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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Graduation Test Update:

States That Recently Eliminated or Scaled Back High School Exit Exams

The number of states requiring high school graduation exams in language arts and math has declined rapidly over the past few years. *Only eleven states have graduation tests in place for the high school class of 2020, down from a high of 27 that had or planned such tests.* The current number is the lowest level since at least the mid-1990s.

Exit exams have harmed tens of thousands of youth but not improved the outcomes of high school graduates.

Listed below are states that have still have exit exams, have suspended their graduation exam requirements, plan to implement new tests, or have granted retroactive diplomas to students who failed the test but completed other requirements.

States that have graduation tests for the high school class of 2020: Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia, a total of 11. Some allow appeals or alternatives. This list includes states where students must pass end of course tests (EOCs) in order to graduate, but not where an EOC just counts as part of a course grade.

Recently ended grad tests: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Washington.

Moratorium on exit exams: Pennsylvania (2020; it has repeatedly been pushed back a year or two).

Retroactively awarded diplomas to students who had not passed exams: Alaska, Arizona, California, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, and Texas. Mississippi has an appeals process allowing students who did not pass the previous exit exam to receive diplomas. South Carolina allowed those who did not pass to appeal to their local school boards through the end of 2015.

Recently reduced number or weight of tests:

- Mississippi requires minimum test scores, though somewhat low test scores can be combined with higher grades to allow graduation.
- Tennessee, Nevada and Georgia replaced graduation tests with end-of-course (EOC) tests that factor into student course grades but which students do not have to pass. Other states such as North Carolina have similar EOC requirements.

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- Texas reduced its plan for 15 required exit tests to five in 2013, then added the right for students to use an alternative for up to two of the five if they fail them.
- Indiana in 2017 passed legislation to allow multiple pathways to graduation in addition to end-of-course tests. Effectively, students do not have to pass a test to earn a diploma, though how easy or hard that will be remains to be seen, including the use of a ‘locally determined’ option.

New civics test graduation requirements: The Education Commission of the States (2017) reports that since 2015, eight states have made passing a high school civics exams modeled on the 100-question immigration citizenship test a graduation requirement: Arizona, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota and Utah. Many exempt students with disabilities and sometimes other students. Not one of these states requires students to pass any other tests to graduate. Seven other states require students to take but not pass the test. In this period, 18 states rejected bills proposing such a law. Some reports say nearly every student passes the multiple-choice exam.

Scheduled to implement new tests:

- Colorado, Class of 2021: will be a series of test/assessment alternatives, ranging from SAT or ACT to district options that do not have to be a test.

Why it’s time to abolish high school graduation tests

- **Exit exams deny diplomas to tens of thousands of U.S. students each year, regardless of whether they have stayed in school, completed all other high school graduation requirements, and demonstrated competency in other ways.** A review by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that high school graduation tests have done nothing to lift student achievement but have raised the dropout rate. These tests give students who have worked hard, played by the rules and stayed in school the status of high school dropouts, with the same barriers to opportunity and employment. Hemelt and Marcotte (cited by Hyslop, 2014) found that the increased dropout rate is especially pronounced in states that do not provide any alternative pathway for those who fail the tests. (Hout & Elliott, 2011; see also, Grodsky, Warren, and Kalogrides, 2008; Warren, Kulick, & Jenkins, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2006; Mason & Watanabe, 2015; Radcliffe & Melon, 2007).
- **The consequences of exit exams create an enormous cost to society.** Adults without a diploma earn less, are less likely to be employed or have a stable family, and are more likely to be imprisoned (Baker & Lang, 2013; Hyslop, 2014). An extreme focus on testing creates disengaged students, putting many at risk of joining the “school-to-prison pipeline” (FairTest, 2010). Baker and Lang also report that tougher graduation tests are associated with a 12% increase in

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incarceration rates.

- **Students with disabilities, English language learners, African American, Latino, American Indian and low-income students are far more likely to be denied a diploma for not passing a test** (Hyslop 2014; Papay, Murnane & Willet, 2010). This is inconsistent with test defenders' claims that the tests benefit students from these groups. For example, in the Massachusetts high school class of 2015, 92% of white students passed all three graduation exams (English, math and science), but just 76% of blacks, 71% of Latinos, 61% of students with disabilities and 41% of English language learners passed. These failure rates contribute to higher dropout rates: Latino and African-American students drop out at rates three to four times that of white students. Eleventh and 12th graders who have not passed the state tests are more than 13 times as likely to drop out of school as those who have passed (MA DOE, 2013, 2015).
- **High-stakes testing undermines education quality.** Untested subjects are ignored, while teaching in tested subjects focuses too narrowly on the tests, with test preparation dominating some classrooms. Since tests are mostly multiple choice, students focus on rote learning instead of learning to think and apply their knowledge (Koretz, 2005). In high school this means students must take additional math or reading classes at the expense of other subjects in which they are more interested. Students who do not pass a graduation test are less likely to take college-oriented courses in subsequent high school years (Hyslop, 2014).
- **Graduation tests have “measurement error,”** which means some children will fail even though they know the subject (Rogosa, 2001). Offering multiple opportunities to take the test only partially solves this problem.
- **A student’s transcript, not a test score, is what makes a high school diploma truly meaningful and gives the most accurate picture of a student’s readiness for college and career.** Two major studies confirmed that high school grades are much stronger predictors of undergraduate performance than are standardized test scores (FairTest, 2009; Hiss, 2014).
- **There are better ways to assess students.** The New York Performance Standards Consortium (2013), for example, uses a performance-based assessment approach, tied to project-based learning, which has been highly successful.

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