High School Exit Exams

Quick Facts



Children's Defense Fund

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Graduation from high school is the foundation for future success in college and the workplace. Therefore, decisions about whether or not a student will graduate should be made in the most thoughtful way. While, historically, states and districts have made individualized decisions to graduate students, by 2009, half of all states will use a single standardized test as the sole means to determine whether a student will graduate.[1] Research has shown that standardized testing has led to negative academic outcomes for students and schools, particularly for those in low-income and minority communities. For example, by 2009, eight out of ten minority public school students (compared to seven out of ten public school students in general) will be denied high school diplomas if they do not pass a standardized exit exam.[2] This fact sheet shows why such testing is neither fair nor the most accurate way of evaluating students, and emphasizes the importance of using multiple indicators of achievement before making important decisions about individual students**.**

Professional standards for educational testing, test publishers and an overwhelming body of research suggest that a single test should not be the sole determinant when making important decisions about students.

- The Joint Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing explicitly state that "in educational settings a decision or characterization that will have a major impact on a student should not be made on the basis of a single test score."[3]
- The Association of American Publishers, which represents the companies that publish standardized tests, asserts, "It is important both legally and technically not to put all the weight on a single test when making important decisions about students and schools. Rather, there must be multiple measures or indicators of performance to support important decisions."[4]
- The National Research Council Board on Testing and Assessment concluded that "no single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge," and that "an educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score."[5]

One of the key problems with high-stakes policies is that they are not fair for children who have been denied the opportunity to learn the material covered on the test. Without significant and adequate investments in educational resources so that all children have the tools they need to succeed in school, and without the opportunity to learn the material covered on assessments, standardized exit exams serve to punish students for public schools' failure to educate them. In this context, poor and minority students are particularly disadvantaged.

- Professional standards for educational testing advise that students must be provided "curriculum and instruction which affords them the opportunity to learn the content and skills that are tested."[6]
- Schools with the highest percentages of minority, limited English proficient and low-income students are more likely to employ beginning teachers,[7] teachers who have less education,[8] and teachers who teach subjects in which they are not certified or in which they did not major in college.[9] High minority schools are nearly twice as likely as low-minority schools to be overcrowded[10] and to have larger class-sizes.[11]
- A recent report by the Center on Education Policy found that exit exam scores were significantly lower among Blacks, Hispanics, low-income students, children with disabilities, and those with

limited English proficiency. Gaps in pass rates between these groups and White students climb as high as 40 percent, depending on the subject.[12]

Another significant problem is accuracy. For a variety of reasons, a single test cannot always validly or reliably measure what students know and can do, resulting in students failing for reasons not related to their ability. This is problematic given that in high stakes testing situations, students could be denied graduation based on insufficient or unreliable information.

- According to the National Research Council, ". . . a test score is not an exact measure of a student's knowledge or skills. A student's test score can be expected to vary across different versions of a test . . . as a function of the particular sample questions asked and/or transitory factors, such as the student's health on the day of the test. Thus, no single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student's knowledge."[13]
- Scoring errors also have led to serious mistakes that have had a significant impact on students. For example, in 2000, 8,000 Minnesota students were told that they had failed the state's graduation test when they had actually passed. Several dozen missed their graduation ceremonies because of it.[14]
- Minority students are more likely to perform poorly on these tests for reasons unrelated to their actual ability. Research shows that when minority students are afraid their performance on a test will confirm a stereotype about their group (i.e. that Blacks will perform less well than Whites) they tend to perform more poorly than they would otherwise.[15]

There is growing evidence that the imposition of exit exams has marginalized at-risk youth, pushed students into General Educational Diploma (GED) programs and led to increased dropout rates.

- A National Research Council report found that high stakes may help to motivate those students who are "just getting by, but know they can do better." However, they likely will harm the lowest-performing students who will "not exert effort when they do not expect their efforts to lead to success."[16]
- Last year more than 2,000 Florida students as young as 16 were placed in the "GED Exit Option" track where they stay in school (in alternate classes) to earn a GED and perhaps a regular diploma.[17]
- In Massachusetts, for example, the dropout rate increased from 2.9 percent to 3.5 percent among seniors graduating in 2003, the first year that students were required to pass an exit exam to graduate.[18]
- An earlier study found that nine of the ten states with the highest dropout rates used high stakes exit exams, while none of the states with the lowest dropout rates used these tests.[19]

Research shows that while high-stakes testing systems in general can lead to a greater focus on state standards, they also can have a negative impact on curriculum, especially for poor and minority students.

- A 2002 study by the Rand Corporation reviewed research on test score inflation and found that "coaching" for tests—or non-substantive teaching—is "widespread" in high-stakes testing situations.[20]
- An earlier Rand survey in 2000 found that teachers in Washington State shifted significant instructional time away from untested subjects including science, the arts, social studies, and health and fitness.[21]
- There are strong indications that a lack of resources plays a role in the degree to which schools feel compelled to "teach to the test." For example, a study in New Jersey found that teachers from high-poverty schools "reported substantially more time devoted explicitly to test preparation activities than those in wealthy districts."[22] Studies of schools in Arizona and Kentucky mirror these results.[23]

[1] Center on Education Policy. (2004). *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*. Washington, DC. p.5.
[2] Center on Education Policy. (2004). *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*. Washington, DC. p.5.
[3] American Education Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.* 1999. Standard 13.7.
[4] The Association of American Publishers. *Standarized Assessment: A Primer.* Available on line at http://www.publishers.org/school/pdf/Testing%20Primer%20Revised.pdf
[5] National Research Council. Heubert, J. P. and Hauser, R. Eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation.* National Academies Press: Washington, DC. 1999. p. 3.
[6] American Education Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.* 1999. p. 14.
[7] U.S. Department of Education. National Center on Education Statistics. *Condition of Education 2003*. Washington, DC.
[8] U.S. Department of Education. National Center on Education Statistics. *Condition of Education 2002*. Washington, DC.
[9] U.S. Department of Education. National Center on Education Statistics. *Condition of Education 2004*. Washington, DC.
[10] U.S. Department of Education. National Center on Education Statistics. *Condition of Education 2001*. Washington, DC.
[11] U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *School and Staffing Survey (SASS),*1999-2000. As cited in Barton, Paul E. *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress.* Educational Testing Service. Princeton, New Jersey. October 2003.
[12] Center on Education Policy. (2004). *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*. Washington, DC. p. 7.
[13] National Research Council. Heubert, J. P. and Hauser, R. Eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation.* National Academies Press: Washington, DC. 1999. p. 3.
[14] Story found at http://www.cnn.com/2002/EDUCATION/11/26/testing.settlement.ap/
[15] Steele, C. M. (1997). "A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape the intellectual identities and performance of women and African-Americans." *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629
[16] National Research Council. *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. 2004. p. 57.
[17] Center on Education Policy. *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*. Washington, DC. 2004. p. 49.
[18] Center on Education Policy. *State High School Exit Exams: A Maturing Reform*. Washington, DC. 2004. p. 47.
[19] Kreitzer, A.E., Madaus, F. and Haney, W. "Competency Testing and Dropouts." *Dropouts from School: Issues, Dilemmas and Solutions*. L. Weis, E. Farrar and H.G. Petrie, Eds. Albany: State University of New York Press: 1989. As cited in National Research Council. Heubert, J. P. and Hauser, R. Eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation.* National Academies Press: Washington, DC. 1999. (p. 174).
[20] Hamilton, Laura. Stecher, Brian and Klein, Stephen. *Making Sense Out of Test-based Accountability in Education*. Rand Corporation. 2002. p. 95.
[21] Hamilton, Laura. Stecher, Brian and Klein, Stephen. *Making Sense Out of Test-based Accountability in Education*. Rand Corporation. 2002. p. 92.
[22] Herman, Joan. "Instructional Effects in Elementary Schools." Center for the Study of Evaluation. National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. University of California, Los Angeles. September, 2002. p. 9.
[23] Hamilton, Laura. Stecher, Brian and Klein, Stephen. *Making Sense Out of Test-based Accountability in Education.* Rand Corporation. 2002. p. 99.