

FairTest

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing

October 29, 2007

Dear members of the Maryland Board of Education,

Since its creation in 1985 by leaders of major civil rights, education reform and student advocacy organizations, the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, Inc. (FairTest) has closely monitored the impact of state-mandated exit exams on both equity and educational quality.

More than two decades of evidence demonstrates that high school graduation tests are the wrong prescription for what ails public education. In fact, such requirements damage the very groups proponents claim they will help. Across the county, misguided exit exam mandates have increased drop-out rates, especially among minority groups, and focused classroom teaching on test preparation rather than 21st Century skills. As you consider whether high school graduation in Maryland should be contingent on passing a series of tests, we urge you to look at the full range of consequences of such policies.

Across the nation, tens of thousands of students are denied diplomas each year--regardless of how well they have done in school--because they did not pass a standardized state test. Under such policies, after 12 years of playing by the rules, working hard and completing all other graduation requirements, a student's future can hinge on just one or two points on a single standardized exam.

The problems exit exams are meant to solve are certainly real. Maryland, like most states, has gaps in educational access, quality and outcomes. But exit exams won't cure these ills. For too many students, the cure is worse than the disease. Rather than provide better education and expanded opportunities, graduation tests add punishment – denial of a diploma – to those who most need help.

Proponents incorrectly claim exit exams will narrow achievement gaps. Though the number of exit exam states has steadily increased since 1987, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports no achievement gap narrowing at the high school level among racial groups. Nor have average high school scores increased.

Simply making tests 'tough' does not mean schools will get better. South Carolina has one of the most stringent definitions of 'proficient,' but its students score low on NAEP. Massachusetts also sets the proficiency bar high. But that state was near the top on NAEP before it even had mandated state exams, and its gains have mostly been caused by major increases in funding.

In the nation as a whole, real progress has been elusive because high stakes testing, whether state graduation tests or the federal No Child Left Behind law, undermines rather

than improves education. Untested subjects are ignored, while tested topics narrow to test coaching programs. Test prep is like holding a match to a thermostat and believing the room is warmer: Scores rise on that test, real learning does not.

The most thorough independent national research confirms a link between graduation tests and higher dropout rates. The more difficult the graduation test, the more the dropout rate goes up. Texas introduced exit exams in 1992. Fifteen years later, Texas used test results to deny diplomas to a record 40,200 students in the Class of 2007. California has seen a dramatic decrease in graduates since it imposed a mandatory exit exam in 2006.

In Massachusetts, high-stakes MCAS proponents cite average statewide dropout rates to show that the tests have had little ill effect, but in urban districts and for certain student subgroups, the numbers tell a different story. MCAS became a graduation requirement in 2003, and between 1998-99 and 2005-06, the annual dropout rates in low-income urban districts have risen: Fall River from 5.2% to 11.4%; Fitchburg from 3.2% to 6.7%, Holyoke from 7.5% to 11.6%, and Springfield from 7.2% to 8.3%. For the state's limited English proficient students, the annual dropout rate has been on a steady upward trend since 2003, from 7.6% to 9.5%. Across the board, minority dropout rates are three or more times greater than those for white students.

In 2006, Boston's annual dropout rate rose sharply, from 7.7% to 9.9%. At the same time, the city suffered a wave of youth violence. Boston City councilors, who solicited the views of local young people on why violence was rising, reported, "Students ... expressed massive frustration and boredom with the endless drilling and practice of the MCAS test and test preparation... Far too many students describe their school experience as an MCAS-centric environment... [as a result] the incentive for students to remain in school is tenuous."

The tests themselves are limited and flawed instruments. They all have "measurement error," which means some children will fail even though they know the subject. Being able to take the test more than once helps more students clear the bar but does not completely solve this problem. There is also the well-documented problem of test anxiety: an accomplished student may freeze, not do well on the test, and be denied a diploma.

No one wants to see youth leave school without the skills needed for success. Exam supporters say students shouldn't get "meaningless" diplomas if they can't pass the tests. But it's a student's overall transcript that makes a diploma truly meaningful. In fact grades are better predictors college success than the SAT, one of the more technically sound standardized tests. Requiring students to pass a standardized exam is not a solid foundation for establishing 'meaning.'

On the other hand, how is society better off if a student who passes her courses is denied a diploma because she does not pass a test? The individual and societal costs of this

approach are high. Students without diplomas earn much less, are far less likely to maintain stable families, and are far more likely to end up in prison.

We commend you for pausing to reconsider before imposing exit exams. This is a critical opportunity to think anew about what students should be required to achieve before they earn a diploma. It's important to ensure the resources are there to enable students to meet those goals. Then think about how students can demonstrate this learning, what are the various ways they can do so, and how the state can check up on the system. Other states have avoided the exit exam route specifically because they recognized the costs can outweigh the benefits. Rhode Island, Wyoming and Nebraska, for example, all have multiple measures systems of determining graduation. In any event, there is absolutely no need to impose a one-size-fits-all graduation test to answer any of these questions. The real fact is that graduation tests hurt, not help, students, schools and society.

We would be happy to speak with you further about this. Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Monty Neill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Monty" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Neill".

Monty Neill, Ed.D.
Co-Executive Director
FairTest