

Pennsylvanians Force Delay in Grad Test Proposal; Battles Continue in Other States

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Fearing the Pennsylvania legislature would block the State Board of Education's plan to impose high-school graduation tests, Governor Ed Rendell crafted a deal with the legislature to fund creation of "voluntary" end-of-course exams and postpone for a year any regulatory mandate. Strong opposition from legislators, school boards, teachers, administrators, parents and others forced this retreat (Examiner, April 2008).

The state Senate had voted in June to give the Legislature exclusive authority to add statewide graduation requirements. In the House of Representatives, a similar proposal was introduced with 110 co-sponsors, several more than the number needed to pass the bill. Pennsylvania activists said this legislation is now unlikely to proceed further.

Wythe Keever of the Pennsylvania State Education Association said the delay is "indicative of the depth and widespread support for an alternative" to the exams. Opponents of the state testing plan vowed to continue their thus-far effective efforts in the legislature and with the public.

Secretary of Education Gerald Zahorchak said, "[T]he delay in the regulatory process will not stop us from moving ahead with developing the... end-of-course final exams." He added that test supporters will "redouble our public education efforts."

Rendell and the Board had proposed that all Pennsylvania students pass state tests to obtain high school diplomas starting with the class of 2014. Opponents organized, spoke out about the negative consequences of the plan, and mobilized to block its implementation. A Pennsylvania agency charged with gathering public input on the proposal received nearly 1,000 comments by late-June, the vast majority of them critical.

FairTest submitted comments and testified before the Pennsylvania General Assembly's Senate Education Committee in May, recommending the proposal be rejected: "The individual and societal costs of denying a diploma based on a state test score are high. Students without diplomas earn much less, are far less likely to maintain stable families, and are far more likely to end up in prison. Ironically, in the long run it would be less expensive to adequately fund schools than to pay for the costs of the resulting damage."

Senate Education Committee Chair James Rhoades and other members also expressed skepticism. Rhoades said, "I understand testing could put increased pressure on kids and it could result in better behavior in school and more work, but kids who want to be successful are already doing that." The others will end up dropping out of school rather than take tests they believe they will fail, he said.

FairTest's full testimony is available here: <http://www.fairtest.org/testimony-lisa-guisbond-pa-senate-ed-committee>.

Exit exams continue to be proposed and debated around the country:

The Oregon Board of Education has adopted a proposal requiring students to pass reading, writing, math and speech exams to earn high school diplomas. The policy would, however, include other routes

to graduation, including getting a certain score on a national standardized test, like the ACT or the SAT, or completing work samples or portfolios graded using a statewide scoring guide. Educators and other citizens have raised range of concerns about the proposal. Eugene Superintendent George Russell wrote to the state Board of Education, "Sole dependence on exit exams...to determine graduation has proven problematic across the nation. Dropout rates have increased and more students fail to graduate. Parents have sued states on behalf of their students who were denied diplomas. In classrooms, teachers and students focus more on tests and less on learning."

Local school board member and parent Jill Zurschmeide said her autistic daughter is doing well in school and plans to go to college but will never pass the speech standard needed to graduate. "It is painful for her to speak. But she is an accomplished, natural writer," Zurschmeide said. The class of 2012 would be the first class required to pass the tests to graduate. Despite concerns, the BOE voted in June to adopt the proposal, making Oregon the 27th state to adopt an exit exam policy.

Beginning in 2009-10, Arkansas students will have to pass state end-of-course tests in algebra I, geometry, biology and 11th grade English to earn credit in the courses and get a high school diploma. There will be an "alternate exit course" and alternate assessment option for students who take and fail the tests three times. "In essence, folks, what we are getting to is a de facto [high school] exit exam," Arkansas Education Commissioner Ken James told the Education Board.

While Oregon and Arkansas moved toward exit exams, Arizona took a step toward reason when the legislature passed and Governor Janet Napolitano signed a bill that permits thousands of Arizona high school students to use good grades to augment their state test scores (Examiner, January 2007). The new law continues a policy of allowing students to augment their scores on the state AIMS test with points earned for good course grades.

Though California's exit exam has been in effect since 2006, this was the first year special needs students had to pass it to get a diploma (Examiner, October 2007). State officials project that this will double the number of students who will be denied diplomas based on the tests, from 40,000 last year to 80,000 this year. About half of all students with disabilities (SWDs) who take the California High School Exit Exam fail it. In response to this crisis for special needs students, Senator Gloria Romero (D-Los Angeles) introduced a bill exempting this year's special needs students from the graduation requirement. "The exit exam has become more of a trap door for special education students," Romero said. "There still has not been a resolution about the fairness of the exam, and that is why I authored the exemption bill." The bill passed the state Senate and moved to the Assembly in mid-June. Meanwhile, the settlement of a seven-year lawsuit on behalf of SWDs calls for neutral experts to study the exam's impact on these students and make recommendations.

- Information on the settlement process can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/hs/kiddnotice.asp>

A new study found that Los Angeles graduation rates began a steep decline two years ago when California's exit exam took effect, even though 12th grade enrollment has risen sharply. The data predate the requirement that students with disabilities pass the exam to graduate, a requirement that will further reduce the graduation rate.

New Jersey's alternative high school exit exam, the Special Review Assessment, has been used by tens of thousands of New Jersey students who struggle to pass the state's exit exams and has bolstered the state's top-ranked high school graduation rate (Examiner, April 2008). However, that hasn't protected it from years of charges that the SRA is not "rigorous" enough compared with the state's exit exams.

Now comes a recommendation from New Jersey officials for a major increase in state graduation requirements starting in 2016. The new rules mean students must pass end-of-course exams in Language Arts, Algebra I & II, Geometry, Biology and Chemistry. The state's proposal would replace the SRAs with a "rigorous, content-focused alternative assessment model" for use by "students who have difficulty with standardized exam(s)." The high school exams would also include a "performance based assessment."

According Stan Karp, a high school reform advocate with the Education Law Center in Newark, N.J., it's a plan to ramp up traditional academics with a costly and difficult one-size-fits-all framework. "New Jersey is in urgent need of a robust reform effort that promotes multiple pathways to success for an increasingly diverse student population," Karp said. "But such an effort must rely less on state standards and high-stakes exams and more on credible resources, school-based change, and an inclusive, collaborative reform process."

A report from ELC on the flaws in the proposed high school overhaul is available at:
http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/elcnews_080430_NJMissteps.htm