

# State needs to avoid exit exam route



## Your Turn

Lisa Guisbond and Brent McKim

Guest columnists

Kentucky residents concerned about public education quality and fairness have until Nov. 30 to speak up and reverse the state's plan to impose damaging and discredited high school exit exams.

Now is the time for Kentuckians — educators, parents and students — to raise their voices and explain why this is precisely the wrong route for Kentucky's students. (A public hearing is set for 10 a.m. Nov. 29 at the Kentucky Department of Education in Frankfort. Written comments will be accepted until Nov. 30. More information is available at the KDE website and here.)

The Kentucky Board of Education claims that adopting exit exams in English and math will help better prepare students for their lives after high school. But if that's the goal, it should avoid the exit exam route. Instead, it must heed

the warnings of negative consequences for its most vulnerable students, and education quality in general.

The warnings are based on a track record of failure, which explains why there's a growing nationwide trend away from exit exams. Just 12 states cling to this destructive policy, down from a high of 27. Experience and research shows the tests do not ensure students are better prepared for life after high school. In fact, there are better ways to assess readiness for graduation, including performance-based assessments that promote challenging and engaging project-based learning.

In 2012, Minnesota Rep. Carlos Mariani explained why his state chose to move beyond exit exams. "We're trying to find a more intelligent way to do it, knowing that some students don't test well, which doesn't mean they're not proficient."

The challenge of addressing inequitable access and providing every Kentucky student with a meaningful education is real. We know there remain real gaps in opportunity and access. But the Kentucky Board of Education's proposal could worsen these ills rather than cure them. The devil is always in the details,

and at this point, details are slim. For example, the proposal says students must meet a "minimum requirement" on math and reading exams, with the scale score to be approved later by the KBE. "Minimum" is not defined, and some think students must reach a higher, "proficient" level to pass. In any case, the requirements will be approved with details to come later, which is concerning.

National research confirms that high school graduation tests do not improve learning but cause harm, especially to vulnerable student groups, including students with disabilities, English learners, low-income, African-American, Latinx and Native American students. These are the groups of students most likely to experience a narrowed curriculum aimed at just getting them over the test score bar. And they are the groups most likely to be denied a diploma because of a few points on a standardized exam.

Test defenders say the exams "give value" to a diploma, but research shows the opposite is true. For example, studies show the tests do not improve employment prospects or college readiness. A 2011 National Research Council

of the National Academy of Sciences review found that high school graduation tests have done nothing to lift student achievement but have raised the dropout rate.

Exit exams give students who have worked hard, played by the rules and stayed in school the status of high school dropouts. This creates an enormous and growing cost to society. Adults without a diploma earn less, are less likely to be employed or have a stable family, and are more likely to be imprisoned.

Kentucky schools need not embrace a policy increasingly viewed by most states as destructive and reactionary. In fact, testing experts like Harvard Professor Daniel Koretz calls such policies nothing less than a "charade."

Again, educators, parents and students have until Nov. 30 to speak out against proposed graduation tests and for meaningful and fair graduation requirements. Now is the time to raise your voice!

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