

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

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Rhode Island Board of Regents
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Regarding Proposed Graduation Requirements**

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 most damage the very groups proponents claim they will help. Across the country, 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.

Because of evidence that exit exams create more harm than good and do not improve the quality of education for underserved student populations, we see Rhode Island's current High School Diploma system as a model for its use of multiple measures of student competence and the limited weight placed on state test scores. Such systems are more effective than exit exams at promoting the development of 21st century skills like creativity, critical thinking and teamwork.

We urge you to consider what could be lost and reject efforts to move Rhode Island toward more reliance on high-stakes exams. Increasing the weight of the test from 10% to one-third will no doubt increase the focus on test preparation and improve the appearance of test results, but it is unlikely to result in students who are better prepared for higher education and life after school.

The problems exit exams are meant to solve are certainly real. Rhode Island, like most states, has gaps in educational access, quality and outcomes. But increasing the weight placed on exit exams won't cure these ills. Rather than provide better education and expanded opportunities, a greater focus on the tests too often results in disadvantaged students getting narrowed curriculum and instruction that pushes lower-order cognitive skills. Meanwhile affluent students are more likely to retain a rich, challenging curriculum because teachers have less reason to fear they will test poorly. The gap in access to high-quality schooling can easily widen instead of narrow.

Proponents are incorrect when they claim exit exams can reduce achievement gaps. Though the number of states requiring students to pass exit exams 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.¹ 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,² and its gains have primarily been the result of major increases in funding. States such as Mississippi and Alabama have long had graduation tests, yet their educational performance remains at the bottom of national rankings.

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, often undermines rather than improves education. Untested subjects are ignored, while tested topics narrow to test coaching programs.³ Since these tests are primarily multiple-choice, students focus on rote learning to identify correct answers instead of learning to think and apply their knowledge. Test prep also is like holding a match to a thermostat and believing the room is warmer: Scores rise on that test, real learning does not.

We realize there is no current proposal to weight the tests so that a poor score alone would prevent graduation, but of course the tests will prove decisive for many more at 1/3 than at 10%. It is worth considering in this context that the most thorough independent national research confirms a link between graduation tests and higher dropout rates.⁴ The more difficult the graduation test, the more the dropout rate goes up.⁵ 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 2007.⁶ California has seen a dramatic decrease in graduates since it imposed a mandatory exit exam in 2006.⁷

In Massachusetts, five years after MCAS became a graduation requirement in 2003, annual dropout rates have reached a nine-year high of 3.8%. Black and Hispanic rates are two to three times the rate for white students, and some urban areas have rates as high as 14.8%.⁸ Yet the efforts to increase MCAS scores and close test score gaps always seem to take priority over the dropout crisis.

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."⁹

To a significant extent, the increase in the dropout rate is a function of very different pass rates. Across the nation, African American and Latino youth pass the graduation tests at far lower rates than do Whites and Asians. English language learners and students with disabilities often pass at rates lower even than those of Blacks and Hispanics.¹⁰ Thus, on test results and on school completion, high-stakes graduation tests exacerbate existing inequalities.

No matter how much they count, 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. There is also the well-documented problem of test anxiety: an accomplished student may freeze and do poorly on the test.

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 is a student's overall transcript that makes a diploma truly meaningful. In fact, test-makers themselves concede that grades are better predictors of college success than the SAT, one of the more technically sound standardized tests.¹¹ 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, as will almost certainly happen to significant numbers of Rhode Island youth under the proposal? 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.

Other states avoided the exit exam route specifically because they recognized the costs can outweigh the benefits. Wyoming and Nebraska, for example, also have multiple measures systems of determining graduation.

In any event, there is absolutely no need to move toward a central role for one-size-fits-all graduation tests to respond to any of these concerns. The fact is that graduation tests hurt, not help, students, schools and society. Again, for all these reasons, we urge you to reject proposals to increase the weight given to exit exams in determining graduation.

We would be pleased to work with you and Rhode Island educators, parents and citizens to strengthen the methods to ensure the quality of local determinations. Such an approach can build on the creativity of educators, the concerns of parents and community members to ensure the education of the whole child, the desire to keep costs and management under control, and knowledge gained from other states and other nations as to how to construct fair, open and educationally supportive systems that avoid the pitfalls of high-stakes testing.

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

¹ Neill, M. 2005. School Beat: Notes on the recent NAEP test results. *Beyond Chron*: (August 4). <http://quartz.he.net/~beyondch/news/index.php?itemid=339>.

² Massachusetts has long performed with distinction on NAEP: Five years before the MCAS exit exam, no state performed significantly better than Massachusetts in 8th grade reading, and 11 years before the exit exam, no state performed significantly better than Massachusetts in 4th grade reading. See the National Center for Education Statistics web site <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/statecomp/>.

³ McMurrer, J. July 2007. Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era. Center on Education Policy. <http://www.cep-dc.org>

⁴ Warren, J.R., Kulick, R.B., & Jenkins, K.N. 2006. High school exit examinations and state-level completion and GED rates, 1975 through 2002. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, V28, N2: 131-152.

⁵ Dee, T.S. & Jacob, B.A. 2006. Do high school exit exams influence educational attainment or labor market performance? Social Science Research Network, April. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=900985.

⁶ Radcliffe, J. & Mellon, E. May 12, 2007. TAKS tests cost 40,000 Texas seniors chance to graduate. *Houston Chronicle*.

⁷ *FairTest Examiner*. January 2007. Exit exam update: WA, TX, CA, AZ, MA.

<http://www.fairtest.org/examarts/2007%20January/ExitExams.html>;
Tucker, J. and Asimov, N. 2007. Graduate rate is lowest in 10 years. *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2007/05/12/MNGIMPQ12P1.DTL>

⁸ Massachusetts Department of Education. 2008. Dropout Rates in Massachusetts Public Schools: 2006-07 <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0607/default.html>

⁹ Ross, M. et al. June 2006. Report of the Special Committee on Youth Violent Crime Prevention: Working Together to Increase the Peace. (June): 10.

¹⁰ Center on Education Policy. Jan. 2007. Gaps Persist in High School Exit Exam Pass Rates; CEP. Sept. 2007. *State High School Exit Exams*. See esp. Tables 7 & 8, pp. 29-30; www.cep-dc.org.

¹¹ College Board, *SAT Registration Booklet 2007-2008*, p. 15