

Exit Exams: Increases or Decreases the Dropout Rate

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine the impact of exit exams on the dropout rate. Data was gathered from several research articles. The most impressionable research revealed exit exams have a negative effect on minorities, especially black males. Results indicate by 2012, that exit exams in 25 states will affect 81 percent of minority high school students. Overall, results were inconclusive if exit exams are decreasing or increasing the dropout rate. However, research does show that exit exams have a negative impact on minorities. Statistics show that more minorities are dropping out and failing exit exams. Although exit exams hinder some students, on the other hand, they are helping administrators and teachers to become more accountable for the instruction being delivered in schools. States with and states contemplating exit exams need to strategically consider the following: a) why other states do not have exit exams and b) does the exit exam influence the dropout rate.

## Exit Exams: Decreases or Increases the High School Dropout Rate

Since 1979, a growing number of states have required high school students to pass exit examinations before they can receive diplomas (Glenn, 2006). States hope these tests will ensure students who receive high school diplomas meet basic thresholds of academic proficiency and job readiness (Greene & Winters, 2004). In 2006, 25 states administered exit exams. Most of the states were facing difficult economic circumstances, and had relatively more African American and Latino students in their schools. Although, exit exams not uniformly endorsed, these policies enjoy widespread support among policy makers, business leaders, and others. Supporters say that tests are a means to evaluate the skills and knowledge of graduates as they leave high school and enter the work world or college. But others say that tests lead to increased dropout rates without offering opportunities for students to improve their outcomes, and they force educators to 'teach to the test' (Warren, 2002).

Many in the public and the media have adopted the idea that exit exams cause higher dropout rates (Greene & Winters, 2004). According to Dee and Jacob (2006), students in states with relatively easy exit exams are roughly 4 percent more likely to drop out of high school than similar students in states with no exams. In states with relatively difficult exams, students are 5.5 percent more likely to dropout than their counterparts in states with no exam. In California, students are crushed by the weight of exit exams. After numerous failures on test after test, pupils presume, rather than make another attempt, it is best just dropout. In 2006, 24,000 high school seniors dropped out,

about 10, 000 more than just four years earlier (Angert, 2007). In addition to the general concern that exit exams will cause more students to dropout, 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 (Amrien and Berliner, 2002). By 2012, the Center on Education Policy (1996) estimates that exit exams in 25 states will affect 71 percent of the nation's public high school students and 81 percent of minority high school students. Dee and Jacob (2006) reported that states with easy exit exams, black male students are 5.2 percent more likely to dropout of high school than their counterparts in states with no exit exams. In states with more rigorous exit exams, they are 7.3 percent more likely to dropout than are their counterparts in states with no exit exams. In 2003, the *Miami Herald* in Florida introduced readers to students who had planned to attend college or enter the military but could not because they failed Florida's exit exam. Reports of Florida students being denied diplomas solely because they could not pass the state's test led minority leaders to call for a statewide boycott until the state removed the testing requirements (Greene & Winters, 2004). Chudowsky and Gayler (2003) report no consistent evidence that exit exams are directly causing certain groups of students to dropout from school at increased rates.

Whereas an exit exam alone probably does not cause many students to dropout, it may be a tipping factor for some students (Chudowsky & Gayler, 2003). 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 (Rumberger, 2001). 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 (Chudowsky & Gayler, 2003). According to Greene and Winters (2004), students who fail the exams are students who would have failed to graduate regardless of the testing requirement; such tests would have no effect on dropout rates. In Florida, home of one the nation's most difficult exit exams, state officials estimated that about 40 percent of the seniors in the class of 2003 who could not pass the state's exit exam had also not completed the necessary course work to receive a diploma (Greene & Winters, 2004).

Proponents of exit exams say they improve learning and future employment by giving both students and school districts better incentives to succeed (Glenn, 2006). Some have argued that exit exams are necessary to ensure that employers continue to see diplomas as valuable in the labor market (Greene & Winters, 2004). According to the Center on Education Policy (2006), exit exams do seem to be having a significant impact on curriculum and instruction, and appear to encourage schools to cover more of the state standards and add remedial and other special courses for students at risk of failing. Research released on California's exit exam program notes a 'profound' impact on instruction, with the number of high schools reporting covering at least 75 percent of the state's standards jumping from about 20 percent in 1999 to more than 80 percent in 2006. Greene and Winters (2004) reported California might support an exit exam even if it did lower graduation rates, in order to protect the value of its high school diplomas. Requiring students to demonstrate proficiency in order to graduate should protect the quality of their diplomas in the labor market.

In conclusion, the research to date is that no evidence of exit exams decrease or increase dropout rates. That is, exit exams are not helping to keep students in school. However, research does show that exit exams have a negative impact on minorities, especially black males. Statistics show that more minorities are dropping out and failing exit exams. Although exit exams hinder some students, on the other hand, they are helping administrators and teachers to become more accountable for the instruction being delivered in schools. Finally, it is inconclusive if exit exams are doing more- harm -than -good.

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