

# THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM GETS REAL

## Implications for the Class of 2006 and Beyond



As they walk across the stage to receive their diplomas, California's high school class of 2006 will likely represent the first group for whom that piece of paper signifies not only meeting course requirements, but also passing an exit exam meant to ensure mastery of key basic skills.

While many elements of the state's accountability system focus on school performance, the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) requirement was implemented to hold students accountable. Established through Senate Bill (SB) 2X in 1999, the exam is meant to ensure that students have learned—at a minimum—the basic math and English skills needed to be productive in the world beyond high school.

While it is likely that all Californians believe those academic skills are important—at least for the vast majority of students—the CAHSEE requirement has nonetheless been controversial. Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell seemed to reflect the opinion of many state leaders when he

rejected alternatives to, and further postponement of, the test. Other people, however, believe that the requirement is unfair for at least some of the seniors who at this point are unlikely to pass the exam and therefore will not receive a diploma. Several lawsuits have been filed based on that conviction, but the requirement still stands for all but a select group of students with disabilities.

As of August 2005—one year before graduation—an estimated 78% of the class of 2006, about 363,000 students, had passed the exam and graduation hurdle; but nearly 100,000 students had not. One estimate by an independent evaluator of the exam has predicted that about half of those students will pass in their senior year. That would leave up to 50,000 students who would not pass and would be ineligible for a high school diploma. It remains unclear how many of those students would be graduating if the CAHSEE were not required. Regardless, they represent just a portion of the young Californians who leave high school each

year without a diploma. Some students finish four years of high school without completing all their district's graduation requirements. Others drop out.

In the class of 2006, about 60,000 students who started 9th grade were no longer in California public schools at the beginning of their junior year. If past trends are any indication, that number could more than double by graduation. The state's estimated graduation rate normally hovers near 70% and—with or without the CAHSEE—this class seems unlikely to vary from that dramatically. Opinions differ about whether the increased rigor of the state's academic expectations are driving even more students from school or keeping them there, and the objective evidence currently available is far from definitive.

This EdSource report outlines what is known at this point about how the exit exam has affected the state's education system and the students required to pass it. It also describes some of the issues of fairness surrounding the exam, what the

## What is the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)?

The CAHSEE is a pass/fail test consisting of two parts—English language arts and math. The English section covers California's content standards through 10th grade in a multiple-choice format with one essay. The math section, also multiple-choice, covers math standards through 6th and 7th grade and Algebra I. Students must score approximately 55% in math and 60% in English to pass. The essay counts for 20% of the English test score. (The state expects to raise the minimum passing scores over time.)

For sample questions from the CAHSEE, go to: [www.edsource.org/pub\\_edfct\\_samplecahsee.cfm](http://www.edsource.org/pub_edfct_samplecahsee.cfm)

Students who progress through grades 10–12 at the normal pace have six opportunities to pass the test during high school—once as sophomores, twice as juniors, and three times as seniors—one of which can be after graduation.

If students pass one section of the test, they do not take that section again. The CAHSEE is not a timed test, though the state expects that most students will take three to four hours on each section. The test is administered over two days.

The class of 2004 was the first to take the CAHSEE, but concern about adequate time to learn the material led policymakers to postpone the exit exam requirement until the class of 2006, thereby giving schools more time to implement standards-based curricula.

The CAHSEE is not the only high school graduation requirement. The state expects students to pass a set of 13 year-long courses covering a wide range of subjects, and most districts require considerably more.

whether students have learned the basic skills necessary to succeed in the adult world. Students must pass both sections of the exam (English and math) to satisfy the graduation requirement.

The state commissioned the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) to conduct a multi-year evaluation of the impact of the CAHSEE requirement. To date, HumRRO has issued six independent annual reports of evaluation activities and findings, the most recent in September 2005. Findings from these various HumRRO reports are discussed throughout this publication.

### *The CAHSEE has raised the bar for California high school graduates*

One of HumRRO's most important claims is that the CAHSEE has had "a far-reaching effect on California education," pushing schools to embrace standards and motivating high school students, as policymakers had intended.

The exam has encouraged both middle and high schools to increase the rigor of their instruction and align it to the state's content standards, HumRRO found. The researchers confirm that the test is generally well aligned with the state's academic content standards for English language arts and math. The English portion does not fully reflect the depth of knowledge the standards require, they say, but the math content is at the appropriate level. And 90% of students taking the exam said that it covered material they had taken in their courses and was not more difficult than their course work.

High schools feel the pressure in two ways: 1) students cannot graduate if they do not pass; and 2) exit exam scores are used as part of the formula to determine whether high schools meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). To make AYP, schools are judged by the percentage of

state is doing to help struggling students (particularly Special Education students), and options for those in the class of 2006 who have not passed the CAHSEE by graduation day.

### **The exit exam has made an impact on California's schools and students**

California is not alone in requiring an exit exam. Currently 25 other states offer or are developing exit exams, according to the Center on Education Policy's 2005 report. One impetus for these exams was complaints from employers, colleges, and universities that high school graduates were not prepared for work or higher education. Another was the standards movement and its drive to ensure that all students master rigorous academic content. Yet another was the need for an incentive that would help motivate students to learn.

The legislation that created California's exam requires that it reflect the state's academic content standards, considered some of the toughest in the nation. The current test—based on math standards through Algebra I and 10th grade English standards—is meant to measure

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students reaching proficiency on the CAHSEE, which is a higher score than what students need to graduate. To be considered proficient under NCLB, students must score 77% on the English (compared to 60% to graduate) and 69% on the math (55% to graduate).

### **Will CAHSEE affect the dropout rate?**

Debates continue on how the exit exam might affect dropout rates. While some educators are concerned that the new requirement might discourage students and lead to more dropouts, HumRRO says that the dropout rate from 10th to 12th grades has decreased, concluding that the exam appears to be motivating students to stay in school. In addition, students may be starting to take the test more seriously. Compared to their sophomore year responses, juniors taking the CAHSEE “were more likely to report perceiving the test as important, expecting to graduate from high school, and reporting they did as well as they could.” On the other hand, researchers from the School Redesign Network at Stanford University say that other states that required exit exams for graduation and offered no alternatives to the exam have seen an adverse impact on student graduation rates.

In California, it is too soon to determine the long-term effects of the CAHSEE requirement. Ongoing monitoring will be needed to figure out the exam’s ultimate impact on the dropout rate.

### **Do exit exams enhance the value of a high school diploma?**

Other researchers report that a minimum competency test such as the CAHSEE, combined with a diploma, may boost a student’s earnings after high school. A 2005 working paper by the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies reports that students in states with such competency tests earned 9% more in the

calendar year following graduation than students in states without such a requirement when controlling for high school completion, college attendance, and local labor market characteristics. In addition, “diplomas that reflect both teacher judgments and external exams appear to be worth more in the labor market than diplomas awarded for seat time only or GED [General Educational Development Test] exams based solely on test scores,” according to the paper.

### **HumRRO reports that most teachers surveyed support the CAHSEE**

From interviews of middle and high school teachers conducted in 2005, HumRRO found that a majority (59%) of general education math and English teachers believed that the class of 2006 was ready to be held accountable to the CAHSEE graduation requirement, with high school teachers responding more positively. Even educators at four high schools with pass rates of 50% or less said that although many of their students would not pass the CAHSEE, the state should not delay or cancel its consequences for the class of 2006. They acknowledged issues for the first class required to pass but predicted that there would also be improvement and increased motivation for the class of 2007 and beyond.

But more than half of the Special Education teachers said they do not believe their students are ready. Most educators agreed that some students with disabilities should be held accountable but that an alternative should be provided for those who cannot pass the CAHSEE because of their disabilities. In addition, close to half of teachers of English learners said they do not think their students are ready.

### **Which students are at risk of failing?**

A central goal of the CAHSEE was to hold individual students accountable

for their efforts in school. Concerns about the exam also tend to focus on individual students, particularly the effect on students already at risk due to inadequate teaching, student disabilities, or limitations in their ability to speak or understand English.

HumRRO predicts that about half of the 100,000 seniors who have not yet passed the CAHSEE will do so in their senior year. However, researchers from UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) point out that HumRRO’s 2005 report shows only a 14-point increase in the percentage of students passing the CAHSEE between 10th and 11th grades. Thus more students would have to pass the exam as seniors than did as juniors in order to meet HumRRO’s estimate. Will those who have not succeeded in their earlier attempts take the steps needed to master the material required to pass the exam? With three more opportunities to pass the exam, how many students are likely to succeed? While it is too early to tell how many students the requirement will affect, the available data do provide perspective on the larger population of students who struggle in high school.

### **Some data suggest that many students not passing the CAHSEE would not graduate anyway**

Of the tens of thousands of students who still need to pass the CAHSEE, a fair number may also be unlikely to complete their district’s graduation requirements. Because the state has no student tracking system currently in place, only rough estimates are possible. (See the box on page 4.)

An overall look at enrollment and graduation statistics for the class of 2004—who were not required to pass the CAHSEE—shows that almost 52,000 seniors did not graduate. Those missing seniors represented about 13% of their class. Some of them might have

## Exit exam data are inexact because California lacks a system to track student progress accurately

California's leaders are developing a data system to allow the state to track individual student performance over time. Although the data will be anonymous (with numbers assigned to names), the state will be able to track demographic data with performance data. Absent this system, getting accurate statistics about which students have passed the CAHSEE is particularly problematic. The state has totals for how many students pass the math or English section of the test at any given administration but can only estimate how many students have passed both sections of the exam, or the cumulative passage rates across multiple administrations of the test. Districts receive CAHSEE results after each test administration and aggregate results are released to the public each summer.

### The number of students who have passed is an estimate

Researchers from HumRRO have relied on data supplied by student identifiers not available to the California Department of Education (names and birth dates) to match records across test administrations and school districts. They have developed estimates for the class of 2006 that they believe are accurate within one to two percentage points.

Students have six opportunities to take the exit exam, starting in their sophomore year. Based on the September 2005 evaluation by HumRRO, about 442,000 students in the class of 2006 took both parts of the exam for the first time as sophomores in spring 2004. (An additional 17,000 took only one part of the exam.)

In their junior year, 175,000-plus students took one or both parts of the exam. Altogether HumRRO believes that of the almost 463,000 students in the class of 2006 who took one or both parts of the test by the end of their junior year, only 363,036 students (78%) passed. Of the more than 20% of students who did not pass, HumRRO estimates that:

- 28,863 (6% of all students in the class of 2006) passed the English section only;
- 24,048 (5% of the class of 2006) passed math only;
- 47,026 (10% of the class of 2006) passed neither section.

These students have three more chances to pass over five administrations during their senior year, the first of which was in September 2005.

In its report HumRRO states that given the limitations of today's data system, combined 11th grade passing rates are particularly difficult to estimate because 11th graders have up to two opportunities to take the exam and some students move from one district to another, sometimes registering under slightly different names.

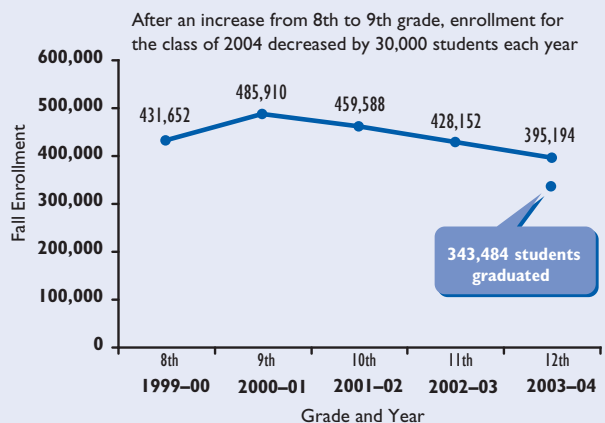
### The reasons why students did not take the test are unclear

A data system tracking individual students by number would also allow the state to gather more helpful information about who chose not to take the exam in a particular administration.

For example, the class of 2006 had 490,000 sophomores based on fall 2003 enrollment statistics. But by the end of their junior year, only 463,000 students had taken the exit exam. What accounts for the 27,000 missing students is a matter of guesswork. They might have been sick or skipped school the day of the test. They might also have dropped out of school, moved out of state, or transferred to a private school before the test was offered. HumRRO does not include these 27,000 students in estimates of how many of the class of 2006 still need to graduate.

### How many students dropped out?

A more robust data system could also improve the state's understanding of which students drop out of high school and when. State enrollment data from year to year show a steady attrition in the number of high school students in California. As the chart below illustrates, this is preceded by a not-fully explained increase in students between 8th and 9th grade. After close examination of the data, it is clear that multiple factors account for the increase. Statewide student retention data are unavailable, and a decrease in private school enrollments can account for only 11.5% of the increase in students enrolled in the public schools. The pattern shown below for the class of 2004 is remarkably similar in other years as well. If 2006 follows the pattern, this class would have been about 90,000 larger in the fall of 2002—when it started high school—than it was at the beginning of this school year. Further, state data consistently show that about 50,000 more students start their senior year than graduate in the spring.



DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

EDSource 2/06



left the state or gone to a private school, but it is likely that the vast majority either dropped out or did not meet graduation requirements. Based on seventh grade enrollment, the class of 2004 shrunk by almost 157,000 students—or about 31%—by graduation day.

The class of 2004 is not an anomaly. For the past several years, high school enrollment for each class has dropped by about 30,000 students a year as students have moved from 9th to 12th grade, and each senior class has lost about 50,000 before graduation.

Data show that historically an even smaller percentage of Special Education students graduate. HumRRO cited the *Pocketbook of Special Education Statistics 2002–03*, which reports that only 59% of Special Education students graduated with a diploma before the CAHSEE was required.

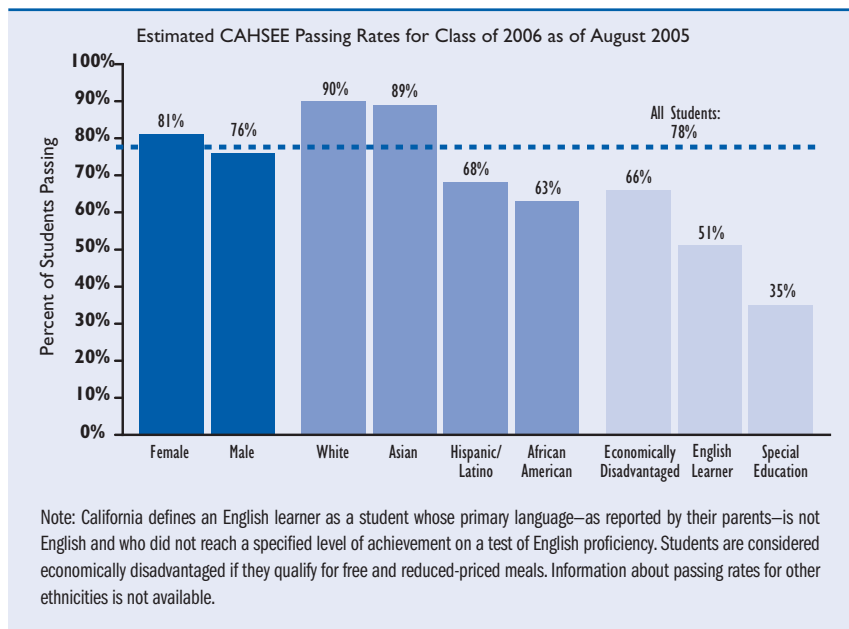
### Passing the exit exam is more difficult for specific student populations

Particular populations of students have had less success passing the CAHSEE. Understanding who these students are is important for addressing what support students need as well as for discussing whether it is fair to expect them to pass. Figure I outlines the percentages passing by student population. HumRRO cautions that these percentages are estimates and may be one to two points higher or lower. The gaps, however, are clear, with the most successful subgroup, white students, at a 90% passage rate and the least successful, Special Education students, at 35%.

### Some “at-risk” students receive an inferior education

The exit exam has aimed a spotlight on the quality of education in California’s middle and high schools. Survey results indicate that thousands of students may have been underprepared for the exam. As mentioned earlier, 90% of students

**figure 1** Certain populations of students are more “at risk” of not passing the CAHSEE



DATA: Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE): 2005 Evaluation Report  
BY HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (HumRRO)

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say they have been taught the material. But HumRRO reported that of *nonpassers*, only 20% said that they’d been exposed to all questions on the exam. In addition, about 20% of *all* test takers indicated that they had had trouble with the test topics when they were taught them in the classroom originally.

Principals in some schools appear to confirm the students’ assessment, according to surveys by HumRRO. In 2002–03, when students in the class of 2006 were freshmen, only 52% of principals said their teachers covered all or most of the standards in English and math. That apparently has improved considerably, as 94% of principals said the standards were covered in 2004–05, with 5% indicating that only part of the English material was covered and 7% reporting partial coverage for math.

In its 2004–05 study, HumRRO also reported findings about standards-based teaching and students “at risk” of not passing the CAHSEE—with “at risk” defined as African American,

Hispanic/Latino, economically disadvantaged, English learner (EL), and Special Education students. According to the study:

- Principals at high schools with high concentrations of at-risk students were more likely to report partial or little coverage of the required academic content standards, while principals at schools with large numbers of English learners (ELs) were more likely to report that teachers covered all or most of the standards in math. (It is important to note that students may have arrived in high school inadequately prepared to learn grade-level standards.)
- Some Special Education students and ELs were being taught the academic content standards differently. Their teachers indicated differences “with regard to depth, time, quantity, and grading.” HumRRO reports that more evidence is needed to determine how widespread such differences might be.

## Students in alternative schools are also at risk of not passing the CAHSEE

Another group of “at-risk” students not singled out in the HumRRO report are the high school seniors attending alternative schools. The California Department of Education estimated that in 2004-05 about 50,000 students in alternative schools were seniors. Robert Barner, administrator of alternative programs at the Los Angeles County Office of Education, has said that he estimates two-thirds of the students in his programs will not pass the exam.

- There is a positive correlation between higher CAHSEE passing rates and a higher percentage of teachers with subject-area credentials in math and English, but at-risk students were less likely in general to have teachers with subject-area credentials. An August 2005 IDEA report, *More Questions than Answers: CAHSEE Results, Opportunity to Learn, & the Class of 2006*, states that students in schools with low CAHSEE pass rates were “11 times more likely to be in a school with critical shortages of fully credentialed teachers.”

In HumRRO’s 2005 report, researchers looked at teacher qualifications. It included survey responses from 227 high schools (57% of those targeted in a representative sample of all the state’s high schools) and more than 500 in-person interviews with teachers at 47 of those high schools. According to the study:

- Three quarters of high schools reported that nearly all their teachers held appropriate credentials, but in other schools at least a quarter of the teaching staff was not fully credentialed.
- While EL students reportedly received instruction from credentialed teachers at nearly the same rate

as all students, Special Education students were more likely to receive both English and math instruction from a teacher who did not hold a subject-area credential.

- Fully credentialed teachers in English language arts were less common in schools with high concentrations of African American students.
- Schools with high concentrations of EL, economically disadvantaged, Latino, and African American students were more likely to report having math teachers without subject-area credentials.

In recent years, the state has paid extra attention to underperforming schools. The settlement of the *Williams v. California* lawsuit required that the state focus attention on low-achieving elementary, middle, and high schools that have deteriorating facilities, inadequate textbooks, and teachers who lack required credentials. In addition, because the exit exam scores are part of what determines whether a high school meets NCLB requirements for adequate yearly progress, schools that are not teaching to the standards are often the same ones included in federal or state intervention programs aimed at assisting and improving these schools.

### The state is helping students who are struggling

Realizing that some students would have more trouble passing the exit exam, California policymakers created options to help them. Some policies help all students, such as the opportunity to take the test several times or providing funds for supplemental programs to assist students who are having trouble. Other policies support specific populations—such as Special Education students or English learners—who are disproportionately represented among those who have not yet passed.

By August 2005, students in the class of 2006 had had three chances to

take the exam. Of the nearly 100,000 who had not yet passed, EdSource estimates that about one-quarter were Special Education students. In addition, about 40% were English learners. Statewide almost a quarter of English learners in K–12 are also Special Education students. Assuming a similar overlap in the two populations among nonpassers, it is likely that about half of all students in the class of 2006 who had not yet passed the exit exam were Special Education students, English learners, or both. General education students would then make up the other half.

### Finding solutions for Special Education students has been a major issue

Less than 1% of students (or 8% to 10% of Special Education students) are excused from the CAHSEE requirement due to severe cognitive disabilities that preclude their participation in a diploma-track program. However, these students are required to take the CAPA (California Alternate Performance Assessment) as an alternative to the STAR tests that most students take.

Many of the other Special Education students—whose disabilities can range from mild reading problems to severe learning disorders—receive assistance on the CAHSEE. Districts must provide students with the specific kinds of support designated in their individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 plans. These may include “accommodations” (such as large-sized print), which do not alter what the test measures, or “modifications” (such as the use of a calculator), which do.

Even with this assistance, HumRRO found that Special Education students were the least likely of all student populations to pass the exit exam, though success rates were significantly higher for those with milder disabilities. The state has addressed this issue in two ways.

### Lawmakers postpone the requirement for some Special Education students

In January 2006 lawmakers passed SB 517, which exempts Special Education students in the class of 2006 who meet certain requirements. The bill followed repeated attempts to codify the partial settlement of the *Chapman v. California* lawsuit reached in August 2005. The suit argued that Special Education students should be exempted from the CAHSEE.

To qualify for an exemption, students must have an IEP or Section 504 plan signed prior to July 1, 2005, and be scheduled to receive a diploma in 2006. They must have attempted to pass the CAHSEE at least twice after 10th grade, including at least once in 12th grade, with any adjustments specified in their IEP or Section 504 plan. They must have received acceptable remedial instruction focused on the CAHSEE through their school, private tutoring, or other means, and have attempted to pass the CAHSEE after receiving such services. They are also eligible for an exemption if they did not have the opportunity to receive remediation.

The law, which only applies to the class of 2006, also requires the state to gather data from this class to inform long-term policy that could affect Special Education students in the class of 2007 and beyond.

### Special Education students can use modifications and get other help

Another option for Special Education students is available through the terms of SB 1476, passed in 2003, which allows students taking the CAHSEE with modifications to apply to their local school board for a waiver. (SB 517 described above does not affect this waiver option.)

Modifications alter what the test measures and affect comparability of scores, so students who pass the CAHSEE using them must also show

competence in other ways. Of those Special Education students tested with modifications, relatively few so far have achieved a passing score, according to HumRRO's data. In 2004–05, more than 5,000 10th graders and 8,000 11th graders took the mathematics test with a modification (mostly calculators). Passing rates were only 23% for 10th graders and 17% for 11th graders. Students who receive a passing score and complete all other graduation requirements can apply for and receive a local waiver. They then qualify for a high school diploma.

To receive a waiver, the student's parent must ask the principal to submit a waiver request to the local school board. The principal must then certify that the student has an IEP or Section 504 plan that requires the modifications provided, confirm that the student has sufficient high school-level coursework either completed or in progress to have attained the skills and knowledge otherwise needed to pass the exit exam, and show evidence that the equivalent of a passing score was obtained using a modification.

To date, these waiver provisions have affected only a small portion of the population. However, it also appears that many parents and districts may have been unaware of the waiver process. In a 2005 survey of school districts, 56% responded that they had not yet adopted a policy regarding diploma eligibility for students who had passed the CAHSEE with modifications. The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) conducted the survey, and 10% of the state's 1,000 districts responded. However, some districts may be offering the waiver without adopting an official policy.

### More analyses of Special Education students may suggest other solutions

In its most recent evaluation, HumRRO also looked at the issue of

Special Education students and offered policy recommendations that could have long-term implications.

Because California's Special Education students vary widely in their disabilities, HumRRO concludes that not all of them need the same options. HumRRO's 2005 report identifies about half as receiving "non-intensive" services, such as in-class accommodations or the assistance of a resource specialist. Those students spend at least 80% of their time in regular classrooms where they are presumably exposed to the material tested on the CAHSEE. With about half passing in 10th grade and another significant (but not quantified) portion passing in 11th grade, HumRRO concludes that these students are generally capable of passing the exam and should be held to that standard.

However, another quarter of Special Education students are in general education classrooms less than 20% of the day. Of these, only about 10% passed in 10th grade and few gains were seen for those retested in 11th grade. Because these students are minimally exposed to the material on the CAHSEE and clearly struggle to pass, HumRRO recommends developing alternatives for them. However, these students are also likely to have IEPs that require modifications. Because some may not yet have taken the CAHSEE with those modifications, the extent to which these students will be able to pass the exam is still unclear.

The remaining quarter of Special Education students showed mixed results on the CAHSEE. The September 2005 report recommends gathering more information on these students to determine the fairest approach for meeting their needs.

### English learners are less likely to pass

English learners represent 18% of CAHSEE test takers in the class of

2006. Of these, 51% had passed the CAHSEE by August 2005. This in itself is significant considering that these students are learning both content and the English language in school and may be struggling to translate the questions on the exam before they can begin to determine the proper answer. However, of the estimated 100,000 seniors who have yet to pass the CAHSEE, ELs account for a significant proportion—about 40%—of those students. The issues for this group of students hinge in part on the state's implicit commitment to the idea that every student must demonstrate English proficiency to earn a high school diploma.

Many English learners have been in the United States for a very short time. In 2003–04 there were more than 15,000 high school students new to California whose native language was not English and who had been in this country less than a year. This number is based on reported administrations of the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) Initial Assessment, which these students take.

The Center on Education Policy reports that English learners across the country have lower pass rates on exit exams than non-ELs. However, of the 25 states with exit exams, 23 are opting not to exempt ELs from the test. The other two states offer some exemptions. In a few states like New York, ELs can demonstrate their competence in their native language. The center notes that five states provide translations of their exams into other languages. In contrast to Special Education policies, no state offers a special diploma for EL students who cannot pass the exam.

### Is the CAHSEE fair to students who are not fluent in English?

Some researchers are examining whether certain assistance is appropri-

ate for English learners. Others assert that the exit exam is not a fair and reliable measure of math and language arts knowledge for students who cannot comprehend the test's questions. Still others contend that if students need to know English to succeed in the United States, then understanding questions in English is an essential part of what should be tested.

The fact that California's ELs take the exit exam in English makes it difficult to determine whether the hurdle for those failing the exam is a lack of English language skills or content knowledge. However, as a group, once English learners have been reclassified as fluent English proficient, they pass the CAHSEE at significantly higher rates than the average high school student. Some 85% passed the English section compared to 73% of the general population of test takers, and 82% passed the math section versus 72%. In New York State, those students who were reclassified as English proficient also had higher graduation rates than non-ELs. Among other interpretations, this may mean that learning English is a key to test passage. It may also mean that being reclassified takes significant work or that the most highly motivated students are more likely to succeed on a variety of measures.

### California districts can provide options

While most states do not exempt English learners from their exit exams, many—including California—provide assistance to make it easier for these students to demonstrate what they know. This practice is allowed under Title I of the federal NCLB Act.

The California Department of Education's August 2004 *Matrix of Test Variations, Accommodations, and Modifications for Administration of California Statewide Assessments* (posted at [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/documents/matrix5.pdf](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/documents/matrix5.pdf))

lists assistance that ELs are allowed to use on the exam if they normally are provided the same type of assistance on classroom tests or other assessments. These accommodations include:

- Allowing test directions to be translated orally into the students' primary language;
- Letting students ask clarifying questions about test directions in their primary language;
- Providing additional supervised breaks during the testing day;
- Allowing EL students to take the exam as a group if supervised by a qualified employee; and
- Providing access to glossaries that include translations but not definitions of words.

It is also worth noting in this context that the test is not timed. EL students, along with all others, are free to take additional time beyond the anticipated three-to-four hours if they need it.

### Subtle changes to the CAHSEE may make it more user-friendly for ELs

Some suggest that certain changes could make the CAHSEE more user-friendly and culturally sensitive without affecting its rigor.

Simplifying the structure of sentences on the test could help both English learners and other students better understand the questions posed. For example, instead of asking "which is the best approximation of the number..." the test might ask "approximately how many..."

Training those who are grading the open-ended portions of the exam in cultural and linguistic issues could also help English learners. For example, students from another country may use deductive reasoning in essays, leading to a conclusion rather than stating the point at the beginning of the essay as students in California are taught.



### *California policymakers fund programs to help all students pass*

Like most states with exit exams, California offers assistance through preparation and remediation programs for struggling students. The 2004–05 California state budget committed \$157 million to help students in grades 7–12 succeed in state exams, including the exit exam. The state has also released teacher guides, student study guides, and a remediation-planning guide to help with CAHSEE preparation. For the 2005–06 school year, the state has funded supplemental instruction for students who have not yet passed the exam, including \$20 million targeted at schools with the lowest passage rates of non-Special Education students and \$48 million for Special Education services focused on intensive instructional support for students with disabilities in the class of 2006 who had not yet passed. However, the state may want to review how best to serve struggling students through remediation. The \$20 million for general education students was offered through an application process open to schools with more than 28% of seniors still at risk of not graduating due to failing the CAHSEE. The funds vanished swiftly, reaching about 30,000 seniors (\$600 for each remediation), or one-third of those still needing to pass.

In addition, assuming that districts have already been trying to help failing students, new approaches to remediation may well be needed. Ongoing research may shed light on this issue. Researchers from the Evaluation Group in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University expect to release in August 2006 an evaluation relating to the effectiveness of remediation programs implemented in the state of Texas.

Although districts are required to offer remediation classes, students do

not have to attend and some schools say that attendance is a problem. Theories vary about why. Teachers and administrators surveyed by HumRRO say that some students do not take advantage of these services because of low motivation or a lack of support from their parents. “Low parental support is rated as a greater problem for required supplemental courses targeted to remediation than for any other course type,” the report states. On the other hand, others suggest that poor attendance at remediation classes may be due to after-school or weekend scheduling conflicts when students must hold a job, care for family members, or attempt to secure scholarships by participating in sports or arts activities.

### *Other ways have been suggested to assist those struggling with the CAHSEE*

Some have proposed offering additional support to students having trouble passing the exam by offering the tests more often, on Saturdays, and during the summer. Students could also be allowed to immediately retest if they miss one or both days of testing, and test results

could be returned within two weeks of an administration—particularly with the May administration when a passing score could determine whether a student graduates with peers.

Another suggestion is to provide more funds for smaller class sizes in 9th-grade English and math so students will get more one-on-one help. Currently the state has a class size reduction program for 9th graders, but funding has decreased over the years. In 2005–06, \$110 million was allocated for the program compared to \$145 million in 2001–02.

On the other hand, state leaders have rejected the idea of allowing alternatives to the exam. California law requires that the State Board of Education, in consultation with the superintendent of public instruction, study whether it will allow alternatives to the exit exam for highly proficient students. Superintendent O’Connell has recommended that no alternatives be offered, and to date the state board has taken no action to contradict that. The alternatives considered are outlined in a chart that O’Connell’s office developed (see [www.edsources.org/pub\\_edfct\\_altcahsee.cfm](http://www.edsources.org/pub_edfct_altcahsee.cfm)).

## The CAHSEE requirement prompts lawsuits

Various lawsuits relating to the CAHSEE have been filed, including the following:

**Chapman v. California** claims that Special Education students should be exempted from the CAHSEE. After many attempts at a settlement, Senate Bill 517 was passed, which will exempt Special Education students in the class of 2006 who meet certain requirements. Assistance for future classes is unclear.

**Coachella Valley Unified School District v. California**—a lawsuit filed by 10 California school districts—says that the state’s implementation of NCLB has been unfair to English learners (ELs). The plaintiffs claim that the state must allow ELs to take exams, including the CAHSEE, in their native language.

**Valenzuela v. California** argues that not all students in the state have had an equal opportunity to learn the material on the exam because some did not have adequate materials or certificated teachers for the subjects tested. The suit represents students who have passed all other graduation requirements except the CAHSEE, but it does not include Special Education students who have other options.

### *Districts are trying additional approaches*

In addition to state supports, districts throughout the country are trying more active approaches, such as increasing outreach to students who do not participate in after-school or Saturday programs and starting their interventions earlier. Other districts offer test-preparation classes, online tutorials, and professional development for teachers. Some districts are using their Title III funds under NCLB to offer remediation classes geared specifically to English learners. The California Department of Education (CDE) reports many similar efforts in California. The CDE's website ([www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/cahseematrix.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/cahseematrix.asp)) provides a list of remediation models and programs that have helped to improve student achievement in one or more districts.

### **Students who fail the CAHSEE will still have options**

Students in the class of 2006 who fail to pass the exit exam before their scheduled graduation this spring have other options for obtaining a diploma or its equivalent.

In January when Superintendent O'Connell announced his opposition to exit exam alternatives, he also stressed that students who did not pass need not be denied a diploma indefinitely. He said that their basic education is incomplete and that "they must continue on through our K–I2 system, adult education, or community colleges to obtain the necessary skills to warrant receipt of a diploma."

### *Adult education and community college programs offer alternatives*

Students who have not passed the CAHSEE after six attempts while enrolled in high school can pursue a diploma in other ways. School-district adult education classes offer high school

diploma programs in which enrolled students have the opportunity to take the CAHSEE up to two times each school year. If they pass the exam and also finish the requisite classes, they will receive a high school diploma. O'Connell has said he will work with the Legislature to lift enrollment caps and increase funding for adult education programs—but that could represent a substantial investment.

Students who do not receive a diploma at the end of high school can still pursue their education by attending any community college in California. In the long run, that path could lead to a degree from a four-year university and more. An unusual community college option also provides an alternative path to a high school diploma. At seven community colleges (out of 109 in the state) students can enroll in adult education courses and receive a high school diploma without taking the CAHSEE again. Community colleges can bypass the CAHSEE requirement because they have their own statutory authority to operate high school diploma programs. Their graduation requirements are the responsibility of the community colleges' Board of Governors and the local community college district governing boards. The governor's 2006–07 budget recommends requiring those enrolled in the community college diploma programs to pass the CAHSEE, but it is unclear whether there is sufficient support to approve the statute.

While these community college programs allow a student to receive a diploma without passing the CAHSEE, the sites currently offering this option have their own set of rigorous requirements for obtaining the diploma. According to the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the competency levels

required to receive a diploma at these community colleges are equal to or greater than the CAHSEE requirements. All programs assess student competency levels in reading, writing, and mathematics and provide various means for students to demonstrate competencies. In addition, the programs have close relationships with the high schools in their areas. Because this option is currently offered by only seven community colleges—six of which are in southern California—it is of limited use to most high school students. It is unclear whether other community colleges will institute similar programs.

Other California community colleges offer high school diploma programs jointly with their local high schools in which students are required to pass the CAHSEE, according to CCCCCO. Names of both institutions appear on the diploma.

In a further effort to provide support for students who have done well in their courses but cannot pass the exit exam, O'Connell called for giving such students financial help to attend community college or to pursue other postsecondary education options. He said students who have not passed the CAHSEE but who have met all graduation and grade-point requirements should be eligible for Cal Grants, which help finance postsecondary education for low-income students.

### *The high school proficiency exam and GED provide paths to diploma equivalents*

As has been true for many years, two other avenues exist that enable students to obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma. However, because both involve exams, they may be of limited help to those who are struggling to pass the CAHSEE.

Students who are at least 16 years old (or who have completed or are

about to complete 10th grade) can take the **California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE)**. This exam is aligned with math (7th and 8th grade) and English (10th and 11th grade) content standards. If students pass, they can receive a certificate from their high school that is equivalent to a diploma and allows them, with parental permission, to leave high school early. The CHSPE, which takes 3.5 hours, has reading, writing, and math sections similar to the CAHSEE but requires students to also pass a section dedicated to writing. (On the CAHSEE, students can do poorly on the essay and still pass the exam.) Because the format is similar to the exit exam (multiple-choice questions and an essay), those unprepared to pass the CAHSEE may struggle to pass this exam as well. The test costs from \$85 to \$135, depending on when a student registers. Special Education students may take the exam with accommodations, but no special assistance is provided for English learners.

Students who are 18 years or older (or 17 years in certain cases) can take the **General Educational Development Test (GED)**. The GED, which is recognized nationally, includes tests in math, reading, writing, social studies, and science. According to the California Department of Education's website, the exam takes about 7.5 hours to complete and its format is similar to that of the CAHSEE. While students may take the test—or sections that they have not passed—three times a year, centers charge up to \$100 on average to take the exam, and most charge a fee for retaking all or part of it. Special Education students can request an accommodation such as additional time, frequent breaks, or a test offered in Braille, large-print format, or on audiocassette.

## To Learn More

For more in-depth information on issues on the CAHSEE and exit exams in general, see the following:

- *California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) Compendium of Considered Alternatives*. California Department of Education, Jan. 6, 2006. [www.edsource.org/pub\\_edfct\\_altcahsee.cfm](http://www.edsource.org/pub_edfct_altcahsee.cfm)
- *High School Exit Examinations: When Do Learning Effects Generalize?* Working Paper Series. Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies, April 2005. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu>
- *Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE): 2005 Evaluation Report*. All six annual reports and two biennial reports to the Legislature can be found at [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/evaluations.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/evaluations.asp). These reports include surveys, site visits, and interviews with principals and teachers. While the evaluations are independent, the state is the sole funder of them.
- *More Questions than Answers: CAHSEE Results, Opportunity to Learn, & the Class of 2006*. UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, Aug. 23, 2005. [www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/resources/exitexam/index.html](http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/resources/exitexam/index.html)
- *Multiple Measures Approaches to High School Graduation*. The School Redesign Network at Stanford University, 2005. [www.schoolredesign.net/srn/mm/pdf/multiple\\_measures.pdf](http://www.schoolredesign.net/srn/mm/pdf/multiple_measures.pdf)
- *State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist*. Center on Education Policy, August 2005. [www.ctredpol.org/highschoolexit/reportAug2005/hseeAug2005.pdf](http://www.ctredpol.org/highschoolexit/reportAug2005/hseeAug2005.pdf)

## Local districts can set some of their own rules for students who fail

School districts also have some options in regard to how they treat students who fail the CAHSEE. For example, districts could award a certificate of completion for general education students, which might include a student's grade point average, attendance record, and other benchmarks. They can also allow students to stay in high school longer. Special Education students currently are entitled to stay in school through age 21, and districts have the option of allowing others to do so. However, to offer this to all general education students who fail the exam would mean increased costs to the state.

Another approach was taken by Santa Ana Unified School District, which formed a partnership with local community colleges to help provide a bridge for students to college if they had not passed the CAHSEE by March 2006. If they are already enrolled in

community college before the end of their senior year, these students may continue their studies and can take the CAHSEE again at their high school the next time the exam is given.

Participation in graduation ceremonies is also a local decision. Because graduation is a rite of passage in the United States, it has high emotional stakes for many. School districts are currently grappling with the question of whether or how to recognize students for their effort if they meet all other graduation requirements but do not pass the test.

In the ACSA survey mentioned earlier, as of fall 2005, 32% of responding districts had no option or policy in place if a student does not pass the CAHSEE, 26% planned to offer a certificate of completion, and 22% expected to provide a certificate if the student has met other graduation requirements and has attended supplemental instruction courses.

## The reality of the exit exam prompts more questions for California

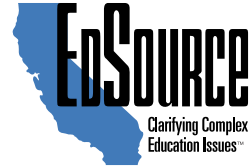
At this point in California, it appears that most state policymakers—including Superintendent O’Connell and the State Board of Education—believe it is time to put the state’s exit exam requirement into effect. Schools and students have known about the requirement since 1999, they say, and both the public and students have the right to expect that a diploma represents mastery of certain academic skills. On the other hand, some advocates remain strongly opposed to the exam requirement. They argue that some students have not received an education that prepares them to pass the test. Other students may need alternative ways to demonstrate learning because they have mastered the material but are unable to show their knowledge in this particular testing format.

California can learn a lot from this first year with CAHSEE as a graduation requirement. Even given the difficulty in collecting accurate data, a fuller examination of the exit exam’s impact on the class of 2006 can help policymakers and educators better understand what is helping high school students succeed or holding them back. Already the state has addressed one of the difficult issues regarding reasonable expectations for students with disabilities—but just for 2006. The state is committed to looking at the issue further. In addition, state leaders will need to assess the extent to which all students had the opportunity to learn the material needed to pass the exam. They also need to determine how many students were motivated and met all other graduation requirements but were unable to pass.

The answers to those questions should help the state address many issues, including the additional programs and resources needed to improve teaching and to help struggling students reach the state’s goal. It is also important to evaluate the programs currently in place. Are existing resources well spent? Are extra services available to all who need them? Are these services producing the results intended? What keeps students from accessing services?

And finally, California needs to look carefully at the options available to all students who leave high school without a diploma. The best estimate is that for every 10 students who start high school in California, only seven finish. Passage of the exit exam is important for students who stay in school, but it is only part of the larger dilemma represented by the tens of thousands of students who do not graduate each year and who fail to attain the fundamental academic skills they need for adult success.

What changes will improve the ability of California’s K–12 public school system, particularly its middle and high schools, to keep these students in school and help them learn? Are the state’s safety nets—including adult education and community colleges—adequately funded and appropriately organized to give these young people a second chance not just at a diploma, but also at mastering the skills and knowledge they need to realize their dreams and contribute productively to the future of California? The exit exam has heightened visibility of students struggling to graduate. The state could use the CAHSEE implementation as an opportunity to intensify its focus on getting *all* students to graduate from high school. ■■



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