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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a panel discussion that addressed exit-exam policies and dropout issues. It presents the panel members' conclusions about existing research and their recommendations on what kinds of further work are needed. Research on how exit exams affect dropout rates is limited and inconclusive, so policies continue to be made in the absence of good information about the consequences for students and society. Most of the paper focuses on the paucity of research as it offer recommendations for further research, including longitudinal studies. The paper does, however, recap some research on dropouts that focused on the underlying reasons for dropping out. The paper concludes with the following recommendations for policymakers to support better information and practices on the potential costs and benefits of exit exams: (1) Report more informative exit-exam results; (2) improve data systems; (3) provide incentives for accurate recordkeeping; (4) keep historical records; (5) consider menus of policies; and (6) support success. (Contains 19 references.) (WFA)

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Effects of High School Exit Exams on Dropout Rates: Summary of a Panel Discussion.

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March 15, 2003

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Effects of High School Exit Exams on Dropout Rates:
Summary of a Panel Discussion
Held on March 15, 2003

Center on Education Policy

About 5% of all high school students drop out of school each year and an increasing number are getting a General Educational Development (GED) certificate rather than earning a regular diploma (Rumberger, 2001). In 1998, 10% of 18 to 24-year olds completed high school through an alternative means such as the GED, compared to 4% in 1988. These statistics are cause for concern because there are social costs associated with dropouts, including higher rates of unemployment, loss of productivity, and increased expenditures for social welfare programs. GED-holders are more similar to dropouts than to school completers in terms of their educational and employment outcomes (NRC, 2001a).

Reducing the number of dropouts is a national goal. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that high schools show adequate yearly progress in graduation rates to avoid sanctions. Yet at the state level, there has been a movement toward implementing what states describe as rigorous, standards-based exams that students must pass to earn a diploma. Opponents of exit exams are concerned that they will exacerbate the dropout problem, in particular causing more poor and minority students to drop out of school. Proponents claim that exit exams will get students and educators to work harder and will ultimately increase student achievement. Research on how exit exams impact dropout rates is limited and inconclusive, so policies continue to be made in the absence of good information about the consequences for students and society.

To help clarify what is (and is not) known about how exit exams affect dropout rates, the Center on Education Policy convened an expert panel in March 2003. The panel[1],

[1]Panel members included: Marguerite Clarke, Boston College and Spencer/Hewlitt Fellow; Sherman Dorn, University of Southern Florida; Phillip Kaufman, MPR Associates, Berkeley CA; Nettie Letgers, Center for

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comprised of researchers and practitioners with expertise in exit exam policies and dropout issues, was asked to consider what conclusions could be drawn from existing research and what kinds of further work are needed. A summary of their conclusions and recommendations follow.

What the Research Tells Us

Over the last several decades, as exit exams have become increasingly widespread across the states, researchers have used various approaches and data sources to explore the impacts of such exams on dropout rates. Some have compared dropout rates between states with and without exit exams, or between cohorts of students within a state before and after an exit exam was introduced. Researchers have also begun using sophisticated statistical techniques to try to isolate the effect of the exit exam policy from all the other inputs and concurrent reforms and policies in the educational context that might be affecting dropout rates at the same time. Results from some of these studies support the claim that exit exams are increasing dropout rates. Consider, for example, these findings:

- Focusing on 16 states with exit exams, Amrein and Berliner (2002) used an archival time series research design to look for changes in dropout rates, high school graduation rates, and enrollment in GED programs after the exit exam was introduced. For each of these outcomes, they compared each state's trend lines to the national ones to control for normal fluctuations and extraneous influences on the data. The researchers conclude that high school exit exams led to higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and increased enrollments in GED programs in the majority of states.
- Jacob (2001) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), a data set that monitored a nationally representative sample of students in the graduation class of 1992 as they progressed from the eighth grade through high school. Controlling for prior student achievement and a variety of other student, school, and state characteristics, Jacob found that exit exams had no appreciable effect on the probability of dropping out for the average students. But he found that

Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University; Dean Lillard, Cornell University; and John Robert Warren, University of Minnesota.

low-achieving students in states with exit exams were about 25% more likely to drop out of high school than comparable peers in non-test states.

- Also using the NELS data set, Warren and Edwards (2003) found that students who were required to pass exit exams in the early 1990s were about 70 percent more likely to obtain a GED instead of a regular high school diploma. This effect was found regardless of students' race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or achievement level.

However, other studies based on different methods or data sources have produced no evidence of a relationship between exit exams and dropouts. For instance:

- Carnoy and Loeb (forthcoming) used statistical model-fitting techniques to see whether states' use of high stakes tests was predictive of high school survival rates. They found no effect of high stakes tests, such as exit exams, on progression through high school for black or white students (though they could not rule out some effect for Hispanic students).
- In Minnesota, Davenport and colleagues (2002) investigated graduation rates to see whether any changes occurred after the introduction of the state's new exit exam, the *Basic Skills Test*. They did not find any overall negative impact on graduation rates. But interestingly, they found that a large number of students (mostly low income and minority students) graduated without having passed both tests, probably due to exemptions and other loopholes. Also intriguing is that over half of the students who dropped out had already passed both tests, indicating that for a substantial number of dropouts, passing the tests was not the primary determinant in their decision to leave school.

In addition to the general concern that exit exams will cause more students to drop out, there is a more specific concern that poor and minority students will be more negatively affected than other students. It is true that exit exams are more prevalent in states with higher percentages of black and Hispanic students, as well as states with the greatest degrees of poverty (Amrein and Berliner, 2002; Center on Education Policy, 2002; Warren and Edwards, 2003). Thus poor and minority students are more likely to be faced with the requirement of having to pass an exit exam than other students. But again, there is no consistent evidence that exit exams are directly causing certain groups of students to drop out from school at increased rates.

Based on the limited empirical evidence available, the panel concluded that there is only moderately suggestive evidence, to date, of exit exams causing more students to drop out of school. Other educational policies and additional graduation requirements, such as retaining students in grade (Clarke, Haney and Madaus, 2000; Hauser, 2001; Rumberger, 2001) and tougher course requirements (Bishop, Bishop and Mane, 2002; Lillard and DeCicca, 2001; and Lillard (forthcoming), have been shown to be more strongly associated with dropping out and increased GED acquisition. If exit exams impose substantive additional requirements on students, it is reasonable to expect that, without additional support or resources that enable students to meet the additional requirements, exit exams will lead to similar outcomes.

Research has shown that dropping out is a complex process and that many factors contribute to the phenomena over a long period of time (Rumberger, 2001). Whereas an exit exam alone probably does not cause many students to drop out, it may be a tipping factor for some students. For instance, a student might already be at risk for dropping out after a long history of low achievement and perhaps being retained in grade, at which point, facing the requirement of having to take an exam, the student gets discouraged and decides to quit. However this is just a hypothesis. As discussed later, research has yet to illuminate how exit exams play into students' decisions to leave school.

One thing that we can conclude from the research to date is that there is no evidence of exit exams *decreasing* dropout rates. That is, exit exams are not helping to keep students in school.

Limitations of the Existing Research

The impact of exit exams on dropout rates has proven to be a difficult topic to study. Panelists were asked to reflect on the limitations of the existing research, the obstacles that arise when trying to study this issue, and possible explanations for the inconsistent findings across studies.

Data Quality

One of the most significant impediments to understanding the effects of exit exams on dropouts is that we do not have adequate national or state data systems for

studying the issue. Researchers have made an admirable effort to mine the data sets that are available, but more and better data are needed.

An overarching problem that makes all of the data on dropouts confusing is the long-standing debate over the best way to count them. Dropouts are calculated in many different ways across national surveys, states, districts, and research studies. For instance, some data collectors count students who leave school and pursue a GED or other alternative credential as a high school completer, others do not. Table 1 summarizes some of the methods most widely used for counting dropouts. The results can vary enormously depending on the methods used. Texas' high school dropout rate for the 1998-99 school year ranged from as low as 2.2 % to as high as 36.6% depending on the counting method used (Viadero, 2001). In Massachusetts, there has been a very public debate about how to count dropouts and the implications of that decision on gauging the impacts of the state's high school exit exam, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

Table 1. Methods of Counting High School Dropouts

Method	Description
Event Dropout Rate	Students in a given grade or age span who were enrolled and failed to complete the year's requirements. May overcount dropouts if students who transfer to other jurisdictions or later complete school are counted.
School Completion Rate	Students who reach a particular age and have received a certificate. Typically does not distinguish type of certificate (e.g., regular diploma vs. GED).
Status Dropout Rate	Students who reach a particular age without have received a certificate and are not enrolled in school.
On-time Graduation Rate	Students who graduate in a given year and were enrolled in ninth grade 3 years earlier.
Attrition Rate	Students who were enrolled in an earlier grade, usually 9th, and are no longer enrolled by twelfth grade.

Source: Adapted from National Research Council (2001), *Understanding Dropouts*, Table 3-1, p.30.

Kaufman (2001) provides an overview of the available sources of dropout data along with the strengths and weaknesses of each. One of the most widely used sources of national dropout statistics is the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. An advantage of the CPS is that it has been collected in a reasonably uniform manner every year for several decades. It is the only source of long-term trends in dropout and completion rates. There are concerns, however, that the CPS inflates the

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graduation rate by including as high school completers those who have passed the GED and by depending on respondees to describe their own levels of educational attainment.

A number of researchers who have studied the impact of exit exams on dropout rates have instead used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which was conducted by the National Center on Education Statistics in the late 1980s to monitor a nationally representative sample of young adults as they progressed from 8th grade though high school. In addition to enrollment information, this database includes scores on a common set of cognitive tests for each student in grades 8, 10, and 12; dropouts were given a special set of questions about their reasons for leaving school. Parent, teacher and school surveys are linked to each student as well, providing relevant contextual information. Researchers have supplemented the NELS data with information about state testing policies from other sources, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers. While an important source of data, results using NELS must be applied cautiously to current high school exit exams.

Respondents to NELS faced tests that differ in many ways to the type of tests being considered by current policy makers. It is unclear whether the findings still apply in today's standards-based testing context so researchers who use NELS must identify and investigate how more general factors—common to both types of tests—are correlated with dropouts and other outcomes of interest. In this way, even the decade old NELS data can provide insights into current policy debates. The latest national high school longitudinal study, the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), though not yet available, will provide an opportunity to get more current data that may be helpful.

Another source of state and national dropout data is the Common Core of Data (CCD), which is essentially a Census of public schools. For this database NCES collects statistical information, including dropout and school completion rates, from state departments of education. Most states get their numbers from school and district administrative records. There are concerns that the data are not as accurate as one would like for research. Rather than relying on surveys or enrollment counts, most districts calculate graduation statistics by trying to track individual students over time. This is the preferred approach for gathering statistics about students' progression through school, but few districts have the resources or incentive to do this successfully. Faced with

ambiguous or missing information about the whereabouts of individuals, they often end up underreporting dropout rates. Data entry errors also frequently occur when employees enter, for instance, the wrong student-identification codes in the records. Most districts simply lack the resources to put in place the kinds of quality controls that would be necessary to ensure an accurate dataset.

A few states, including Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, have developed student level data systems that track students using individual identification numbers. However, most of these systems are not sophisticated enough to accurately track students who, for instance, leave the state or who have mixed up identification numbers. Substantial numbers of students get lost, with such systems locating at best about 90% of all students in a state (Kaufman, 2001). There is new federal legislation (authorizing OERI) that calls for states to develop longitudinal data systems to track dropouts, but those systems will take many years to implement.

Finally, to study the impact of exit exams policies on dropouts, accurate historical information is needed about the testing policies that were in place at different points in time. Some panelists described their frustration trying to get this information from state departments of education, whose archives are often not well organized or accessible.

Other policies get in the way.

Research supports what common sense tells us: dropping out of school is a gradual process influenced by a variety of factors in a student's life, including personality traits, the home environment, prior educational experiences, and economic conditions. (NRC, 2001a; Rumberger, 2001). Trying to isolate the role that exit exams play in that complex process is challenging. Researchers need to ask: Everything else held equal, are exit exams causing students to drop out? But the "all else held equal" is often lacking in the current research.

Ideally, from a research perspective, one would conduct a controlled experiment that assigns random groups to the treatment (exit exam) and control (no exit exam) groups. If the assumption held that the treatment and control groups were similar in all other ways, any difference in dropout behavior could be attributed to the exit exam. For obvious reasons, this is not feasible or acceptable in an educational setting with real-life

students. Instead, researchers have used statistical techniques to control for factors other than the exit exam that are hypothesized to be associated with dropout rates; for instance, they might look at whether students matched in terms of prior achievement and socioeconomic status are more likely to drop out if they are required to pass an exit exam.

Existing studies have controlled for some of the relevant factors but many have been left out. Because of these kinds of misspecifications, or oversights, in the empirical research, the results are often contradictory and difficult to interpret. For instance, tougher course requirements are associated with higher dropout rates, yet that variable is not controlled for in most of the existing studies. This renders many of the findings difficult to interpret because state course requirements are often ratcheted up around the same time that an exit exam is introduced. In such a situation, one might find a correlation between dropouts and exit exams, but it is impossible to tease apart the effect of the exam from the requirement to take more courses.

A second factor that needs to be taken into account in the research model is grade retention policies. Research suggests that states or districts that retain low achieving students in grade will likely have many students quitting school before they ever reach the point of taking an exit exam. This makes it impossible to answer the question of whether exit exams are causing young people to drop out because we have not accounted for differences across jurisdictions in the pools of students who have made it to the point of taking an exit exam.

A final example of a factor that has been largely ignored by current research is the nature of the exit exams themselves. Most studies have treated exit exams as if they are the same thing across time and place. For instance, many recent studies are based on NELS data that were collected more than a decade ago, at a time when most high school exit exams were characterized as minimum competency tests. It is unclear whether the findings from those studies still apply today, when most states are introducing what they describe as more rigorous, standards-based exams. Even studies based on more current data should not assume that exit exams of today are similar across states. We know that state exit exams differ in the content covered, the difficulty of the questions, the kinds of tasks students are required to perform, the numbers of opportunities for retests, and the amount and types of remediation offered to those who fail (CEP, 2002). It is quite

feasible that some state exams will result in positive outcomes, while others lead to negative ones.

Underlying Reasons for Dropping Out

Complete data sets and highly specified research models alone will not be sufficient to capture the complex processes by which students drop out of school. Even if a statistical correlation or causal relationship is found between exit exams and dropout rates, important questions remain about *how* or *why* the exam influences students' decisions to drop out or stay in school.

Large-scale surveys are not the best for uncovering mechanisms. In the NELS survey, the most specific reasons that students gave for dropping out were: "did not like school," "failing school," "could not get along with teachers," and "got a job" (Rumberger, 2001). But these responses do not reveal the underlying causes or processes that over time may have contributed to students' attitudes, behaviors, and school performance, and they tell us nothing about the role of exit exams.

To explore mechanisms—that is, to answer the "how" or "why" questions--qualitative, descriptive, in-depth studies are often most useful. The mechanisms that emerge from such efforts can, in turn, be further tested by large-scale quantitative studies. One of the advantages of open-ended methods such as interviews, focus groups and case studies is that they can uncover processes that are unanticipated by the researcher. While the researcher may go into the study expecting students to have certain reasons for dropping out of school, qualitative methods make it possible for phenomena to emerge that are completely unexpected. Large-scale surveys, in contrast, tend to constrain responses by using multiple-choice or likert scale response formats for the sake of efficiency and standardization.

Too little has been done to ask students about the link between exit exams and their decision to dropout. In one such study, Catterall (1989) interviewed more than 700 students in four states. Among his findings were that students who initially failed the test were more likely to express doubts about their chances of graduating. Unfortunately, he did not follow students long enough to find out if those who initially failed the test actually graduated at lower rates than other students.

Rather than being discouraged by the limitations of the research to date, people should view the existing work as part of a natural scientific progression. Rarely does a single study in education produce unequivocal and durable results--multiple methods, applied over time, are usually required to answer a scientific question (NRC, 2001b, Evidence Study). With the ever-increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing in American education, researchers are showing great interest in studying the consequences of testing policies. As the research community continues to build and improve on past studies, ask better and more refined questions, and collect more accurate and complete data, it is likely that we will gradually converge on a clearer set of answers to our questions.

Priorities for Future Research

State leaders need reliable information about the costs and benefits of exit exams--including their impact on drop out rates--and how to implement them most effectively. The following priorities for research were identified by the panel.

More Refined Reporting of Exit Exam Results

As a first step toward understanding the consequences of exit exams, states, districts and schools need to provide more detailed information about student performance beyond overall pass rates. Each year, average scores and pass rates should be reported on each subject area test broken down by subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, English language learners and students with disabilities). For states that plan to use their exit exam to fulfill high school testing requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, this kind of disaggregation of results is now mandatory.

Because all states allow students who fail the exams to retake them multiple times, it is also important that test results be reported by cohort—that is, first-time test takers separate from second-time test takers, and so on. Perhaps most important to the policy debate, statistics are needed about the number and types of students who do not pass all of the required exams by their last opportunity in grade 12. These data are surprisingly difficult to come by. Currently, only a few states provide cumulative pass rate information because it requires tracking student performance over consecutive test administrations (or getting such information from districts and compiling it at the state

level). If we are to understand the consequences of exit exams on school completion rates, an obvious first step is to get a handle on the number of students who do not get a diploma because of failing to pass the tests by the end of grade 12; these students are technically different than students who dropout before the end of 12th grade.

Finally, state departments should monitor and report the numbers of students who are exempted from the tests or take an alternative route to earning a diploma; that is, the number of students who earn a diploma without having passed all of the exams. This is important because if the exit exams are truly more rigorous than those of the past, schools and districts may compensate by allowing more students to circumvent the requirement, in an effort to keep school graduation rates at an acceptable level. Whereas there are good arguments for allowing certain students alternative ways to earn a diploma, too much lenience in the requirements could fly in the face of the fundamental intent of standards-based reform—that all students be held to the same high expectations. On the other hand, if policies are too rigid, then states could be denying diplomas unfairly (and making themselves vulnerable to lawsuits). This tension needs to be explicitly explored and addressed.

Creation of Better Longitudinal Data Systems

Longitudinal data systems that follow individual students, tracking what happens to them over several years, are the gold standard for dropout research. To further explore how exit exams affect school completion, relevant data would be collected such as students' background characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, special education and limited English proficiency status, measures of socioeconomic status); courses completed; grades; test scores; grade retentions; type of high school credential earned (e.g., regular diploma, GED, alternative certification offered by the state, no credential); and when possible, the later educational and employment outcomes for the students who receive those credentials.

Unfortunately, longitudinal studies that follow all students are extremely expensive to conduct. A more feasible alternative would to repeatedly survey only a representative sample of students, which would be sufficient for most research purposes. The survey could focus on factors relating to high school completion rather than being a

general-purpose survey. It might be attached to the state's yearly standardized test, for the selected sample of students. Still, substantial effort would need to be devoted to following students who transfer or otherwise disappear from sight; this is one of the greatest challenges in conducting longitudinal studies.

Assuming that it will be more technically feasible to collect better data in the future, another productive starting point would be to form a state consortium to jointly develop a set of standards or characteristics of the data system they would like to eventually build in the future. Such a collaborative effort might be coordinated through an organization like the Council of Chief State School Officers or one of the regional boards. The goal would be to develop specifications for a data system that states could adopt when they are ready. A standard data collection system (that could also be partially customized by states as needed) would enable comparisons to be made across states.

Study of Multiple Cohorts Using Mixed Methods

A single cohort study, such as NELS, provides information about one group of students' progression through school but tells little about the impacts of educational policies such as exit exams. For that, successive cohorts of young people must be followed so that changes can be observed before, during, and after the new requirement goes into effect.

To study the consequences of exit exams, an ideal design would be to choose a state that is about to introduce a new exam and observe one or two cohorts of students that are not yet affected, the first cohort that must pass the exam to graduate, and a few subsequent cohorts when the requirement is being fully implemented. Researchers would follow each cohort of students from grade 8 or 9 through 12 and maybe even a few years beyond; each year, a new sample would be selected and asked the same questions as the previous years' cohorts. Thus, the population being studied would grow each year. At some point after a group graduated, they could be dropped from the study. In any study of this sort, substantial effort would need to be devoted to following non-responders, to minimize the number of students that disappear from the sample over time.

In addition, an ideal design would use a mixture of large-scale surveys and more in-depth interviews and observations, to get at both general trends as well the underlying

reasons why students are leaving school. A team of researchers could survey a large, representative sample of students to collect information about their progress through high school. In addition, a much smaller subset of respondees could be selected to participate in the more in-depth portion of the study. These students would be interviewed each year to explore how they are thinking about the exit exam and how that is playing into their decisions to either stay in or drop out from school.

Another strand of the study could be aimed at exploring the kinds of learning opportunities students are having as a result of the tests, and other aspects of the institutional response to the testing policy. Teachers and administrators could be surveyed and interviewed. In addition, observations could be made in a sample of classrooms to get more direct evidence about changes in curriculum and instruction. A number of instruments already exist and have proven to be reliable and valid. Some examples of where this work has been done successfully can be found in the TIMMS study, *Why Schools Matter: A Cross-National Comparison of Curriculum and Learning* (Schmidt, et. al., 2001) and in "Measuring the Content of Instruction: Uses in Research and Practice" (Porter, 2002).

To be sure, such an effort would be an ambitious and costly undertaking, but a comprehensive study of this sort could move the field much further along in understanding the consequences of exit exams, including impacts on school completion.

The Nature of Exit Exams

What are students required to know and do to pass a state's exit exam? How rigorous is one state's exam compared to another? Are exit exams of today truly more difficult than the minimum competency exit exams of the past? Unfortunately we cannot answer these questions yet because close analyses and comparisons of state tests have not been done.

State department of education websites and some recent reports (e.g., CEP, 2002) provide general or surface level information about state tests such as the number of test questions, subjects tested, when the tests are administered and opportunities for retesting, etc. What is lacking are analyses of the rigor of the content covered, how well the test is aligned to state standards, how difficult the questions are, and what level of competency

the passing score represents (ACHIEVE has done some initial work of this type for selected states). These kinds of analyses are difficult and time-consuming, and require methods for describing different tests in terms of a common set of dimensions or measures so that comparisons can be made. Such studies are a prerequisite to research that takes into account the differences among state exit exams and explores whether some types of exams and policies lead to more positive consequences than others.

Continue to identify the factors most strongly associated with dropping out and control for those in future research models.

By controlling for known factors that are associated with dropping out in future studies and identifying other potential factors that may be associated with dropping out, two goals can be achieved. First, the impacts of new policies on dropout rates can be more easily separated from other confounding factors. Thus, clearer connections can be made between specific policies and impacts. Second, the results of studies identifying new factors could be used to identify ways to intervene in the dropping out process.

The main groups of factors to be considered include district, state, and national policies as well as student, school, and family characteristics. Some examples include GED acquisition policies, retention policies, labor market opportunities and policies, graduation requirements, family wealth and income, parental educational background, and prior student academic achievement.

Some Other Priorities

- Examine the impact NCLB is having on state exit exam policies. There may be some interesting interactions since NCLB requires that schools, districts, and states show adequate yearly progress in graduation rates across all subgroups, and exit exams may be viewed as an impediment to reaching that goal if educators believe that these exams delay graduation or increase dropout rates.
- Focus on schools and districts that are putting significant effort into reform—such as different types of remedial help, different types of curriculum and teaching—and see whether any of those efforts are helping so that more students pass the tests and less students get discouraged and drop out.

Messages for State and National Leaders

It is important that policy makers and the public gain a better understanding of the potential costs and benefits of exit exams, including the impact on dropout rates. Policy makers can support better information and practices by taking the following actions.

1. **Report more informative exit exam results.** Report yearly exit exam results overall, and broken down by subgroups and by the number of times students have taken the test (e.g., first-time test takers and so on). The number of students not passing all of the tests by their last opportunity in grade 12, and who are therefore denied a diploma, should be monitored. A high stakes testing program will be more defensible in a court of law when there are complete, accurate data of this sort.
2. **Improve data systems.** Support national, state, and district efforts to create better student-level longitudinal data systems for monitoring dropouts and related factors as students progress through school. Gather feedback from educators and researchers about how currently existing data systems could better support these efforts. Invest the resources—it does not make sense that the federal and state governments spend millions every year on measuring student achievement, but only a fraction of that amount to see how many students are actually finishing high school. Encourage the formation of consortia of states to decide upon uniform ways of defining, collecting, and reporting data so data be transferred more easily from state to state and so that information across states can be compared more easily.
3. **Provide incentives for accurate record-keeping.** Accountability systems that penalize schools, districts, or states for increased dropout rates may provide a perverse incentive to underreport. Take a look at your accountability system to make sure it does not inadvertently penalize educators for reporting accurate dropout and completion statistics.
4. **Keep historical records**. Organize historical archives that document high stakes testing policies of the past, and make them readily available to researchers. Such

information is necessary for researchers to study trends and consequences of past policies, which in turn, will provide important information about the consequences of future ones.

5. **Consider menus of policies.** Multiple factors influence a student's decision to drop out of school. Interactions between policies should be considered. For example, having an exit exam and lowering the age at which students can first take the GED exam are both likely to induce students out of school; on the other hand, having an exit exam and raising the cost of getting a GED work in opposite directions.
6. **Support success.** If graduation requirements are going to be ratcheted up—for instance, by increasing course requirements or introducing an exit exam--and if drop out rates are not to increase as a result, then there must be a complementary system of supports put in place to increase the education quality.

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