

# The Case Against High School Graduation Tests

**Many states are eliminating or scaling back high school exit exams, in response to a rising testing resistance and reform movement along with strong evidence of their harm.** From a high of 27 states that had or planned to have graduation tests, just 12 require them for the 2016-17 school year. In the past few years, eleven states ended their tests or imposed a moratorium (MN, SC, GA, AZ, NV, AK, ID, CA and OK); Rhode Island ended its test and Pennsylvania adopted a moratorium before their tests went into effect. Seven states retroactively granted diplomas to students who had been denied them based on test scores (AK, AZ, CA, GA, MS, NV, SC). Some states have or End of Course (EOC) exams that count as part of course grades. Also, since 2015, 12 states added or will add a civics exam requirement; some of those states have no other exit exam (<http://www.fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated>).

- 1. Exit exams deny diplomas to tens of thousands of U.S. students each year, regardless of whether they have stayed in school, completed all other high school graduation requirements, and demonstrated competency in other ways.** A review by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that high school graduation tests have done nothing to lift student achievement but have raised the dropout rate. (Hout & Elliott, 2011; see also, Grodsky, Warren, and Kalogrides, 2008; Warren, Kulick, & Jenkins, 2006; Dee & Jacob, 2006; Mason & Watanabe, 2015; Radcliffe & Melon, 2007).

These tests give students who have worked hard, played by the rules and stayed in school the status of high school dropouts, with the same barriers to opportunity and employment. 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. Hemelt and Marcotte (cited by Hyslop, 2014) found that the increased dropout rate is especially pronounced in states that do not provide any alternative pathway for those who fail the tests.

- 2. Students with disabilities, English language learners, African American, Latino, American Indian and low-income students are far more likely to be denied a diploma for not passing a test** (Hyslop 2014; Papay, Murnane & Willet, 2010). This is inconsistent with test defenders' claims that the tests benefit students from these groups.

For example, in the Massachusetts high school class of 2015, 92% of white students passed all three graduation exams (English, math and science), but just 76% of blacks, 71% of Latinos, 61% of students with disabilities and 41% of English language learners passed. These failure rates contribute to higher dropout rates: Latino and African-American students drop out at rates three to four times that of white students. Eleventh and 12th graders who have not passed the state tests are more than 13 times as likely to drop out of school as those who have passed (MA DOE, 2013, 2015).

- 3. Exit exams do not improve employment prospects for those who pass the tests while harming those who fail and thus do not obtain a diploma** (Warren, Grodsky & Lee, 2008; Baker & Lang, 2013). Test defenders say the exams "give value" to a diploma, but the research evidence shows the opposite is true, as the tests fail to produce claimed benefits.
- 4. Exit exams have been linked to increased incarceration** (Baker & Lang, 2013; Hyslop, 2014). An extreme focus on testing creates disengaged students, putting many at risk of joining the "school-to-prison pipeline" (FairTest, 2010). Baker and Lang also report that tougher graduation tests are associated with a 12% increase in incarceration rates.
- 5. New, "tougher" tests are no more likely than the old tests to improve college and employment prospects but do cause more dropouts**, with more extreme damage to the same groups of students harmed by the less tough tests (Baker & Lang, 2013). When states switch to Common Core tests, they are likely to see much higher failure rates (FairTest, 2013). For example, a Carnegie Foundation report estimates that if the new tests establish graduation eligibility at the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the six-year national graduation rate will decline from 85% to 70%, while the dropout rate will increase from 15% to 30% (Hamilton & Mackinnon, 2013).
- 6. High-stakes testing undermines education quality.** Untested subjects are ignored, while teaching in tested subjects focuses too narrowly on the tests, with test preparation dominating some classrooms. Since tests are mostly multiple choice, students focus on rote learning instead of learning to think and apply their knowledge (Koretz, 2005). In high school this means students must take additional math or reading classes at the expense of other subjects in which they are more interested. Students who do not pass a graduation test are less likely to take college-oriented courses in subsequent high school years (Hyslop, 2014).

7. **Graduation tests have “measurement error,”** which means some children will fail even though they know the subject (Rogosa, 2001). Offering multiple opportunities to take the test only partially solves this problem.
8. **A student’s transcript, not a test score, is what makes a high school diploma truly meaningful and gives the most accurate picture of a student’s readiness for college and career.** Two major studies confirmed that high school grades are much stronger predictors of undergraduate performance than are standardized test scores (FairTest, 2009; Hiss, 2014).
9. **There are better ways to assess students.** The New York Performance Standards Consortium (2013), for example, uses a performance-based assessment approach, tied to project-based learning, which has been highly successful.

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References available below or at <http://www.fairtest.org/time-abolish-high-school-graduation-tests>.

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