

# FairTest

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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

## **Why Graduation Tests/Exit Exams Fail to Add Value to High School Diplomas**

**Graduation tests do not promote the knowledge, skills and habits needed for success in college or skilled work.** According to college professors and employers, high school graduates must be able to analyze conflicting explanations, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, reach conclusions, conduct research, and engage in the give-and-take of ideas (National Research Council, 2002). Also needed are attributes such as good study skills, time management, awareness of one's performance and persistence. Since exit exams do not measure most of these important attributes, test scores have little value for colleges or employers. (Peter D. Hart, 2008).

**Graduation tests do not make high school diplomas more valuable to employers.** There is no evidence that exit exams make diplomas more meaningful in the labor market. In fact, recent research found no positive impact on employment status or wages in states with high school exit exams. There was also no impact on numbers of high school graduates going to college (Warren et al., 2007).

**Most state standards-based high school tests are not aligned with college-level work or employment.** Most tests just try to measure basic academic skills. They rely primarily on multiple-choice questions, some adding a few short written pieces. They rarely require students to apply their learning or engage in higher-level thinking. According to Stanford Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, "Most jobs in today's knowledge-based economy require that we find, assemble and analyze information, write and speak clearly and persuasively; and work with others to solve messy problems," none of which are measured by multiple choice exams (Darling-Hammond, 2005). College requires similar skills.

**Test preparation overshadows the development of college-level skills.** A focus on learning out-of-context facts to pass exit exams detracts from preparing students for the work required in college. A survey of professors and employers by Achieve (2005), which promotes standards and tests, found many high school graduates are weak in comprehending complex reading, oral communication, understanding complicated materials, doing research, and producing quality writing.

**The widespread adoption of exit exams has not resulted in more high school graduates prepared for college.** Exit exam policies now influence the education of 65% of U.S. public high school students, yet colleges report increasing need for remedial education. Federal statistics indicate that 40% of college students take at least one remedial course, reducing their probability of graduating (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Texas colleges reported in-state high school graduates needed more, not less, remediation after high-stakes testing was introduced (Haney, 2000).

**High school graduates would *not* be better prepared if schools were to "raise standards" by making exams harder.** Tougher multiple-choice questions won't address the real gap between tests and college or employment requirements. Such strategies also ignore research on human motivation, assuming that simply "raising standards" and threatening punishment (withholding diplomas) will make students and teachers work harder. Most modern businesses no longer try to boost productivity by threatening employees with punishment (Oakes and Grubb, 2007).

**Better assessment methods are needed if high schools are to develop higher level skills students need for college and work.** Unlike standardized exit exams, the use of high-quality assessment methods, such as performances, exhibitions and portfolios, has been shown to promote the development of skills, knowledge and disposition actually valued in college and employment. Employers have said they are more interested in examples of student work and problem-solving, such as portfolios, than they are in test results [or grades] (Peter D. Hart, 2008).

## References

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