

Half of states require exit test

Critics still question impact on teachers, disadvantaged youths

By Anica Butler
Sun reporter

August 22, 2006

Since Texas in 1987 first required students to pass a standardized test before being awarded a high school diploma, half the states have adopted similar requirements, with mostly successful results.

Educators say the tests encourage students to take more rigorous courses and require teachers to work harder. But critics say they deny diplomas to the most disadvantaged students and force teachers to "teach to the test."

"It really depends on who you ask. ... The studies go in both directions," said Kevin Carey, research and policy manager for Education Sector, a Washington think tank.

In Maryland, the class of 2009 is the first for which passing exit exams is a graduation requirement.

According to a report released last week by the Center on Education Policy, about 71 percent of the nation's high school students will be required to take exit exams by 2012.

In Massachusetts, the rising number of students who pass the exams on their first try is evidence that the initiative is working, officials there say.

"We're seeing across-the-board improvement in all grades," said Heidi Perlman, spokeswoman for the state department of education. "We see that kids are trying harder and the teachers are very focused."

As in many states, the Massachusetts exit exams met with controversy when the process began in the mid-1990s.

"There were several years for people to panic," Perlman said, adding that detractors predicted an increase in high school dropouts and the number of students who would finish coursework but not earn a diploma. That hasn't happened, Perlman said.

But in California, where exit exams went into effect for the 2005-2006 school year, fears have turned into lawsuits. Students who failed the exams have mounted a court challenge, as has a grass-roots advocacy group.

"Our concerns really are for students who are going to school where they are not getting a quality education," said Mike Chavez, spokesman for Californians for Justice. "It's not fair to students who haven't received a chance to learn, who go to overcrowded schools where there are not enough textbooks."

As of July, 9 percent of California's high school seniors - more than 40,000 - did not receive a high school diploma because they did not meet one or more of the state's graduation criteria, including passing one of the exit exams.

Utah had planned on requiring students to pass an exit exam, but instead state officials offered two diplomas this year - one for those who passed and one for those who didn't.

"The state board of education didn't want to penalize most of the special education students by giving them something less than a diploma for completing most of the high school graduation requirements," said Mark Peterson, a spokesman for the Utah State Office of Education.

Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, said a wide gap in performance remains for special education students, racial minorities, poor kids and English language learners.

"Unfortunately, it's a pattern," he said.

In Texas, officials say exit exams have helped narrow the achievement gap and identify students who need extra help or are ready for college-level work.

"It has given us a better barometer of whether students are learning what they need to know," said DeEtta Culbertson, a spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency. "One benefit is all students have to learn the same material and have to pass the tests together."

Carey, of Education Sector, added that an exit exam can identify struggling students to help them "get over the bar."

"It increases the urgency to make sure students really do learn those skills," he said.

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