

California joins trend among states to abandon high school exit exam

THERESA HARRINGTON

AND

OCTOBER 12, 2017 | LOUIS FREEDBERG



PHOTO BY TIFFANY LEW/EDSOURCE

Certificate of Achievement awarded to Prospect High student Arlene Holmes instead of diploma because she didn't pass the California High School Exit Exam.

This week Gov. Jerry Brown made official what has been state policy for several years: he **signed** a bill abolishing the California High School Exit Exam.

Known by its initials as CAHSEE — and pronounced KAYSEE by educators and students — it had been in place as a graduation requirement for about a decade, until administration of the exam was **abruptly suspended** as a result of bureaucratic snafu in the summer of 2015. Soon thereafter, the Legislature **abolished the exit exam** as a graduation

requirement. But it did so for only three years — through the current school year — to give the state time to decide whether to replace it with another test more aligned with California’s current academic standards.

With **Assembly Bill 830** now law, it is clear that there will be no replacement. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, who made the recommendation to the Legislature against coming up with another exit exam, called it “outdated and unnecessary,” saying that “California education is moving forward,” and has better ways to make sure students are prepared for college and the workplace.

California is not alone in abandoning its high school exit exam. In 2013-14, some **24 states had an exit exam** or graduation test of some kind. Today **only 13 do**.

During the time it was in place, some 5 million California students took the test. In some districts students were issued with a “certificate of achievement” in lieu of a diploma, but those did not have the same value in applying for jobs or getting into college.

Since 2015, the state has allowed students who had failed the exam to apply to receive their diplomas retroactively, as long as they completed all required coursework or other graduation requirements. The number of students eligible to receive them retroactively was estimated to be more than 30,000.

When the Legislature originally approved the idea of a high school exit exam in 1999 — and for it to become a graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2006 — its **primary goal** was to “significantly improve pupil achievement in high school and to ensure that pupils who graduate from high school can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics.”

Lawmakers were persuaded that it was reasonable to expect students with a high school diploma to be able to read and do math at a basic level of proficiency. In fact, the content students were tested on in the exam was set relatively low — between an 8th- and 10th-grade level.

But, after the state adopted the **Common Core** standards and began testing students on them in the spring of 2015, as part of an overall push to raise academic standards, lawmakers concluded that the exit exams were no longer sufficiently aligned with instruction in California schools.

Other concerns related to the exam's impact on historically disadvantaged students. Critics argued that more affluent students typically had greater access to higher quality instruction, or could afford private test prep classes and other resources, and were more likely to be able to pass the test than some of their lower income peers.

Each year the CAHSEE was in effect, the state contracted with the Human Resources Research Organization, or HumRRO, an independent evaluator, to review results. Its reports were generally favorable.

But in its last report in 2014 the HumRRO evaluation noted that “passing rates for economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and African-American students continue to be significantly lower than passing rates for white and Asian students at all grade levels.”

In 2013-14, the overall pass rate was 95.5 percent, which on its face sounded impressive. But in a state the size of California, just a few percentage points of failing students translates into tens of thousands of students being sent into the world without a high school diploma, which could handicap them throughout their lives, and also have long-term economic repercussions for the state.

The HumRRO evaluation concluded that “that there is some evidence from our prior analyses that the CAHSEE requirement has prevented or delayed between 1 and 4 percent of seniors from graduating.” Based on that estimate, between 37,695 and 150,780 students would have been denied a high school diploma solely because of the exam since it became a graduation requirement in 2006.

What also was not anticipated was the test's disproportionate impact on English learners. They were supposed to get help taking it, including being provided with glossaries in their native languages, as well as translators should they need them. But HumRRO evaluators

observed that at times neither glossaries nor translators were available for students. They concluded that the exit exam “has been a significant barrier for students classified as English learners.”

Even former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell, who authored the legislation that created the exam in 1999 when he was a state senator, supported abandoning the exit exam in 2015.

“I still believe we need to ensure that all of our students graduate high school with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful,” he wrote in an EdSource [commentary](#).

But, he wrote, “I’ve always believed that our assessment and accountability systems need to be coherent and avoid duplicative and unnecessary testing, and the current version of the high school exit exam is neither aligned to our standards nor essential to the development of our new accountability system. Whether or not an exit exam should be part of our evolving assessment and accountability systems is worthy of debate. But for today, we cannot let the exit exam operate as an obstacle to students who have earned the right to continue their paths to college or careers.”

Questions about the effectiveness of an exit exam or a graduation test long predated their repeal in many states.

For example, a [2004 analysis](#) by Jay Greene and Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute concluded that exit exams had no effect on raising graduation rates. A [2009 study](#) by Stanford University professor Sean Reardon and UC Davis professor Michal Kurlaender found that the exit exam “has had no positive effects on students’ academic skills.”

At a time when the thrust of many education reforms is to increase graduation rates, and promote college and career readiness, an exit exam is increasingly viewed as counterproductive. That appears to be the case in California, where Assemblyman Ash Kalra, D-San Jose, introduced the bill that will remove CAHSEE from the California education lexicon for good.

“Since the implementation of the state’s high school exit exam, California has adopted new and rigorous standards, implemented new assessments and applied an improved accountability framework to better prepare students for college and career-readiness,” said Kalra after Brown signed the bill

He commended Brown for “recognizing that the CAHSEE is outdated and incompatible within these new standards, and has for years held back tens of thousands of otherwise-qualified students from graduating each year.”

Comments are closed

Join the conversation by going to Edsource's [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) pages. If you do not have a social media account, you can learn how to create a [Twitter account here](#) and a [Facebook account here](#).

Darron

3 weeks ago

Raising standards while lowering accountability is meaningless. A high school diploma in California has become diminished as a result. Just show up and you can get a high school diploma in California. It’s become a total joke.

Kyle Chang

10 months ago

The California State Exit Exam was a waste of time!

▶ David O'Brien

1 year ago

"The thrust of many education reforms is to increase graduation rates, and promote college and career readiness, an exit exam is increasingly viewed as counterproductive." ... [Read More](#)

▶ Joan

1 year ago

The statement that the thrust of education today is to increase graduation rates and therefore the exit exam is counterproductive makes no sense. If a student is worthy of a diploma to graduate then surely they should be able to pass a simple math and English exam. If not there should be no diploma. Giving away diplomas, and lowering high school class expectations is lowering California education overall. Since LAUSD had the biggest problem in 2015 with ... [Read More](#)

Frances O'Neill Zimmerman

1 year ago

Nowhere in this story is teachers' union opposition to the CAHSEE mentioned. California students often required some teacher-tutoring to pass the high school exit exam, and that was anathema to the California Teachers Association which successfully lobbied against it and got it dropped without a replacement. Part of California's race to the bottom.

Wayne Bishop

1 year ago

“But, after the state adopted the Common Core standards and began testing students on them in the spring of 2015, as part of an overall push to raise academic standards, lawmakers concluded that the exit exams were were no longer sufficiently aligned with instruction in California schools.”

Raising academic standards by dropping the only test that meant anything to California high school students. Orwellian public education newspeak at its finest .