Education Week's blogs > College Bound

Report Calls for States to Rethink High School Exit Exams

By Caralee Adams on July 15, 2014 12:24 PM

States that require students to pass a high school exit exam before receiving a diploma should rethink their policies as the Common Core State Standards are rolled out to avoid confusion and mixed messages about expectations, a **New America Foundation report** finds.

If states don't modify their use of exit exams, many students will either be unable to pass them or the temptation will be to lower the bar—at the same time that the new standards raise rigor in the classroom, according to Anne Hyslop, a policy analyst for the Washington-based research organization and the author of the brief, "The Case Against Exit Exams," released July 15.

For the Class of 2014, 24 states require students to pass state exit exams in various subjects in order to graduate, up from 18 to 2002, according to the report, including Florida, Mississippi, and Virginia. But as the report notes, this testing is "controversial," and the policies are in flux**.** The New America analysis finds that seven states plan to eliminate the exit exam requirement, including Arizona, Georgia, and Minnesota, while a few others may add them.

As many as 21 states plan to continue their exit exams in English/Language arts and mathematics as they move forward to implement more challenging tests aligned with the common core, New America says, including 10 states that are expected to use high school tests developed by either PARCC or Smarter Balanced, the two common-assessment consortia. The remaining 11 states are planning to use tests unique to their states.

As the common-core standards are implemented in 40-plus states, many analysts expect student performance on state exams will initially drop. The first wave of students being tested will be expected to have more advanced skills, said Hyslop, but will not have had sufficient instructional time with the new curriculum. This could lead to fewer students graduating from high school and being denied access to higher education.

Some states are considering strategies to minimize the risk to students during the transition, such as phasing in new requirements gradually or only using the results from lower-level subjects as exit exams, and setting one cut score for graduation and a higher one for readiness, the report finds.

Hyslop recommends that states either abandon the use of exit exams altogether or change how they use them. The results could be applied instead toward a students' final course grade or leveraged as a positive incentive to get credit at a college, she suggests. Switching from having an exit exam be a punitive tool to a positive one could help motivate students to achieve, Hyslop added.

The New America paper discusses the lack of evidence that exit exams have an impact on raising high school graduation levels. Hyslop also writes that exit exams have been notorious for being too easy or that states often provide waivers for many groups of students, making the tests of little value.

"The transition to the common core creates a lot of issues for exit-exam policies," said Hyslop said in the interview. "States need to think about strategies so they don't deny opportunity for large groups of vulnerable or at-risk students."

Confusion over what exit exams and what standards students will have to meet to graduate is one reason states are hesitating to embrace the new high school assessments being developed by PARCC and Smarter Balanced, she adds.

Adjusting the exit exams to ensure students can graduate from high school would counteract efforts to "increase rigor and student achievement, build stronger curricula, authentically evaluate students' postsecondary readiness, create buy-in from higher education institutions, and use the assessments as one way to place students in college-level coursework, " writes Hyslop.

Categories: Common Core   High School Graduation Rates   college readiness

Tags: college readiness   exit exams   high school dropouts   high school proficiency tests   New America Foundation