Graduation test lessons

In less than a decade, the number of states with high school graduation tests has declined from 26 to 13. Nearly half the states that ended these tests made the new policy retroactive, awarding diplomas to tens of thousands of young people.

FairTest looked at states that recently dropped their exit exams and found common themes:

**First, research mattered.** Multiple studies show high school exit exams do not increase college going or workforce success, but they do increase the dropout rate. Those without a high school diploma have higher unemployment rates, earn far less, have less stable families, and greater rates of incarceration. The tests have blocked graduation for tens of thousands of young people who had completed all their other high school requirements. Many more dropped out because they thought they would not pass the test.

In Arizona, the State Board of Education found that “The tests did not improve college preparedness or workforce readiness,” according to Vince Yanez, former executive director of the board.

**Second, introducing new tests is a good time to reconsider the exit requirement.** Yanez explained:

> Arizona was in transition from the AIMS test to a Common Core test, which initially was the PARCC. ... With the new test, our choice was to have high expectations, or to lower the expectations to ensure enough kids could pass it. It looked like the PARCC failure rate would be high. We wanted high expectations. The Board submitted legislation to end the graduation requirement and it became law. ... Arizona subsequently dropped PARCC and contracted with AIR for a new state test.

In sum, the key issue was moving to a tougher test and the consequences of using that for graduation, coupled with evidence the AIMS graduation test had produced no benefits.
Similarly, California imposed a moratorium on graduation requirements as the new SBAC test was implemented. Previous legislative efforts to end the tests had been opposed by then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who blocked legislation pushed by student, parent, teacher and civil rights groups. Tens of thousands of students had been denied a diploma because of the test; many more dropped out because they thought they would not pass. Current Governor Jerry Brown and Superintendent Tom Torlakson backed ending the test. Democratic party unity in support of the moratorium eased passage. Both teachers unions backed the measure, but there was no public campaign, perhaps because none was needed.

This year, a bill that permanently ends the graduation test passed both houses of the legislature and was signed by Governor Jerry Brown.

**Third, public campaigns can matter.** The Providence Student Union led a highly visible and ultimately successful campaign to prevent implementation of Rhode Island’s newly mandated graduation exam. This campaign changed the views of state leaders, who approved a three-year moratorium. The head of the state education department, who had pushed for the mandate, later extended the moratorium another three years. In 2017, the state permanently ended the exam.

In Pennsylvania, school boards and the teachers union have actively opposed a state graduation test requirement, resulting in a series of delays. This year, the legislature exempted some students from the requirement. Many observers believe the legislature will end the policy before it takes effect.

The Washington Education Association and parent groups have pushed, year after year, to end the state’s exit exam. They came close in 2017, but won only a delay of the science test. They will keep fighting.

In New Jersey, a public campaign to end the exit exam stalled in the legislature, in part due to pressure from Governor Chris Christie. The New Jersey Education Association, Save Our Schools NJ, the Education Law Center and other groups have pressed hard on the issue. The newly-elected governor, Phil Murphy, has promised to end the requirement.
Making the decision retroactive was mainly a legislative decision. Yanez commented, “Some non-grads were asking, or could ask, can I go back to school, then simply graduate because I completed all non-test requirements?” In Arizona, an amendment to the original bill made it retroactive. It was also a question of fairness: Why should previous non-graduates be penalized for a state policy that has been reversed?

Opposition can be turned into support. In Arizona, business groups raised concerns. Yanez said, “But when they saw evidence of lack of benefits of the grad test and our intent to make new test more rigorous, they did not oppose ending the graduation requirement. There was no real opposition to the board-proposed bill.” However, in other states, business groups have been vociferous in their opposition.