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that in mathematics and reading, while more U.S. students are scoring high, far too many are underachieving. 39% of all fourth graders, 37% of eighth graders, and 36% of twelfth graders tested “below basic” in mathematics. The numbers in reading were only slightly less dismal. The same NAEP indicated that 34% of fourth graders, 33% of eighth graders and 34% of twelfth graders scored “below basic.” More shocking still is that the number of twelfth graders who scored “below basic” actually rose since the previous NAEP in 1994.

As these kinds of statistics surface in the press, state legislatures across the country are taking decisive action. The most common response is to create “high stakes” testing where a student can be retained or a diploma can actually be withheld if a student does not pass an exit examination. Currently, twenty-six states have established exit tests. California is the most recent to enact such a test. In our state, the first high school exit exam to count towards graduation will be administered next year to sophomores in the graduating class of 2004.

Previously, California high school students gathered graduation credits, referred to as Carnegie Units, to earn their diplomas. Graduation was tied to the number of Carnegie Units earned, and all students knew that a letter grade of “D” or higher was required to receive credit for a class. All that is changing, however. Now separate tests in language arts (reading and writing) and mathematics will be given in the tenth grade year. Students who fail either portion of the test will be required to retest until they pass. If by the end of their senior year they can’t pass all portions of the test, they don’t receive a diploma - even if they have all the Carnegie Units required to graduate. That means four years’ of attendance and passing grades might not equal a diploma. This is a huge change for students and school districts.

Governor Davis has stated that eventually he wants the mathematics portion of the test to cover material taught in Algebra 3-4 and geometry. In the first years of the test, however, the content will go no higher than Algebra 1-2. The English portion of the test will cover tenth-grade level reading and writing skills. Current plans call for two separate essays to be written. Although the specific content is not yet known, the essays will cover some type of literary response, persuasive writing, or some sort of technical writing.

The bottom line for students will be, “You pass all portions of the test or you don’t graduate. Period.” For those who have earned all their units, without a passing score on the test, there will be no diploma.

Are exit exams fair and valid? Experts disagree. Some question the concept of these tests. They charge that the tests are only a single measure of performance taken on a single day. Some students who suffer from what is called “test anxiety” or who simply had a bad day may be unable to demonstrate what they really know. To these experts, daily classroom work, teacher observations, and a wide variety of tests are the only fair ways to judge something as important as a diploma. Alfie Cohn, author of *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, writes, “These high stakes tests are unconscionable. They say to kids that regardless of your record, you will not receive your diploma unless you pass a single, stressful test.”

However, whether or not an exit test is fair, the reality of what is driving state legislatures and state governors to create the tests is undeniable. Currently, students can come to the end of four years in high school, have all the units needed to graduate, and still – according to achievement tests – be performing at levels equal to fourth grade students. This is not acceptable to both taxpayers and legislators who fund school systems.

Raising the Bar?

So what is the real truth? Do high stakes test really influence student learning or not? The evidence seems to argue both sides of the question. George W. Bush and his predecessor Anne Richards, while governors of Texas, have mandated high stakes testing starting back in 1985. Their state’s achievement test, called the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), shows that student achievement scores over the last five years have risen dramatically. However, during this same five-year period, Texas high school students’ scores on the SAT (college boards) have remained flat. Critics of the TAAS say this shows that it is a low-level assessment and requires only basic-skills level knowledge. A panel of mathematicians who looked over the contents of the math portion of the TAAS described the questions as “too focused on minimal achievement.” An example of the level of 10th grade mathematics questions: “A restaurant bought 102 pounds of beef for \$318. Which of these choices is the best estimate of what the restaurant paid per pound?” Tests like the SAT college boards require far higher levels of critical thinking, skills which critics claim to be more “real world.”

And what about the dropout rate? Will high stakes testing increase the number of students who dropout before they receive their diplomas? Again, critics disagree. In Texas, some experts claim that since the TAAS exit test, the drop out rate among minority and special education students is now as high as 25%. While the official numbers being reported to the press are lower than this staggering 25%, the lower numbers do *not* include students forced to finish school by taking the GED in adult school because they couldn’t pass the exit exam during their four years in school.

Those in favor of the exit tests point out that by simply “raising the bar” for our expectations of students, we will also raise their levels of achievement. Ann Smisko, Associate Commissioner for Curriculum Assessment of the Texas State Education Agency, says the Texas test has caused teachers to teach to the state’s objectives and standards, and that by focusing their instruction and by expecting more of their students, teachers have produced higher levels of student achievement. She sites Texas’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores as proof. “Our NAEP scores have been rather good and are improving each time we take it. This proves that by simply demanding more of our students, we are getting more from them. And this is a test we didn’t create.”

An Issue of Equity

Although the new California test has not yet been challenged in court, other states with similar tests have faced legal action. In Texas, a Hispanic advocacy group challenged the fairness of the test in a suit filed in the US District Court in San Antonio on October 15, 1998. The group, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, asked the courts to stop the use of the Texas high school exit exam as a requirement for earning a diploma. They claimed that content of the test was racially biased. Preliminary studies, said the group's spokesperson Albert H. Kauffman, showed a disproportionate number of students who failed were African American and Hispanic. "This test has had a particularly negative effect on minority students, who have long received substandard education in their community schools." The creators of the TAAS say that the test has actually boosted minority student achievement. They point to the math scores of African American fourth graders that have shown dramatic gains over the last four years and are now nearly equal to the average scores for the grade level.

In a Florida lawsuit, *Debra P. v. Turlington*, a case which challenged using exit tests to withhold diplomas, the plaintiffs alleged that such tests were unfair to economically disadvantaged students and minority students whose community schools were less well funded and less well staffed than suburban schools. The Florida court supported the test but ruled that a high school diploma is a property right that cannot be denied without observance of all due process. In the case of the exit test, the court said due process must include: adequate notice of such tests to parents and students; an assurance that the content of the test would only cover material that was taught to all students; and guarantees of opportunity for success (remedial or special classes for students in jeopardy of failure). If all these were present in a school system, the court said such tests were fair and valid.

The Future of "High Stakes" Exit Examinations

The trend toward high stakes, accountability testing is not ending. If anything, signs point to an increase in the amount of testing students will face. No one denies that testing is important; no one disagrees with the idea of kids leaving school better prepared to enter college or the work force. What has some people worried is the use of a single, one-time test as a measure of what kids know. Does it show us who knows the things that are important? Does it really give every kid a chance to show what he/she has learned in four years? Does it give every child an equal chance of success or does it discriminate against certain groups of children? Will it increase the dropout rate?

These are questions that critics and fans of the exit tests will be debating for some time to come.

Please go on to the next page!

Writing Directions:

*You have just read an article about the growing use of exit examinations. Now you must take a stand. In a well-developed essay answer the following question. **Should earning a high school diploma be based on passing an exit test in addition to having to earn “Carnegie” units?***

Write a multi-paragraph essay in which you:

- *state your opinion on this controversial issue of using an exit test to award or withhold diplomas*
- *include counter arguments to answer opposing points of view*
- *use evidence to support your position*

Evidence may be taken from many sources—from the articles (both statistics and expert opinions), from commonly accepted beliefs, from things you have learned in school, and from your own personal observations.

Remember:

- *Do **not use the exact words of the articles** unless you also use quotation marks to indicate words that are not your own.*
- *Always give credit (or attribution) for information taken from the articles.*

When you have finished your paper, be sure you go back and check it for correct sentences, punctuation, and spelling.