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Joint Committee on Education/Ways and Means
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In support of H. 520 and S. 787

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 the overwhelming evidence that exit exams create more harm than good and do not improve the quality of education for underserved student populations, we support House Bill 520 and Senate Bill 787, which would prohibit the State Board of Education from including the passing of statewide, mandatory, curriculum-based examinations or assessments in public high school graduation requirements. We urge you to pass these bills.

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 the challenges of those who most need help.

Proponents incorrectly claim exit exams will narrow 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 mostly multiple-choice, students focus on rote learning to identify correct answers instead of learning to think and apply their knowledge. (Indeed, Maryland intends to reduce its open-ended questions.) 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.

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, 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 risen⁸: 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."⁹

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, test-makers themselves concede that grades are better predictors of college success than the SAT, one of the more technically sound standardized tests.¹⁰ 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 believe it is time to rethink what students should be required to achieve before they earn a diploma. It's important to ensure sufficient resources to enable students to meet those goals. Then develop various ways in which students can demonstrate this learning and 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 respond to any of these concerns. The real fact is that graduation tests hurt, not help, students, schools and society. Again, for all these reasons, we recommend that you pass House Bill 520/Senate Bill 787.

We would be pleased to work with you and Maryland educators, parents and citizens to craft a different approach to graduation, one that would rely on local determinations of adequate achievement but that would establish methods to ensure the quality of the 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.

We would be happy to speak with you further about this. Thanks for your consideration. I can be reached by phone at 617-864-4810 x 101, or by email at monty@fairtest.org

<http://www.fairtest.org>

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>

⁸ Massachusetts Department of Education. 2007. Annual Dropout Rates by District and School. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/0506/appendixA.xls>

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

¹⁰ College Board, *SAT Registration Booklet 2007-2008*, p. 15.