

Exit Exams Face Pinch in Common-Core Push

By **Andrew Ujifusa**

With many states crafting assessments based on the common-core standards—and an increasing emphasis on college and career readiness—some are rethinking the kind of tests high school students must pass to graduate, or whether to use such exit exams at all.

Twenty-five states, enrolling a total of 34.1 million students, make exit exams a graduation requirement, according to a [study](#) released last month by the Center on Education Policy, a Washington-based think tank. That represents 69 percent of the nation's K-12 enrollment. And that's grown over the past decade: In 2003, 19 states representing 52 percent of U.S. enrollment had such exit exams.

But now states including Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island plan to use new common-core-aligned tests as exit exams in some form once those tests are fully implemented in 2014-15. Other states are less certain about their plans for the assessments being developed as part of the common-standards push.

Exit exams have grown more prevalent over the past decade, due in part to advocacy from the business community for assessments that can better measure whether students will be ready for the labor force and therefore ensure the value of a high school diploma.

Setting the Bar

States vary on whether students must pass an end-of-course or exit exam to graduate from high school.



SOURCE: Center on Education Policy

Many of today's exit exams, however, are seen as significantly less rigorous than the common-core tests being produced by two consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

"They're really at a crossroads at this point," Shelby McIntosh, the author of the CEP study, said of exit exams, which the group defines as state-mandated tests, including end-of-course tests, that students must pass—not just take—to graduate.

The Common Core State Standards were sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. **PARCC has 23 member states** while **Smarter Balanced has 25**, although some states belong to both consortia, which are crafting the assessments in math and English/language arts aligned with those standards, with the help of \$360 million in federal money.

Because of federal rules connected to that funding, states adopting the tests will be required to use them for school, district, and state-level accountability, as well as for teacher evaluations. But they will not be required to use them as high-stakes tests for individual students. That decision will be up to individual states.

"They have to hit the right balance between making it more rigorous and making it acceptable," said Brian Gong, the executive director of the Dover, N.H.-based National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, which has provided technical assistance to PARCC and Smarter Balanced.

Common Demands

Rhode Island has not yet implemented an exit-exam requirement, but plans to adopt the common-core tests for that purpose starting with the class of 2016.

The state set itself on that path in 2008, said David Abbott, Rhode Island's acting education commissioner. That year, the state board of regents decided that, in order to graduate from high school in 2014, students would have to pass the New England Common Assessment Program, or NECAP, adopted in 2005 by New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. (In Rhode Island, the NECAP is administered in reading, writing, math, and science, although only the reading and math scores are part of the state's diploma system.)

Whatever the federal rules and rigor surrounding them, Mr. Abbott said, state officials feel comfortable using common-core tests as graduation requirements.

"Very early on, that was one of the assurances that we and several other states needed, that we need to develop as a consortium a test that can be used for that purpose," said Mr. Abbott. The state is part of the PARCC consortium.

He acknowledged that there would be a transition period, since the new tests will be administered on a different schedule from the NCAP and will have different proficiency levels. Still, he said, the benefits would outweigh those complications.

Florida this year implemented end-of-course tests in reading and mathematics that students must pass in order to graduate. Those tests will make way for the PARCC-devised assessments in math and English/language arts in 2014-15. The state education department plans to require students to pass the PARCC tests to graduate, although the decision is subject to oversight by state lawmakers and the state school board. (Other end-of-course tests in civics and biology, for example, will remain.)

Vince Verges, the state's PARCC implementation director, highlighted the fact that the tests could mean different things for students in different states.

For example, if the PARCC tests have five proficiency levels, Florida could decide that students scoring at the two highest levels could be labeled "college ready" in those subjects. Students scoring in the middle level, meanwhile, could be allowed to satisfy the graduation requirement for a particular course, but miss out on the college- and career-ready designation.

"When it comes to high school graduation, that will be a state-by-state decision," Mr. Verges said.

In a radio interview last week, Florida Gov. Rick Scott, a Republican, said, "PARCC will make sure we're not teaching to a test," pointing out that the assessments would be "diagnostic" for students, the *Miami Herald* reported.

But the use of newer, more-rigorous tests as graduation requirements could have an especially negative impact on minority students, said Robert Rothman, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which advocates high school policies that promote college and career success.

"These standards are, in many cases, higher than existing state standards, particularly with exit exams, which were traditionally pegged to lower standards than other state tests," Mr. Rothman said.

Changing Course

Passing rates on students' first attempts on exit exams across various states tend to be well above 50 percent. In Minnesota, for example, 80 percent of students passed the exit exam in reading on their first attempt in the 2011-12 school, CEP reports, and 92 percent did so on the writing test. However, the first-attempt passing rate in math was only 58 percent.

Georgia is phasing out its comprehensive exit exam in favor of end-of-course tests, and students who started high school in the 2011-12 school year won't have to pass the exit exam (the Georgia High School Graduation Test) to graduate. However, they will still be required to pass the state's high school writing test.

But the PARCC exams will be used as end-of-course tests in English/language arts and math when the assessments become available, and each exam will count for 20 percent of a student's course grade.

Similar to Florida's plan, scoring at high proficiency levels will allow students to avoid remediation in Georgia's state university and technical-college systems.

Georgia has always understood that the common-core assessments were to be designed as end-of-course exams, said Melissa Fincher, the state education department's testing director.

"We will have students that do not pass the course as a result," Ms. Fincher said. "The increased rigor is absolutely a concern. But that didn't influence our decision not to use it as an exit exam."

Alabama is also eliminating exit exams (the class of 2015 will be the last to take them). Its upcoming end-of-course tests for 8th graders and high school students will be based on the **ACT QualityCore program**, not the common-core assessments, and won't count toward students' final grades.

"The [common-core] assessments seemed too far out in the future and with too many elements of the unknown for us," said Sherrill Parris, the deputy superintendent of public instruction, although the state will implement the common-core math standards this year and the English/language-arts standards in the 2013-14 school year. "We've separated our assessment work from the accountability work," she said.

On the Fence

Some states haven't decided whether to use the common-core tests for graduation purposes.

In California, for example, schools Superintendent Tom Torlakson is set to deliver his recommendations to the state legislature this fall on how those exams should be used.

Students in the class of 2015 and beyond in Washington state will have to pass five exams—including three end-of-course ones—to graduate, while students in previous classes must pass three, including one end-of-course test, said state department spokesman Nathan Olson. State legislators are to decide next year whether students must also pass the two Smarter Balanced tests to graduate.

The CEP study reports that 14 states allow students to take modified or alternative exit exams, while eight allow for students to earn alternative diplomas, although those are not always equivalent to regular degrees.

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