APPENDIX

New Jersey Joint Committee on the Public Schools
December 6, 2022
Comments on State Assessments, Equity, and Accountability

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Good afternoon Senator Cryan and Assemblywoman Jasey, and honorable members of the Joint Committee.

My comments today are based on almost 29 years in education, 14 of which I spent as a teacher, assistant principal, director of curriculum, middle school principal and assistant superintendent. For almost the last 15 years I have been a professor of education leadership, management, and policy here in New Jersey, conducting research on curriculum and assessment at the local, state, national, and international levels. I have also been a Visiting Professor at two universities in Italy where I lecture on international testing and education policy. I am also currently the National Research Professor in Residence for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and I assist them in conducting some of their national studies.

I've been the Researcher at the Year for the College of Education at my university twice, had my research recognized by the United States Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, several of my books on education policy have won national awards, and I was given the Outstanding Scholarship award from the Kappa Delta Pi International education honor society. I have provided testimony on issues related to curriculum and assessment in several states, including to this committee in May of 2019. To date, I've published 8 books on education policy and over 125 articles and conducted dozens upon dozens of research presentations and mainstream speaking engagements. My testimony includes information that has been previously published in peer reviewed academic journals.

I forwarded the committee two articles that go into more detail about my comments and also present a plan of what we could be doing instead.

Background

In addition to the federally mandated testing, New Jersey continues to voluntarily administer the Start Strong and the high school exist exams, making New Jersey students some of the most tested students in the country. Overall, the large body of results on the usefulness of standardized tests suggest they are blunt instruments and inaccurate measures of the quality of teaching and learning that take place in schools and they do nothing to address inequality of achievement, described by some as the achievement gap.

The achievement gap itself is an offensive term that suggests there is something wrong with students, specifically students of color and students from poverty because those are the students

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who are always identified as having a gap. The term suggests that those students lack something that Caucasian student have.

The achievement gap is a distraction – it is a symptom of a much larger problem that exists in our society: The enactment of policies that favor one group over others- policies that create, by design, inequalities of opportunity. These include tax policies that widen income inequality, housing policies that segregate communities, labor policies that keep specific groups of people on the margins, and even our own school funding policies like S2 that have clearly hurt students from poverty by denying their school districts of the funding they need to provide equitable education.

Unfortunately, standardized tests, whether they be high school exist exams, or any other standardized test, have no history of closing opportunity gaps, achievement gaps, or any other gaps. If they did, New Jersey would not have any gaps, as we have had high school exit exams for more than three decades and annual standardized testing of some form or another for just as long. Surely 30 years should be long enough for us to know whether an education reform intervention works, shouldn't it? Based on the results from the last 30 years, standardized testing has not closed any gaps.

Standardized Tests Measure Student Background Characteristics

Standardized test results do not accurately tell what or how well students learn, or how much they know about a specific topic. The results tell us more about the social and economic conditions in which students live and grow than what they know and can do.

For example, colleagues and I and other researchers have conducted a series of studies in states such as New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Iowa, Michigan, Virginia, and Ohio, in which the results from standardized tests were predicted at the school and district levels by knowing only a few demographic factors found in the U.S. Census data about the community and families served by schools (e.g. See Tienken, Colella, Angelillo, Fox, McCahill, & Wolfe, 2017). The tests simply cannot accurately measure how much a student has learned. We have known this for over 100 years when these types of tests were first adopted.

That is because the tests are picking up the noise from students' lives, not their potential as human beings, not how much learn, not the kind of people they are, not their hopes, passions, and interests. This is all explained by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979).

To be clear, this doesn't mean that money determines how much students can learn. In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Study after study demonstrate that students from poverty learn as much in a school year than students not in poverty – they just start at a different place and standardized tests are not measuring what they know. So, if everyone is in a race, and they all run at relatively the same speed, yet one group starts 30 yards behind, it is not hard to see who will always be in the front.

Though some proponents of standardized assessments claim that scores can be used to measure year-to-year academic growth, we've found that there's simply too much noise in the scores to be useful indicators of learning or teaching. In fact, the inventor of the Student Growth Percentile (SGP) used right here in New Jersey, Damien Betebenner stated as much in his September 2011 article, – yet here we are, still using them and still arguing over the facts.

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New Jersey's state test scores track very closely to the per capita income of New Jersey's communities- very closely. In fact, there is an almost perfect correlation between the Start Strong results for each school and a community's economic classification as there are with the high school exit exams and the annual state tests. When looking at the results on a bar graph, the bars look like a staircase. As community wealth rises, tests scores rise. How could it be that the quality of hundreds of schools just so happens to correlate to the per capita income of their towns? Are the teachers in poorer towns incrementally worse teachers? The research-based answer is no, it's just that standardized test results are fundamentally flawed- they are driven by out of school factors.

Nationally known tests like the SAT suffer from the same issues. For example, there is about a 150-point difference between the scores of students living in families making $40,000 a year and those making $80,000 a year and almost a 300 point difference between that same family making $40,000 a year and a family making $180,000. We have a lot of both types of families in New Jersey.

Although some might not want to accept it, over time, assessments made by teachers are better indicators of student achievement than standardized tests. For example, high school GPA, derived from teacher assessments, is a better predictor of first-year college success and four-year persistence than the SAT – that is according to the College Board's own data from all SAT takers (College Board, 2019). Also, high school GPA is less discriminatory against students from poverty and students of color than the SAT.

Furthermore, standardized tests are not diagnostic. A test must have a minimum of 20-25 questions per skill to be considered diagnostic (Frisbie, 1988; Tanner, 2001). Standardized tests simply cannot offer that many questions without taking over a month to administer.

Why Standardized Tests Measure Student Background

But why do standardized tests end up measuring a student's background instead of knowledge and skills? Because of the way they are designed.

Most standardized tests are heavily text-based; the tests require a lot of reading, even in the mathematics sections. The main problem with text-heavy standardized tests is with the contexts and situations of the questions that rely on life experiences and background knowledge to answer them. In many cases, standardized tests include reading passages and question contexts or situations that are not universally common, especially to students from poverty and students who did not grow up in the United States. State tests and other standardized assessments have included questions that use passages, contexts, or situations based on a famous violinist, visits to a state park, pioneer life in the 1800s, ecology and environmental topics, life on the farm, space exploration, travel and vacations, contemporary suburban life, roller coasters, life in Japan, and other contexts and topics that require students to have varied life experiences and background knowledge to successfully answer the questions.

A well-known experiment with middle school students, known as the Baseball Study, demonstrated the effect of background knowledge on reading achievement (Recht & Leslie, 1988). Students in the experiment read a fictional story that narrated a portion of a baseball game. The researchers then asked students to complete an assessment. The researchers found that regardless of reading ability, students with more background knowledge of baseball scored higher on the assessment.

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Similar research on the effect of background knowledge on student achievement was conducted with 3,534 high school students (O'Reilly et al., 2019). The authors found a strong positive relationship and advantage among students with background knowledge of a topic and student achievement. The more background knowledge you had, the better you did on the test.

Standardized Tests are not Accurate for English Language Learners

Beyond the fact that reading a test in a foreign language will cause the test results for English language learners to be compromised, many of the passages and contexts in the questions on the tests include colloquial language, idioms, slang, and white middle class cultural situations, making them difficult for students who have not grown up here. Academic language proficiency typically can take between 4 and 7 years to acquire, and in some cases, becoming fully proficient in a language can take as long as 10 years (Cook et al., 2011). Nearly 32% of English language learners live in poverty, which, like other students living in poverty, can limit the variety in their life experiences as well as limit their collateral language learning (Duffin, 2022).

Standardized Tests Disadvantage Students with Individualized Education Programs

As a group, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) score lower on state standardized tests and national standardized tests. This is due, in part, to the fact that the format of the questions and skills found on standardized tests do not align with the students' instructional methods, formats, and skills found in the IEPs.

By law, special education services are required to be individualized with the methods, skills, and knowledge that best meet a student's learning needs based on the specific disability or disabilities being addressed. Standardized test questions are one-size-fits-all models, meant to be mass produced and mass scored as quickly and economically efficient as possible. The tests are not customized in content or administration to the specific needs of each student's IEP. Standardized testing for a student with an IEP makes as little sense as having a left-handed person create a writing sample in cursive with his right hand and then making a determination about the quality and skill of his handwriting and his readiness for college and careers based on that sample.

Using standardized tests results for high stakes decisions do little to inform a system of education and they ensure that certain groups of students will have to jump through more hoops and pay a higher price to graduate than other groups of students. Again, students who need the most, get the least, and do more work than everyone else. How that is equitable is beyond my comprehension. It is time to change New Jersey's testing system.

Accountability 3.0: Assessment to Inform Learning

The following comments come directly from my article that appeared in the Kappa Delta Pi Record and was distributed to the Committee.

At the end of the day, this entire argument over high school exist exams comes down to accountability. In its most basic sense, education accountability at the state level is about answering the questions, *How is the school doing and are students learning?* To fully answer that question, a comprehensive accountability program should address how well schools address the economic,

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social-emotional, socio-civic and avocational interests/hobbies of students (Dewey, 2016). This type of accountability requires a layered system that provides multiple measures and data points. The data points would be captured from the district, state, and regional accreditation layers.

The District Layer

The first layer of the comprehensive accountability system resides at the school district level. School districts should be accountable for assembling a portfolio of district-wide indicators that provide information on how well students are developing academically, socio-civically, and avocationally. The district level is ideal for providing in-depth information because districts can draw upon the many types of teacher-made assessments to help paint a picture of student development.

Districts can use high-quality, teacher-designed, assessments that foster effective teaching methods. Examples include assessing reading levels through running records and readers' workshop formats, writing prompts, literary analyses, and problem-based assessments that include socio-civic concepts and use of mathematics. Schools also can be judged on the types of avocational opportunities (clubs, hobbies, and organizations) they offer and how many students take advantage of those pursuits or have a hobby activity outside of school.

Existing Models

The New York Performance Standards Consortium is a group of almost 40 public schools that has developed authentic and problem-based assessments in areas such as higher-order thinking, writing, mathematical problem-solving, technology use, science research, appreciation and performance in the arts, service learning, and career skills. The schools use outside experts from universities and the community, along with the teachers, to audit assessment quality and results, review student work, and provide real-world feedback to students.

A clear framework for a district layer accountability structure already exists. The program known as the Nebraska School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) was first implemented in Nebraska during the 2000–2001 school year under former Nebraska Commissioner of Education Doug Christensen (Dappen and Isernhagen, 2005). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2005) called it the "nation's most innovative assessment system" (p. 13).

The program operated successfully until the 2009 school year when the political winds changed and an NCLB-friendly state legislature changed to an all commercial, standardized, test–based system. But the framework, including state policy documents, assessments, and protocols still exist; and state education leaders could easily reinvigorate the system without having to reinvent the accountability wheel.

The State Layer

The second layer involves the state department of education, in which state personnel serve a three-part role: (a) assessor, (b) auditor, and (c) professional developer. In the role of assessor, the state would administer low-stakes, nonintrusive, off-the-shelf standardized assessments of basic skills such as arithmetic and reading comprehension in grades 3-8 and high school. Such tests can be administered in 30 or 45 minutes, be finished in one day, and are inexpensive to administer and

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score. The results would carry little weight in the overall accountability system, but they would satisfy the federal ESSA testing requirement for compliance purposes.

The more important roles for state education personnel are those of auditor and professional developer. State personnel provide and/or facilitate job-embedded professional development for teachers on quality assessment design, problem-based activity development, and scoring protocols and processes. State personnel also provide an auditing system in which they audit a percentage of district-level accountability assessments to maintain quality control of the scoring processes.

National Accreditation Layer

The final layer is the capstone of the multidimensional accountability system: accreditation from third-party regional accreditation organizations. For instance, the process used by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (2014) includes 12 components that cover all aspects of education at the school level: school mission, governance and leadership, school improvement planning, finances, facilities, system organization and staff, health and safety, information resources, educational program, assessment and evidence of student learning, student services, and student life and student activities.

National accreditation involves a comprehensive, multi-year process of intensive self-study by the school and district, a rigorous external review capped by a multi-day visitation by an independent team of accreditation auditors, and a detailed visitation report written by the team.

Accreditation looks at how schools are functioning on a broad range of components that affect all areas of schooling. When compared to national accreditation, the current system of QSAC review seems to be nothing more than bureaucratic hairspray to make an otherwise ineffective process look good.

Closing Argument

The time is right to revise New Jersey's ESSA plan to downplay the role of standardized test results and develop a multi-layer system of accountability to inform teaching and learning.

A three-layered approach to accountability provides triangulated data points from which to inform all areas of the education process. The layered approach brings a sense of balance in which one indicator cannot make or break the rating of a school district. The entire structure acts to provide feedback about school quality to the public and provides actionable formative data that school personnel can use for more evidence-informed school enhancement efforts.

Thank you for your time and Happy Holidays.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

ISSN: (Print) 1940-4476 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/umle20

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To cite this article: Christopher H. Tienken, Anthony Colella, Christian Angelillo, Meredith Fox, Kevin R. McCahill & Adam Wolfe (2017) Predicting Middle Level State Standardized Test Results Using Family and Community Demographic Data, RMLE Online, 40:1, 1-13, DOI: 10.1080/19404476.2016.1252304

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2016.1252304

Published online: 05 Dec 2017.

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RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

2017 • Volume 40 • Number 1 ISSN 1940-4476

Predicting Middle Level State Standardized Test Results Using Family and Community Demographic Data

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Abstract

The use of standardized test results to drive school administrator evaluations pervades education policymaking in more than 40 states. However, the results of state standardized tests are strongly influenced by non-school factors. The models of best fit (n = 18) from this correlational, explanatory, longitudinal study predicted accurately the percentage of middle school students scoring proficient or above on the New Jersey state-mandated standardized tests in mathematics and language arts for grades 6–8 during the years 2010, 2011, and 2012 for 70% to 78% of the schools in the statewide samples (n = 292 to 311), using only family and community demographic variables from the U.S. Census. Just three demographic variables, (a) percentage of families in a community with income over $200,000 a year, (b) percentage of people in a community in poverty, and (c) percentage of people in a community with bachelor's degrees, predicted results accurately in

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14/18 of the models. The findings suggest that state standardized test results are not as objective and transparent as advertised by state and federal department of education officials. Some middle level school administrators might be getting rewarded or punished based on factors that they do not influence.

Keywords: principal evaluation, high stakes testing, education reform, accountability, middle school assessment

The federally implemented Race to the Top (RTTT) grant program and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) waiver initiative increased the use of student results from state-mandated standardized tests of mathematics and language arts to evaluate the effectiveness of school administrators in most states. The RTTT competitive grant program, funded under the 2009 American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), required states to submit applications for funding that were evaluated based on six broad categories of criteria. The Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL) category was worth the most credit in the application with 138 possible points (United States Department of Education, 2009, p. 3).

One subcategory of GTL, Improving Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Based on Performance, carried the most weight within the category and was worth 58 points (United States Department of Education, 2009, p. 3). "Students' results from standardized state assessments to make determinations about principal effectiveness" was a key component of the category (United States Department of Education, 2009, p. 9). The student results from state-mandated tests aligned to college- and career-ready standards formed the basis for school administrator evaluations in many states, and these evaluations could trigger career-changing decisions about school administrators' compensation, retention, promotion, tenure, and certification (United States Department of Education, 2009).

Similar conditions applied to public school administrators in states granted an NCLB waiver by the Secretary of Education under the waiver program. The parameters for teacher and principal evaluation found in NCLB waivers tracked closely to the criteria set forth in RTTT as many of the previously granted NCLB waiver policies used student results from state-mandated tests as the linchpin of school administrator accountability.

Although the rule changes in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) renewal legislation nullified the Secretary of Education's ability to grant waivers, new rules maintain a focus on school administrator effectiveness. State education agency officials have the latitude to continue with test-based school administrator accountability policies and may continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

The existing literature about evaluating middle level administrators based on student test results suggests the practice is tenuous at best. There exist a myriad of out-of-school factors that influence the lives of middle level students that require administrators to divide their time among initiatives aimed at cognitive, social, and emotional factors (NMSA, 2010; Wiles and Bondi, 1981). Standardized test results cannot capture the complexities of the influence middle level administrators may have on the lives of students.

Common Practice

Education officials and governors from more than 40 states essentially volunteered their public school students, parents, teachers, and school administrators to participate in various standardized testing programs that met the requirements set forth in the RTTT grant application and other state-developed accountability guidelines. The mandated tests must align to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) in mathematics and English language arts, or other state-adopted curriculum standards that conformed to the college and career readiness definitions and mandates set forth in RTTT.

According to the RTTT guidelines, former NCLB waiver requirements still in effect, and requirements set forth in ESSA, data generated from the student results on state-mandated assessments of math and English language arts will be used to evaluate school administrator performance in the states granted either NCLB waivers or RTTT grants and as part of ESSA (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2015).

The Study

New Jersey was awarded a RTTT grant and was the recipient of an NCLB waiver. State officials decided to continue to evaluate school administrators based (in part) on the results from state standardized tests as a component of New Jersey's ESSA application. Middle level administrators in New Jersey, like school administrators in approximately 40 other states, found themselves being

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judged in part by student test results from state-mandated tests of mathematics and language arts.

New Jersey is home to over 300 middle schools or schools that house middle level grades 6–8. Thus, middle level principals and assistant principals constitute a large portion of the school administrators working in New Jersey and form an interesting convenience sample from which to examine various influences of RTTT and ESSA evaluation guidelines on the evaluation of middle level administrator effectiveness.

Research Problem

We were struck by provisions embedded in two of the RTTT grant requirements related to the procedures that must be used to grant tenure and remove school administrators:

> (c) Whether to grant tenure and/or full certification (where applicable) to teachers and principals using rigorous standards and streamlined, transparent, and fair procedures; and (d) Removing ineffective tenured and untenured teachers and principals after they have had ample opportunities to improve, and ensuring that such decisions are made using rigorous standards and streamlined, transparent, and fair procedures. (p. 9)

Furthermore, the language about principal evaluation embedded in ESSA seems to have been influenced by the RTTT guidelines. For example, Section 2103, Local Use of Funds, subsection (a)(3)(A)(i) states that ESSA funds can be used by states for "developing or improving a rigorous, transparent, and fair evaluation and support system for teachers, principals, or other school leaders that is based in part on evidence of student achievement."

We took interest in the fact that the RTTT guidelines and ESSA language included the requirement for school administrator evaluation procedures that are transparent and fair. The requirements for transparent and fair procedures conflict with some results from existing literature that call into question the use of standardized test results to make important decisions about children and educators (e.g., Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Specifically, results from previous predictive studies suggest that the percentage of students in a school or district who will score proficient or above on state standardized tests in language arts and mathematics at the district level can be predicted, with a good deal of accuracy, by using only community- and family-level demographic variables found in U.S. census data (e.g., Darnell, 2015; Maylone, 2002; Sackey, 2014; Tienken, 2016).

Results from most of the previous quantitative studies that used algorithms to predict the percentages of students who scored proficient or above on state tests were cross-sectional in nature, explaining only one year in time, and looked at the district-level data (e.g., Sackey, 2014). Although district-level predictive studies provide important insights into how non-school factors can reflect on ratings and rankings of teachers, school administrators, and school districts, they have limitations. Such studies do not provide insights into how predictable state test results are at the individual school level over time or how non-school factors can influence evaluations of school administrator effectiveness.

There has been increased use of test results to judge school-level administrators, yet little is known about the influence of family and community demographic variables on the percentage of students who score proficient or above on state tests, at the school level of analysis, over the course of multiple years in the middle level grades. Middle level administrators constitute a substantial proportion of the public school administration corps in New Jersey and the United States, yet there is no quantitative, longitudinal literature since the inception of the CCSS that has directly addressed this issue at the middle level.

Middle Level Context

The middle grades are characterized by many social, emotional, and cognitive changes in children. According to information presented in *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), middle level students undergo a host of physical and environmental experiences.

> It is a time when young people experience puberty, when growth and development is more rapid than any other developmental stage except that of infancy. Dramatic physical changes are accompanied by the capacity to have sexual relations and reproduce. It is a time, too, of emotional peaks and valleys. (p. 7)

Given the focus on developmentally appropriate practices and social and emotional development found in the classic and recent middle level literature, it seems to us that middle level administrators, more so than administrators in elementary school and high school, must spend a considerable amount of

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leadership time on tasks not directly related to academics, but no less important (Beane, 1990; Lounsbury, 1991; Mann, 2013).

The middle level administrator is expected to be more than a top-down manager who is single-mindedly focused on a narrow sliver of test-based content in the language arts and mathematics. In sum, the middle level administrator position is a multifaceted job that requires multifaceted success criteria, not a single standardized test score (NMSA, 2010; Wiles and Bondi, 1981).

Purpose and Questions

Our purpose for this study was to explain the accuracy of family and community demographic variables as predictors of the percentage of students who scored proficient or above, at the school level, on state-mandated tests of mathematics and language arts in grades six, seven, and eight over the three-year testing cycles of 2010 through 2012.

We guided the explanatory study with two questions: (1) How well do family- and community-level demographic variables, found in the 2010 U.S. census data, predict the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on New Jersey state tests of mathematics and language arts for the testing years 2010 through 2012? (2) How accurate a measure are state standardized test results, at the school level, of principal or assistant principal effectiveness?

Conceptual Framework

Family characteristics, such as wealth factors and family structure, and the characteristics of the community in which a student lives, such as the percentage of community members who are unemployed or the percentage of people in a community with a high school diploma, are important factors that can and have been used in past studies to predict academic achievement on standardized tests (e.g., Darnell, 2015; Maylone, 2002). In general, there exists a broad category of family demographic factors that influence and predict levels of achievement. Some factors are families headed by two parents, family income levels that exceed the federal poverty line, and a parent employed securely and full time (College Board, 2012; Davis-Kean, 2005; Dawson, 1991; Weinberg, 2001).

Some researchers use eligibility for free and reduced lunch as the proxy for socioeconomic status (SES) of individual students or a proxy for the overall SES of the students served by an entire school or school district. Sirin (2005) conducted one of the largest meta-analyses of the influence of SES on student outcomes and found that approximately 20% of the studies conducted between 1990 and 2000 used free and reduced lunch as the only variable to describe SES at the individual student, school, or school district levels.

Although student eligibility for free and reduced lunch is one variable that can help provide a general description of student SES or overall family human capital, Harwell and LaBeau (2010) presented an argument against using the variable of free and reduced lunch status as the sole indicator of student family capital, school SES, or school district SES. They suggested that student eligibility for free and reduced lunch is not as precise an indicator of overall student or community SES as some researchers might think. To overcome this potential limitation, we used multiple variables from the U.S. census data to create a multidimensional view of the family and community characteristics that influence student achievement on standardized tests.

Some researchers use the term "human capital" to refer to the broad collection of people's skills, experiences, and abilities that allow them to potentially become more economically successful and act with greater skill (Becker, 1993; Coleman, 1988). In the context of our study, the student's family is the closest level of human capital that the student experiences and that directly influences him or her. We synthesized from the existing literature that students who live in families with more human capital more frequently have access to academically-oriented life experiences, collateral learning experiences that extend school learning, and more supports to help them connect to and capitalize on academic content embedded in formal and collateral education opportunities (Scherrer, 2014). Thus, students with more family human capital often perform better on standardized tests of traditional academic achievement (Tienken, 2011). Family demographic factors, such as income, living in a single- versus a double-parent household, or the percentage of female households in poverty, are factors that help describe the level of human capital in a family. Those demographic factors can be used as proxies for the human capital experienced by the student.

The community in which a student lives also plays an important complimentary function, and in some ways

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has a reciprocal relationship with the human capital of a family. We connect the community demographics to "social capital" as described by Coleman (1988):

> Social capital is defined by its functions. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. ... A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others. (p. 98)

Formal and informal interactions and relationships within a community create social capital at the community level (Coleman, 1988; The World Bank, 2011). The types of professionals who live in a community, the community groups that exist for adults, structured community recreation programs for children, religious groups, libraries, services for senior citizens and disabled residents, arts commissions, local social advocacy groups, quality and affordable daycare and preschool opportunities, and other similar resources intersect to contribute to the overall social capital of a community (Becker, 1993; Putnam, 2000).

When children grow up in communities with access to high levels of social capital, it may increase the chances those children and their families will interact with and develop formal and informal relationships with people who have high levels of human capital. Therefore, children have the potential to be exposed to more academic ideas and life experiences that influence their learning in school directly and indirectly through the people that they interact with on a daily basis.

Children living in communities with higher levels of human and social capital are more likely to have access to varied life experiences that build academic background knowledge. They are more likely to come to school with existing academic knowledge that they can use to connect their life experiences to new content and effectively transfer ideas from school to other situations (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Access to varied types and quality of social and human capital influences student learning in traditional classroom situations where children must connect the content of the classroom to their life experiences. Therefore, community social capital and family human capital may play a significant role in ultimate achievement on standardized tests (Scherrer, 2014).

Our connecting of family and community demographic variables to human and social capital as a tool to predict standardized tests results is situated within the broader theoretical framework of ecological systems theory, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979). He posited that children exist in an ecological system, and various layers of the system exert influence upon them. Family, school, peer groups, and community intersect to directly and indirectly influence behaviors and outcomes of children.

Specifically, ecological systems theory provides support for our thinking because it suggests that key circles of family human capital and community social capital surround children. We conclude that the ecological systems theory helps explain how those circles of influence can hinder or encourage academic achievement and thus influence results on standardized tests. We hypothesized that a combination of the indicators related to family human capital and community social capital can predict student test results at the school level because the school is within the ecological system of children and is thus influenced by the other factors within the system.

Ecological systems theory also comports with research-based perspectives of poverty that suggest the importance of not only providing children the formal education resources necessary for learning at high levels, but also ensuring the appropriate social supports are in place so that children can make full use of the resources they encounter in formal learning environments. Known as the "capabilities perspective," the line of research suggests students can have varying capabilities to "convert resources into their intended benefits" (Scherrer, 2014, p. 203). The realized output from the resources provided is influenced by the capability of the student to fully utilize the resources as intended.

Factors such as health, stable living situations in which basic needs are met, and access to academically oriented life experiences are necessary to support students connecting to formal curricular content; seeing the lessons learned in school being used in real world situations by others to whom they aspire; applying formal academic content in their everyday lives; and participating in life experiences that extend, enhance, and encourage more learning and increase a child's capability to make the most of school (Kelly,

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2010). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, an important way one can gain an accurate understanding of a child is by considering the various layers of the system in which a child lives and is raised.

The capabilities perspective is another layer that influences learning, and it should be considered when analyzing student achievement patterns. When we view the issue of middle level administrator evaluation via test results through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) and the capabilities perspective, we are left with questions about how the criteria in RTTT, ESSA, and state-level accountability policies related to the use of standardized test scores to evaluate middle level administrators can be transparent and fair.

We proposed to use variables found in the U.S. census data that represent various aspects of human and social capital at the family and community levels, and the capabilities perspective embedded in EST to predict, within a margin of error, the percentage of students in New Jersey schools serving the middle levels who will score proficient or above on state-mandated assessments in English language arts and mathematics. We drew upon previous works on the topic (Darnell, 2015; Maylone, 2002; Sackey, 2014; Tienken, 2016; Turnamian, 2012) to guide our work.

Significance

We expanded upon previous studies on this topic in three specific areas. First, we constructed a series of hierarchical regression models that extended beyond the district level, to the individual school level, closer to students. Therefore, we could draw conclusions and recommendations related to individual schools (and hence, their principals and assistant principals) regarding how factors within the students' ecological systems related to family human capital and community social capital acted upon student test results, and thus influenced the school administrators' evaluation ratings. Earlier studies were unable to reach to this level of specificity with the school as the unit of analysis.

Second, whereas earlier studies were cross-sectional, using only one year of data, our study was longitudinal and covered three years of data for English language arts and mathematics. We used three years of data at the middle levels in grades sixth through eighth to explain the predictive accuracy of family and community demographic variables.

Finally, this was the first longitudinal study to use family and social capital factors to predict state test results at the middle level since the inception of the CCSS. The results from this study reflect a first look at this issue at this level of detail for middle level administrators.

Methodology

We used a correlational, longitudinal, explanatory design with quantitative methods to complete our study (Johnson, 2001). Such a design is appropriate when the research aims are to (a) identify relationships among independent and dependent variables, and (b) to explain and predict outcomes at one period in time or over time.

Variables

The percentages of students who scored proficient or above at the school level for each of the New Jersey mathematics and language arts state tests in grades six, seven, and eight during the 2010, 2011, and 2012 test administrations constituted the dependent variables. We located 18 independent variables in the census data consistently found in the extant literature related to family human capital and community social capital. We found eight variables related to family human capital and 10 variables related to community social capital (see Table 1).

Sample

The final samples for our study ranged from 292 to 311 schools serving the middle grades, depending on the number of schools that met the sampling requirements (see Table 2). The state of New Jersey consists of 21 counties with approximately 590 operating public school districts within those counties. The types of school categorizations in New Jersey include elementary schools, middle schools, comprehensive high schools, magnet schools, vocational schools, charter schools, and special education schools. The size and grade composition of schools within each district varies across the state. Some school districts house all students from pre-kindergarten (PK) to grade 12, whereas other school districts include only kindergarten through grade six or kindergarten through grade eight. Districts with PK–6 or K–8 do not have high schools within their districts. Instead, regional school districts house high schools that include students from various districts.

To ensure consistent matches between family and community demographic data and the characteristics of the students that attended the schools in grades six,

18X

Table 1
Family Human Capital and Community Social Capital Independent Variables

Family human capital	Community social capital
% families making less than $25,000	% people employed
% families making less than $35,000	% households making less than $25,000
% families making more than $200,000	% households making less than $35,000
% families in poverty for 12 months	% households making more than $200,000
% male only households, no females	% all people under poverty
% female only households, no males	% population with less than 9th grade education
% lone parent households (total)	% population with no high school diploma
% female households in poverty	% population with some college
	% population with a bachelor's degree
	% population with an advanced degree

Table 2
Number of Schools in Each Sample

	Grade 6 ELA	Grade 6 M	Grade 7 ELA	Grade 7 M	Grade 8 ELA	Grade 8 M
2010	311	311	300	300	297	296
2011	308	308	298	299	294	294
2012	305	306	297	297	292	295

seven, and/or eight, the samples met the following criteria:

- Schools that only served grade six and/or grade seven and/or grade eight in one school building in the district during the years 2010, 2011, and 2012;
- Schools that serviced students within their home district only. Regional schools were excluded;
- Schools that were the only school in the district that served grades six, seven, and/or eight;
- Schools that had at least 25 students per middle level grade participate in the administration of the NJASK in English language arts and mathematics who received valid scores and whose town had complete U.S. census data for the 18 home and community variables included in this study.

Samples sizes varied somewhat due to violations of the sampling criteria. For example, in some years, some schools had fewer than 25 students in a grade level take a state test or receive valid data from the state. Small schools with small student populations are common in New Jersey, a state with almost 600 school districts. Variations in the number of schools within the same grade levels in our samples over different years are most often due to variations in student populations within some schools. The sampling criteria also excluded schools in large districts because there were multiple schools that serviced middle level students. Human and social capital demographic data from the community could not be matched precisely to different schools within the same district.

19x

We conducted a priori sample size calculations to ensure the sample sizes were large enough to accommodate working with up to 18 variables. None of our final predictive models included all the variables. Field (2009) recommended the formula 50 + 8(k) for simultaneous multiple regression, with k equaling the total number of predictor variables in the model, to determine an appropriate sample size to detect an effect size of at least .50 at the 95% confidence level and a p value of at least .05. This study included 18 potential predictor variables to represent k. Using Field's formula, we calculated 50 + 8(18) = 194. Therefore, to reach an appropriate effect size and p value equal to or less than .05, we must include at least 194 schools in the study at each grade level and subject. All our sample sizes exceeded the minimum sample sizes required.

Then, we calculated the required sample sizes for hierarchical multiple regression. Green (1991), as cited in Field (2009), recommended 104 + k, where k represents the number of predictor variables to be entered into the model for hierarchical multiple regression. Our sample sizes ranged from 292 to 311 schools and exceeded the minimum requirements for 122 cases to conduct hierarchical linear regression.

Instrumentation

We collected the dependent variables, the percentage of students proficient or above on the mathematics and language arts portions of the state tests from the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) tests administered to grades six, seven, and eight during the 2010 through 2012 school years. State officials mandated the administration of NJASK as an operational assessment in the schools within our sample during the spring months of April and May during the 2010, 2011, and 2012 school years. The NJASK was the assessment New Jersey education officials used to measure student achievement and progress under the requirements of the NCLB Act prior to the first administration of the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment during the 2014–2015 school year.

State officials used the results from the NJASK as part of rating systems for teachers and school administrators. Teachers, administrators, schools, and school districts received ratings as "effective" or "ineffective" based partially on results from the NJASK tests. The NJASK test can be categorized as a high-stakes assessment, given how the results have been used to evaluate teachers and school administrators.

Data Collection

We located the data for the dependent variables from the New Jersey Department of Education's website (NJDOE, 2015). The percentages of students rated proficient and advanced proficient were combined into one total percentage for each subject and year tested. Next, we matched the percentages to corresponding town demographic data from the U.S. Census for the communities served by each school that met our sampling requirements. We retrieved data for the family and community level variables from the American Community Survey section of the U.S. Census (2010) and localized the data with American Factfinder. Finally, we matched town demographic data from the U.S. Census to school assessment data.

Data Analysis

We used two forms of regression as the primary methods to analyze results for each subject area: simultaneous multiple regression (SMR) to narrow down variables and then hierarchical linear regression (HLR) to identify the most efficient statistically significant predictor variables and models of best fit for our predictive algorithms. Considering that the goal was to predict the aggregate performance of a school based on the best predictive model, hierarchical regression analyses was an appropriate strategy. Predictions require the identification of models of best fit, and hierarchical regression is an accepted method to determine such models (Field, 2013).

Prior to running the regressions, we inspected the skewness of the dependent variables to determine whether the data were normally distributed within the 1.00 to –1.00 ranges. All dependent variables except grade seven math 2011 met the assumption of normality. Grade seven math 2011 data had an initial negative skew of –1.167 due to two low, outlier percentages of 29 and 39. Both variables exceeded three standard deviations below the mean, and they met the definition of an outlier. In this case, we used the Winsorizing procedure to substitute the outlier scores with scores of 40 and 50, respectively, which (in our case) were one standard deviation higher than the original percentages (Field, 2013). Winsorizing "involves replacing outliers with the next highest score that is not an outlier" (Field, 2013, p. 198). Winsorizing resulted in normalizing the grade seven math 2011 data within acceptable limits of +/– 1.000.

20x

We next conducted a series of layered analyses for each subject area in each year. First, we created correlation matrices and scatterplots to help develop more refined SMR and HLR models. We reviewed the correlation matrices for relationships between independent and dependent variables and among dependent variables to anticipate possible multicollinearity. We loaded the independent variables into an initial SMR model for each subject within each year. We began to remove variables from the model that were statistically insignificant above .10 or that exhibited initially high levels of multicollinearity above 7.000, then above 4.000, and finally above 3.000.

The process of removing variables was important because to obtain accurate measures of *R*-squared, one must correctly identify predictor variables that correlate strongly with the dependent variable (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003). We attempted to isolate predictor variables so the variance in the criterion could be accounted for only once to ensure that the predictor variables accounted for different proportions of the variance in the criterion variable. Therefore, we sought to refine each model so the predictor variables exhibited low correlations among themselves with variance inflation factors (VIF) below 3.000 (Hinkle et al., 2003). The process of factor elimination and substitution continued until we arrived at two to four predictor variables that maximized *R*-squared in each model.

We placed the statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) predictor variables in highest to lowest rank order based upon beta values to run the hierarchical regression models. The hierarchical regression models allowed us to identify how much influence each specific variable had on the dependent variable. We ran hierarchical models for all grades in both subjects and all three years, and sought the model of best fit in each case. The formal representation of our final regression equation for each model of best fit was $y1 = b0 + (b1Xi) + (b2Xii) + (b3Xiii) + e$, with b representing the unstandardized beta for the predictor variable, X representing the percentage of the variable in the community, and e representing the constant for each model (Field, 2013).

For example, the final predictive model of best fit for the 2010 grade six mathematics data for the Brookside School in the Allendale Boro School District included three variables that represented family human capital and community social capital, and most accurately predicted the percentage of students who achieved proficiency or above: (a) percentage of households in the community with annual income less than $35,000 [% HS<35K], (b) percentage of families in the community with annual income greater than $200,000 [%Fam>200K], and (c) percentage of people in the community with bachelor's degrees [%BA]. We entered the values of those demographic predictors into the predictive algorithm with their unstandardized betas from the regression models, and the constant:

$$y1 = 60.642[\text{constant}] + (0.653 * [\%\text{BA}]) + (0.194 * 37.6[\%\text{Fam} > 200\text{K}],) + (-0.463 * 8.6[\%\text{HS} < 35\text{K}]).$$

In this case, $y1 = 89.90$.

The answer, 89.90, represented the percentage of grade six students at the Brookside School predicted to score proficient or above on the 2010 grade six New Jersey standardized mathematics assessment. The actual percentage of grade six students at the Brookside School who scored proficient or above on the New Jersey standardized mathematics assessment, as reported on the New Jersey State Report Card, was 89.20, a difference of .70%. The standard error of the estimate for the model was 9.60. The standard error of the estimate was used to make final determinations about the accuracy of each prediction. If the prediction was within the margin of error for the model, it was deemed accurate, as was the case of our example.

Findings

The mean percentage of students at the school level scoring proficient or above on the 2010 through 2012 language arts state standardized tests for our models ranged from 64.28 to 73.83. The standard deviations of the means ranged from 13.60 to 18.04. The mean percentage of students at the school level scoring proficient or above on the 2010 through 2012 mathematics state standardized tests ranged from 65.69 to 83.37, and the standard deviations ranged from 10.86 to 16.94 (see Table 3).

The hierarchical regression calculations resulted in 18 models of best fit: one for each grade level and subject in each year 2010 through 2012. We accounted for more than 50% of the variance in the percentages of students scoring proficient or above on the language arts and mathematics portions of the 2010 through 2012 state standardized tests in 16/18 (89%) of our models. The *R*-squared values ranged from .351 for the grade six 2012 math test to .709 for the grade eight 2012 language arts test (see Table 4). The *R*-squared

21X

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Students in Sample Scoring Proficient or Above

	Grade 6 ELA	Grade 6 M	Grade 7 ELA	Grade 7 M	Grade 8 ELA	Grade 8 M
2010	71.43 (14.37)	76.61 (13.62)	73.76 (15.01)	68.49 (15.76)	73.83 (14.90)	66.88 (16.58)
2011	72.41 (13.60)	69.77 (15.67)	68.82 (16.45)	70.11 (15.20)	66.57 (18.04)	68.28 (16.47)
2012	70.77 (15.67)	83.37 (10.86)	66.57 (16.27)	67.85 (15.21)	64.28 (17.96)	65.69 (16.94)

values appear at the top of each row in Table 4, and the standard error of the estimates appears below each *R*-squared value. The standard error of the estimates ranged from 7.79 for the grade six 2011 mathematics model to 10.66 for the grade seven 2011 language arts model.

Each model of best fit produced a set of statistically and practically significant predictor variables. The final set of variables for each model was narrowed from the original 18 to between two and four variables. All the models of best fit included variables related to family human capital and community social capital.

The majority of the models of best fit, 14/18 (78%), excluding 2010 grade six English language arts, 2011 grade six mathematics, 2011 grade seven math, and 2012 grade seven English language arts, included the same three variables: (a) percentage of families in a community with income over $200,000 a year, (b) percentage of people in a community in poverty, and (c) percentage of people in a community with bachelor's degrees. Those three variables accurately predicted results for 78% of our samples.

The 2012 grade seven language arts and 2011 grade six mathematics models excluded the percentage of families in a community with income over $200,000 a year. Thus, 16/18 (89%) of the models included the percentage of people in a community in poverty and the percentage of people in a community with bachelor's degrees.

The 2011 grade seven math model of best fit included the (a) percentage of people in a community with advanced degrees, (b) percentage of people in a community without a high school diploma, and (c) percentage of lone parent households. The 2010 grade six language arts model of best fit included the (a) percentage of households in a community with income over $200,000 a year, (b) percentage of people in a community without a high school diploma, (c) percentage of families in a community living in poverty, and (d) percentage of families headed by a lone parent female.

Finally, we used the unstandardized betas and constants from the statistically significant variables identified in each hierarchical regression models of best fit as part of our predictive algorithms. We predicted accurately (within the standard error of the estimate) the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the New Jersey mandated standardized tests in language arts and mathematics for 70% to 78% of the schools in our samples (see Table 5).

For example, our algorithms for the 2011 grade eight English language arts test and 2011 grade six math tests predicted the school-level percentage of students who scored proficient and above in 78% of the schools

Table 4
R-squared Values for Each Model and the Standard Error of the Estimate

	Grade 6 ELA	Grade 6 M	Grade 7 ELA	Grade 7 M	Grade 8 ELA	Grade 8 M
2010	0.643 8.640	0.482 9.870	0.686 8.380	0.600 9.950	0.707 8.550	0.625 10.140
2011	0.674 7.800	0.514 7.790	0.584 10.66	0.504 10.790	0.669 10.290	0.611 10.260
2012	0.618 9.740	0.351 8.790	0.661 9.700	0.587 10.290	0.709 9.610	0.6480 9.880

22x

Table 5
Percentage of Schools Whose Results Were Predicted Accurately

	Grade 6 ELA	Grade 6 M	Grade 7 ELA	Grade 7 M	Grade 8 ELA	Grade 8 M
2010	75	74	73	72	73	72
2011	70	78	70	76	78	74
2012	74	72	73	75	75	73

in those samples. The algorithms for the 2010 grade six language arts, 2011 grade seven math, and the 2012 grade eight language arts predicted accurately the school-level percentage of students scoring proficient or above for 75% of the schools in those samples (the majority of the middle schools in the state excluding the large urban districts).

Essentially, the results suggest that if we have access to the U.S. Census data for the (a) percentage of families in a community with income over $200,000 a year, (b) percentage of people in a community in poverty, and (c) percentage of people in a community with bachelor's degrees, the probability is high that we can predict the percentage of students in grades six, seven, and eight in each school who will score proficient or above on the New Jersey standardized language arts and mathematics tests.

Conclusions

We interpret the findings from this and prior studies to suggest that using the student results from standardized tests to rate, rank, judge, or evaluate middle level administrators is not "transparent and fair" as required by the RTTT guidelines (United States Department of Education, 2009, p.9) and ESSA requirements. The results raise important issues about fairness and transparency in terms of (a) using results that are influenced strongly by factors outside of school and out of control of the middle level administrator, and (2) using results that can be predicted with a good deal of accuracy by family and community demographic factors. We view the two issues presented above as serious challenges to policies and practices that rely on standardized tests results to rate, rank, judge, or evaluate middle level administrators. We view the issues raised by our results and those of others also as challenges to the claimed scientific objectivity of results from standardized tests.

Provisions within RTTT, ESSA, and hold-over requirements in some state's NCLB waivers that require, encourage, or reward the use of standardized test scores to rank, rate, categorize, or judge the effectiveness of school-level administrators seem fatally flawed. Given the other pressing responsibilities that middle level administrators must attend to, such as the vast physical, social, and emotional changes that occur with students during their middle level years, the use of test results as a determining factor for middle level principal effectiveness seems to run counter to the overall middle level vision and philosophy as describe in *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), and other seminal middle level sources.

The results from our study and previous studies, considered in concert with Bronfenbrenner's EST, suggest policies and programs that mandate test results be used as the deciding factor in the effectiveness of middle level administrators are not grounded in sound science. Standardized test results are simply too unstable, inherently prone to contamination from non-school factors, and not representative of the multifaceted job middle level administrators perform. The results do not accurately reflect the ecosystem that influences students' social and emotional development or their direct or collateral learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The tests provide only blunt measures of a narrow set of skills and cannot capture the nuances of middle level leadership, some of which take years to produce noticeable results, such as social and emotional coaching. In many cases, the results of middle level leadership can never be measured by student test results. For example, do test scores measure students', parents', and teachers' sense of safety and security, their sense of belonging, their hope for the future, or sense of community that exists in a middle level school (Beane, 1990)? Standardized tests cannot measure pride, self-efficacy, resilience, or compassion,

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yet middle level administrators help foster those attributes.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST brings to the forefront the myriad factors that interact to influence learning and combinations of various factors that can influence learning in different and unanticipated ways. The human capital of the family and social capital of the community in which students live and grow are integral parts of the ecology of learning. Family and community capital provide opportunities for formal and collateral learning opportunities and interactions that can enhance or impede achievement on traditional measures of achievement, such as standardized tests (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Community and family development is not within the purview of the school principal. Those are influenced in part by public policy and controlled by political bureaucrats and legislators.

The use of standardized test results to judge middle level administrators belies a simplistic, mechanistic view of the multifaceted worlds of education leadership and child development, and ignores the social, emotional, physiological, physical, and ecological influences that cannot be controlled by school personnel or policies. This type of evaluation scheme seems inherently unfair and opaque. We view those who mandate and enforce middle level administrator evaluation and rating schemes based on student test results (and who claim they are not aware of the issues raised by these results and the results of other studies) as somewhat disingenuous and in dereliction of their duty to children, and in violation of basic professional ethics. We view the continued use of students' results from standardized tests as criteria to determine middle level administrator effectiveness education malpractice.

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Students at an Atlanta elementary school prep for upcoming state standardized tests. AP Photo/David Goldman

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Every year, policymakers across the U.S. make life-changing decisions based on the results of standardized tests.

These high-stakes decisions include, but are not limited to, student promotion to the next grade level, student eligibility to participate in advanced coursework, eligibility to graduate high school and teacher tenure. In 40 states, teachers are evaluated in part based on the results from student standardized tests, as are school administrators in almost 30 states.

However, research shows that the outcomes of standardized tests don't reflect the quality of instruction, as they're intended to. Colleagues and I have conducted studies in New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Iowa and Michigan.

The results show that it's possible to predict the percentages of students who will score proficient or above on some standardized tests. We can do this just by looking at some of the important characteristics of the community, rather than factors related to the schools themselves, like student-teacher ratios or teacher quality.

This raises the possibility that there are serious flaws built into education accountability systems and the decisions about educators and students made within those systems.

Standardized tests

Students' scores on mandated standardized tests have been used to evaluate U.S. educators, students and schools since President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002.

Although more than 20 states had previously instituted state testing in some grade levels by the late 1990s, NCLB mandated annual standardized testing in all 50 states. It required standardized mathematics and English language arts tests in grades three through eight and once in high school. State education officials also had to administer a standardized science test in fourth grade, eighth grade and once in high school.

The Obama administration expanded standardized testing through requirements in the Race to the Top grant program and by funding the development of two national standardized tests related to Common Core State Standards: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC).

Forty-five states initially adopted the Common Core in some form. Approximately 20 are currently part of the PARCC or SBAC consortia. Key portions of Race to the Top applications required states use student test results to evaluate teachers and principals.

Predicting scores

It's already well-established that out-of-school, community demographic and family-level variables strongly influence student achievement on large-scale standardized tests.

For example, median family income is a strong predictor of SAT results. Other factors strongly linked to achievement on state standardized tests include parental education levels, percentage of lone parents in the school community and percentage of families living in poverty in the community.

We decided to see if we could predict standardized test scores based on demographic factors related to the community where a student lived. By looking at three to five community and family demographic variables from U.S. Census data, we have been able to accurately predict the percentages of students who score proficient or above on standardized test scores for grades three through 12. These predictions are made without looking at school district data factors such as school size, teacher experience or per pupil spending.

Our models can identify how much a particular variable affects students' scores. That allows us to identify the most important demographic characteristics as they relate to the test results. For example, by looking at just one characteristic – the percentage of families in a given community living in poverty – we can explain almost 58 percent of the test's score in eighth grade English language arts.

Our most recent study explored three years of test scores from grades six through eight in more than 300 New Jersey schools. We looked at the percentage of families in the community with income over US$200,000 a year, the percentage of people in a community in poverty and the percentage of people in a community with bachelor's degrees. We found that we could predict the percent of students who scored proficient or above in 75 percent of the schools we sampled.

An earlier study that focused on fifth grade test scores in New Jersey predicted the results accurately for 84 percent of schools over a three-year period.

Smarter assessments

To be clear, this doesn't mean that money determines how much students can learn. That couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, our results demonstrate that standardized tests don't really measure how much students learn, or how well teachers teach, or how effective school leaders lead their schools. Such tests are blunt instruments that are highly susceptible to measuring out-of-school factors.

Though some proponents of standardized assessment claim that scores can be used to measure improvement, we've found that there's simply too much noise. Changes in test scores from year to year can be attributed to normal growth over the school year, whether the student had a bad day or feels sick or tired, computer malfunctions, or other unrelated factors.

According to the technical manuals published by the creators of standardized assessments, none of the tests currently in use to judge teacher or school administrator effectiveness or student achievement have been validated for those uses. For example, none of the PARCC research, as provided by PARCC, addresses these issues directly. The tests are simply not designed to diagnose learning. They are simply monitoring devices, as evidenced by their technical reports.

The bottom line is this: Whether you're trying to measure proficiency or growth, standardized tests are not the answer.

Though our results in several states have been compelling, we need more research on a national level to determine just how much test scores are influenced by out-of-school factors.

If these standardized test results can be predicted with a high level of accuracy by community and family factors, it would have major policy implications. In my opinion, it suggests we should jettison the entire policy foundation that uses such test results to make important decisions about school personnel and students. After all, these factors are outside the control of students and school personnel.

Although there are ideological disputes about the merits of standardized tests results, the science has become clearer. The results suggest standardized test results tell more about the community in which a student lives than the amount the student has learned or the academic, social and emotional growth of the student during a school year.

Although some might not want to accept it, over time, assessments made by teachers are better indicators of student achievement than standardized tests. For example, high school GPA, which is based on classroom assessments, is a better predictor of student success in the first year of college than the SAT.

This change would go a long way to providing important information about effective teaching, compared with a test score that has little to do with the teacher.

NJPSA
NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

NJPSA Testimony on Student Assessment in NJ
Before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
Arlene Rogo, Principal of Neptune High School
December 6, 2022

Good afternoon Chairwoman Jasey and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools. I am Arlene Rogo, the Principal of Neptune High School and the current President of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association. I am a career educator, serving my 41st year in public education. I have served as a teacher, supervisor, assistant principal and principal and have leadership experience in schools at all grade levels from elementary to middle and high school. It is this experience, and the perspective of NJPSA members across the state that I bring to this discussion today on the subject of student assessment in education.

As an instructional leader at the school building level, I see first-hand, the importance of student assessment as an integral part of the instructional process. To be an effective tool, our assessments must be linked to New Jersey's Learning Standards, our local curriculum and strong instructional practice in the classroom. Just as a doctor relies upon blood tests, MRIs and other pieces of functional data to diagnose a patient, educators rely on multiple data points, including assessment results, multiple teacher observations and more to identify learning issues and respond appropriately. Teacher engagement and first-hand observation of students within the instructional context, provides critical information to the student learning process. These factors, assessment data, a strong curriculum, and strong instructional practices, provide the key ingredients to student learning.

However, the use of assessments must be balanced with other critical factors in the learning process including such basics as the amount of instructional time available during the school day. The amount of instructional time has been significantly threatened by new curriculum mandates and assessment requirements. NJPSA members believe we must be strategic in our use of state assessments, streamlining and targeting student assessment to appropriate times within the school calendar and avoiding duplication and over testing.

This fall for example, the NJDOE suddenly required all public-school districts to administer Start Strong Assessments across grade levels and subject areas. This surprise requirement provided little "added value" in information to school districts since all districts had just administered more comprehensive state assessments to students a few months earlier, even though we had not received the test results! It also interfered with every educator's goal of welcoming back our students and setting a positive

29x

learning climate for students who have experienced too much upheaval, trauma and interruptions in their instructional time.

So, despite these challenges, why is assessment so important? The benefits depend upon the type of assessment and its purpose. Let me share a building leader's perspective.

Teachers utilize assessments regularly within their classrooms to understand the level of student understanding of learning content and their students' ability to apply subject matter content in a problem – solving context. This information assists the teacher in refining his/her instructional approach, modifying curricula if needed, setting the pace of instruction, and providing instructional assistance and interventions to individual students as needed. Learning challenges can be shared with parents who can work in partnership with the teacher to assist the student. **These teacher-developed diagnostic assessments are among the most important and effective tools we use to assist students in their learning throughout the school year.**

School districts also utilize a broader system of benchmark assessments to review the progress in student learning as the year progresses. Again, these assessments provide important information to educators, students, and parents on the learning levels of individual students, but benchmark assessments provide important data on instruction across classrooms and grade levels. This information is analyzed locally by teachers and instructional leaders during the school year to fine-tune instructional practices, pacing, curriculum, and school-based interventions.

State level, standardized assessments are another component of our assessment system that seek to measure not only student learning growth, **but also school system accountability under federal legal requirements.** Our NJSLA (NJ Student Learning Assessment) tests are administered annually to all public schools within the state in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school in language arts, math, and science. These assessments provide comparative information of student performance across subgroups of students within and across school districts, identify achievement gaps, and "red flag" the need to effectively respond to such gaps. These test results are also utilized to identify districts "in need of improvement" where there is a real need for systemic support and assistance to address comprehensive learning gaps within the district. These are important functions of system accountability, but the results have no "high stakes" outcome for an individual student who scores below expectations.

Further, New Jersey utilizes these test results and other student performance measures in the evaluation of individual teachers and principals under our educator evaluation law, TEACH NJ (2012). Since the pandemic put a temporary hold on state testing requirements in 2020 and 2021, the use of outdated standardized test score data to evaluate current educator performance is questionable as a fair measure of an educator's performance. This is an issue that requires further consideration.

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One final component of New Jersey's formal assessment landscape is the statutory requirement that high school students pass the NJGPA, our legislatively mandated "do or die" graduation exit examination. By law and practice, students who do not pass the NJGPA assessment cannot receive a high school diploma unless they demonstrate proficiency through an alternative portfolio process that is stressful, labor intensive and time consuming. The stated purpose of the exam is to hold students individually accountable for meeting the learning standards mandated during the high school experience. The test requirement also arguably provides a level of assurance to the public, our business community and policy makers that a high school diploma in our state signifies that a student has in fact met the core proficiency marks in key subject areas to earn a state diploma.

The reality is that current high school seniors have demonstrated proficiency at other points in their high school career. They also have a lot on their plates.

If intending to pursue higher education, they are taking the SAT, ACT (and completing college applications during their senior year), assessments that are more comprehensive and challenging. If moving on to the world of work, they may be taking equally challenging professional licensing exams or beginning their job search. They must meet state graduation standards by passing all required courses, meeting attendance requirements, and meeting any local graduation requirements in place in their school district. They have also been assessed over the course of their educational career in each course and classroom and on all mandated state assessments.

NJPSA, as an association is currently reviewing A-4639 (Caputo, Jasey, McKnight), legislation that would eliminate the high school graduation assessment requirement in the context of today's learning environment in New Jersey. As we seek broad input from our members and review the educational research, we will share our recommendations as the legislation moves forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to address how student assessment is used in New Jersey schools. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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Testimony to the NJ Joint Committee on the Public Schools by Deborah Cornavaca, Director of Government Relations NJEA December 6, 2022

Thank you very much for the time you are taking today to consider the topic of assessments in schools, with a focused lens the high school exit exam. While I doubt you will be surprised by the position of the NJEA, it is worth noting that we are joined by a chorus of professional organizations and advocates whom we hold in high regard. There is a national awakening on the issues of high stakes assessments that has come from decades of work – and we hope and expect that New Jersey will act to address the high school exit exam in the coming months.

Let me start with the reminder that our members assess their students all the time. Sometimes, in a discreet way – a one on one lesson where the student does not even know they are being assessed. Sometimes it is a quiz and exam, a graded essay or paper. There are a multitude of ways to assess, and we support the appropriate use of the vast majority of them.

As any educator will tell you, assessments are an integral part of the teaching and learning process. They are ongoing and varied. And in a classroom they are an important tool to measure student comprehension and learning. They are built into the curriculum across all subjects at all grade levels.

Our objection has consistently been with the overuse of standardized tests – particularly attaching high stakes to them such as whether a student will receive their high school diploma or not. And we are pleased to see that across the educational landscape high stakes standardized tests are being recognized for their limitations and their perpetuation of systemic and structural racism that need to be addressed in order for us to achieve more just and equitable educational opportunities for all.

And it is here that I want to pause and recognize the lasting impact of the impressive career of Senator Ron Rice, who may not be sitting with you at the virtual dais today but is among us and in large part the reason that we meet for these discussions at the Joint Committee. The NJEA acknowledges and appreciates the legacy of his public service and we are committed to joining you in continuing his work.

While I will focus our remarks on the topic of exit exams, it is important to note that the high school exit exam is but one of a litany of standardized tests taken throughout a student's k12 career. Federally mandated tests across elementary, middle and high school along with state mandated end of year exams in certain subjects, means that there is hardly a year in school that

students are not seated for a mandated test. And now the NJDOE has required the Start Strong exam implemented during COVID to meet the federal requirements of the testing waiver we received.

We want to share with the Committee the position that we have shared with the Governor and Department of Education - that Start Strong should not have been a mandated test this year, but it should most certainly be the last year it is required. Districts have their own methods for assessing students at the start of the year and determining strengths and weaknesses. We hope you will join us in assuring that next fall this test will not be administered.

In addition, we would like to note that as the NJDOE is in the process of procuring a vendor for the develop tests for the Federal mandates, we should be taking a careful look at what is required and what we are getting from vendors. The standardized tests used in the spring to meet Federal mandates should be as minimally intrusive to authentic learning as possible. A vendor may make more money from more testing, but we should not spend our state's limited dollars, or more importantly our student's learning time, to make money for testing companies. So please join us in encouraging the NJDOE to be transparent about the process and ensure that they are limited the scope of work of any testing vendor to the minimum required to meet Federal standards.

And on that note, I would encourage any of you who have not, to visit a school during standardized testing days. While we have reduced the hours under the Murphy administration, the logistics of administering these tests are incredible disruptive to days of learning and require staffing shifts and basically a logistical battle plan. If you have never talked to a school principal about what it requires or visited a school. we encourage you to do so because it is not just the hours spent testing that are lost.

But to the focus on the high school exit exam. We are but one of ten states still utilizing a high stakes graduation test. And I admit, I sometimes find it hard to articulate the objections to this test because it is so illogical at face value, that it feels like we are stating the obvious. But as this Committee has asked, let me try to provide the basic objections.

1. No single test should be allowed to determine a student's qualifications for graduation. And that is what the NJGPA is – a singularly high stakes test. Students in their junior year have advanced through course work and exams, meeting school standards sometimes with flying colors and sometimes struggling – but nonetheless advancing through classes, quizzes, exams, grades, etc. Think about the message that you as lawmakers send to students – that our educators are forced to perpetuate – that despite all your hard work to get to this point, this single exam is all that matters with respect to you getting a diploma. How is that logical or fair?

   The truth is, we know that is neither logical or fair – and the evidence for that knowledge is in the process we have set forth should a student not pass the test the first time. We make them take it again. We give them another chance and another until finally we abandon the test and allow the use of a portfolio to determine if they are worthy of a

diploma. They have to fail this test to be provided an alternative because we know this is not a fair or good measure of earning a diploma.

If there was a belief that a single test should determine eligibility to graduate, why would we continue to offer options? It is because we know a single test should not have that power – so then let's ask the obvious question – why do we administer it at all.

2. One of the most obvious reasons this single high stakes test is inappropriate is because we know – and the data speak in an overwhelmingly singular voice on this – that standardized tests are a better marker of socio-economics and resources than a test of student knowledge or most importantly a predictor of future success.

   Study after study cite that students of color, students with disabilities, students who are learning English as a second language, students who did not have access to early childhood education or students who economic circumstances prevented enrichment, test prep courses, etc., will underperform on these tests – will fail at a higher percentage rate and will be the ones forced to retake the test and some finally utilizing the portfolio. And some along the way will abandon the process and drop out.

   I believe we are all here today committed to equity and justice in our educational system. That does not mean giving up on standards and assessments. It does means abandoning systems that have perpetuated racism and disparities of opportunity. This exam is part of a legacy we must abandon to move towards a more just and equitable education system.

3. Our third objection is embedded in what is presented already but worth being explicit about: The high school exit exam administered in New Jersey is not a good indicator of the student's overall abilities or potential. It is not a good indicator of college or career readiness. It tests on knowledge that most learned in past years but more on a student's ability to perform on a specific test format that is often not widely utilized in school assessments.

   These standardized snap shots of student's ability to perform on these tests is not a useful tool for educators – nor is it a good indicator of the skills that are increasingly recognized as the important ones for success – critical thinking, problem solving, the ability to work independently and collaboratively, articulate a position, discern fact from fiction, and the ability to work through challenges.

   We see at institutions of higher education the recognition that standardized tests used for decades – such as SATs – are a poor indicator of student success and that grades and coursework or their essays are better indicators and predictors in the long run. And the reduction in use of the high school exit exam across the nation is aligned with our understanding that it is not a good or fair measure of student success.

4. Our fourth objection is the arbitrary basis for deciding a passing score to qualify for graduation. Cut scores, as they are known, are set by the SBOE – it is in their hands that a student's ability to graduate is determined by an arbitrarily set score. The recent

kerfuffle at the SBOE regarding where to set the cut score highlights this problem. Should 25 points be the determinant of getting a diploma?

Those making this decision are not the professional educators and administrators currently in the schools and classrooms. They are not experts in assessments or what qualifies as proficiencient or the subjects being graded. They are test developers, SBOE members and legislators.

Respectfully I would ask why are they given that much power over a student's future? And in what world should their decision override the decisions of professional educators in classrooms and schools that have educated these students for the better part of a decade?

5. Finally, we should mention the diversion of resources that accompanies any development and administration of a standardized tests. The NJDOE solicits bids, contracts with a vendor for millions of dollars, and then spend resources (time and money) to field test it – or they should but this isn't always done. They spend time distributing it and preparing and sharing and explaining results.

   Schools divert enormous resources to standardized tests that go far beyond the hours of the actual test. It is includes moving classes, substituting teachers, sometimes cancelling half days of school.

   In addition, there is the natural tendency to teach to the test. This is something that we all know happens, especially when a test is high stakes. If a teacher knows that performing well on that test is essential to their own evaluation, a student's advancement or a student's ability to graduate, you will find a logical choice to teach to the test in varying degrees (and for some students to access test prep).

   The cumulative diversion of resources to a test that perpetuates systems of discrimination is a structural problem we cannot ignore, and we should not perpetuate. These resources from tax payer dollars paying testing companies, to NJDOE staff time, to district staff and money are better spent on real teaching and learning in pursuit of equity.

   For these reasons, the NJEA will continue to strongly advocate for the elimination of the high school exit exam. We have many excellent measures in place to evaluate both students and schools. And we have a moral imperative to eliminate systems and structures that perpetuate racism and discrimination. The NJEA advocates for equity and justice for our students and a high school exit exam flies in the face of those goals and values.

   Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with you to see this goal a reality in the near future.

Joint Committee on the Public Schools Hearing on NJ Assessment Issues

Stan Karp
Education Law Center
12/6/22

NJ Has More Testing Than Ever

- **NJ Student Learning Assessments**
- **Start Strong Assessments**
- **NJ Graduation Proficiency Assessment**
- **District/School level testing**

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Statewide Public Reports Delayed

NJDOE Memo September 7, 2022

- *Districts received results for NJSLA, ACCESS for ELLs, and DLM results. ...[and NJGPA] in Sept/Oct. and reported to local school boards. But statewide results have not been released. Under public pressure, State Board plans assessment report at Dec. 7 meeting.*

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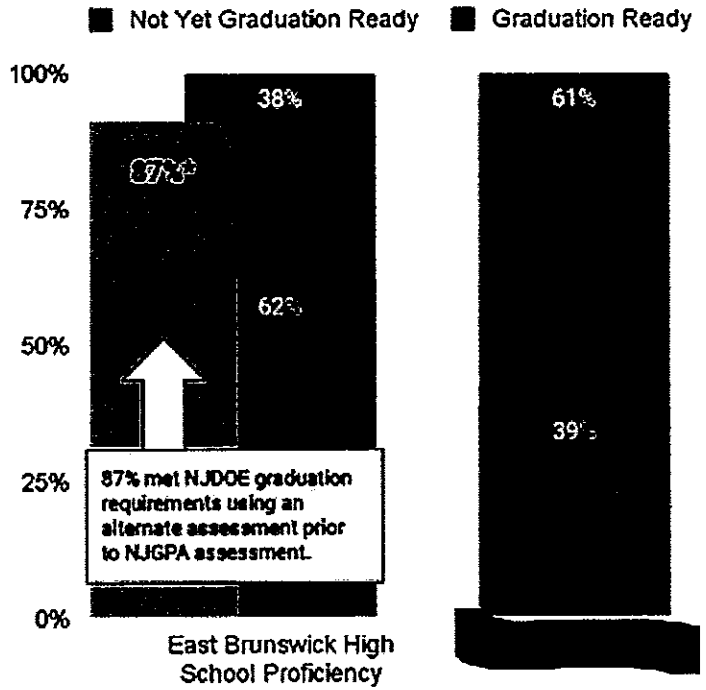
District Reports Revealed Partial Statewide NJGPA Results

New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment

Class of 2023 in 2021-2022 (Grade 11)

English Language Arts



SUBGROUP PERFORMANCE	Not Graduation Ready	Graduation Ready
GENDER		
Female (296)	33%	67%
Male (314)	43%	57%
ETHNICITY		
Hispanic/Latino (51)	59%	41%
Asian (211)	22%	78%
Black or African American (33)	55%	45%
White (305)	43%	57%
ECONOMIC INDICATOR		
Economically Disadvantaged (94)	59%	41%
Non-Economically Disadvantaged (518)	34%	66%
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES		
IEP-Yes (86)	80%	20%
IEP-No (526)	31%	69%
504 (37)	38%	62%

*Data collected on Class of 2023 in grade 11 prior to NJGPA results

East Brunswick Public Schools | Department of Academics — Assessment and Achievement 2021-2022

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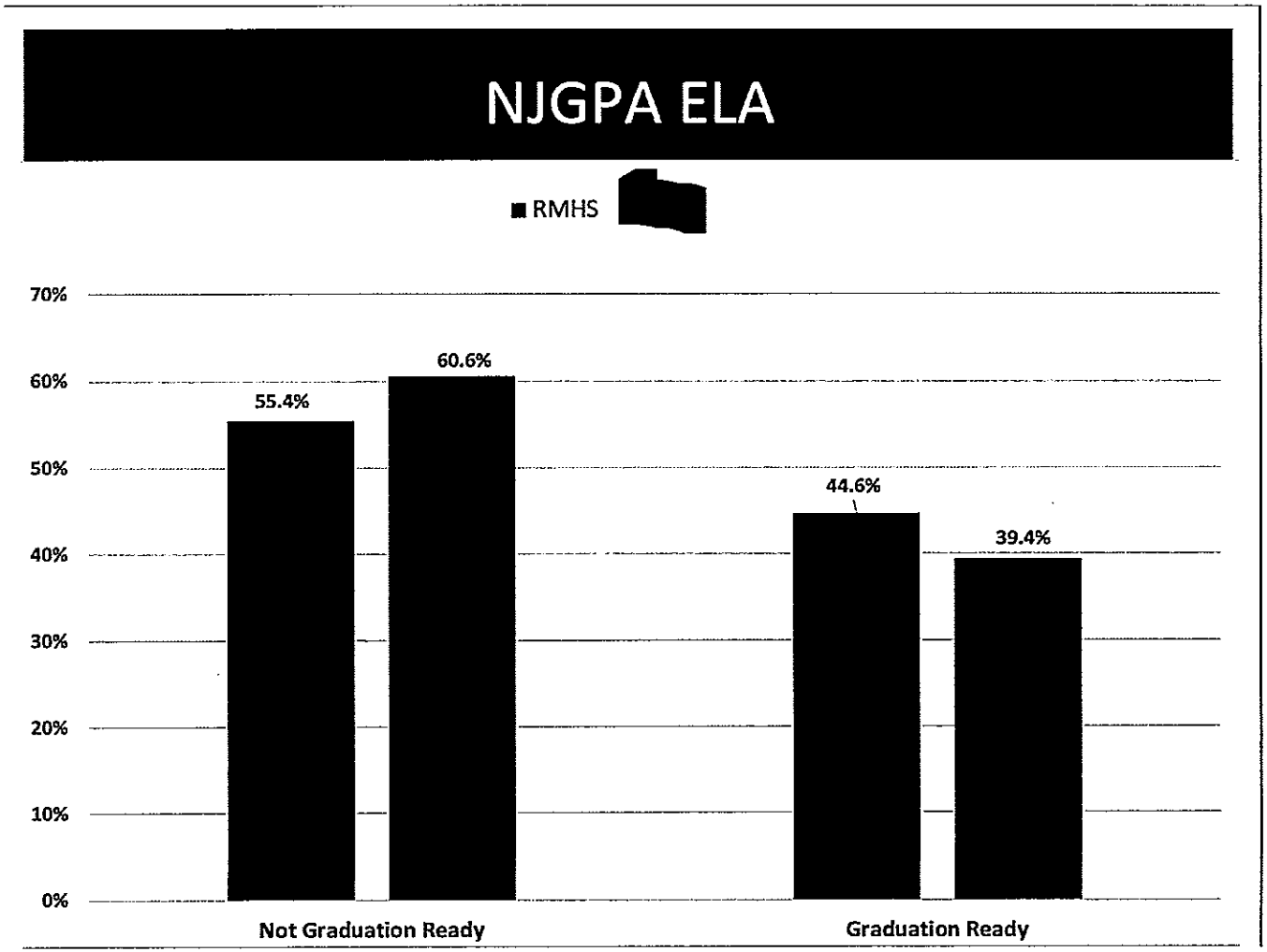
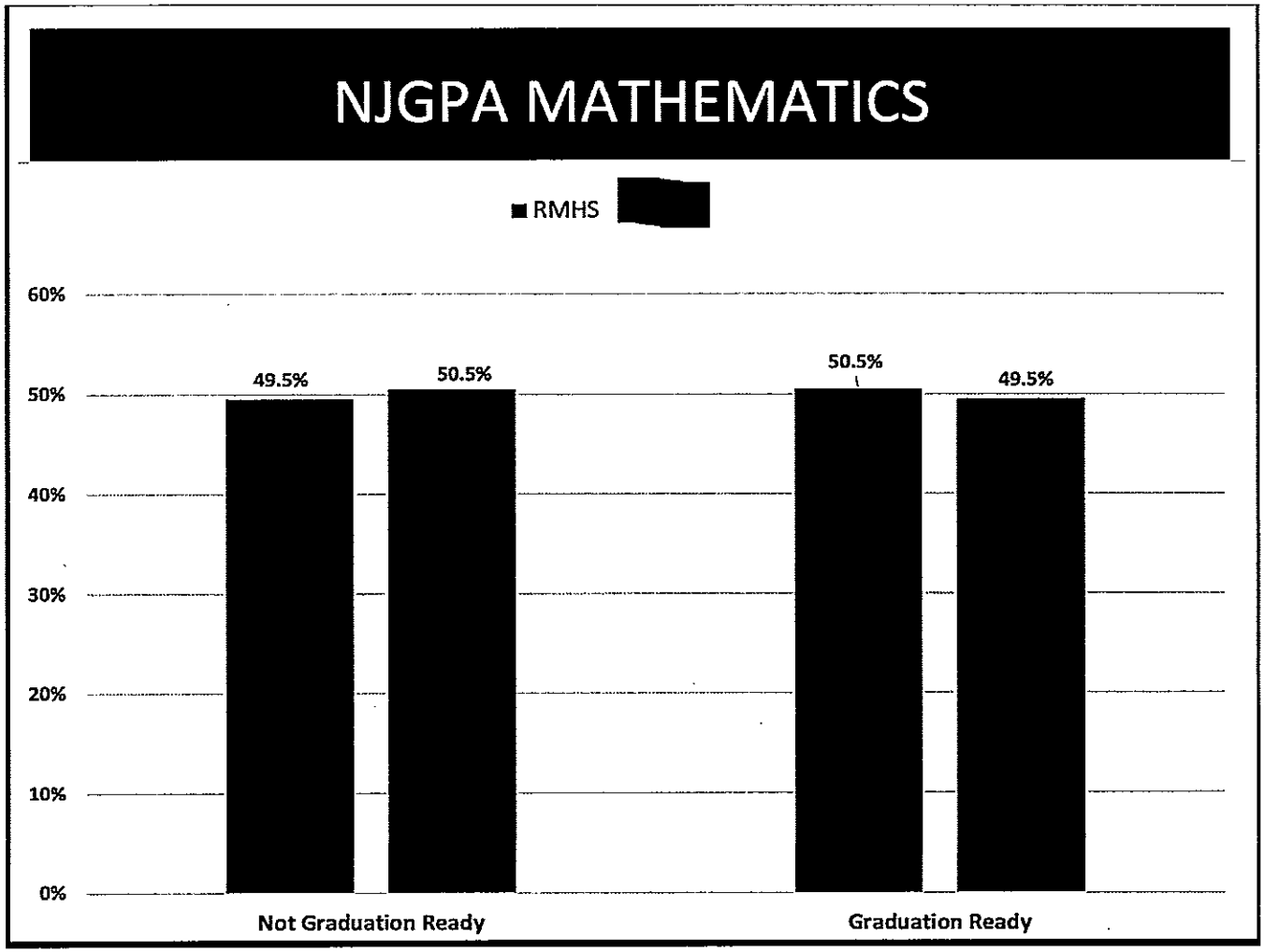
District Reports Reveal Partial Statewide NJPGA Results



Ridgefield Park Public Schools

District Reports Reveal Partial Statewide NJPGA Results



Ridgefield Park Public Schools

District Reports Reveal Partial Statewide NJPGA Results

7

NJGPA Results
Graduation Proficiency Assessment
Class of 2023

Subject	*Average Score*	*Graduation Ready*
English Language Arts	**763** (NJ - 736)	**64%** [redacted]
Math	**773** (NJ - 752)	**77%** [redacted]

[1]NJGPA is administered to 11th grade students ONLY. Results in 2022 did not count, and the state waived the graduation requirement for the Class of 2023. The current junior class of 2024 must pass the NJGPA in Math and ELA to graduate. Other pathways to graduation are explained on the NJDOE website.

NJGPA Results Raise Issues

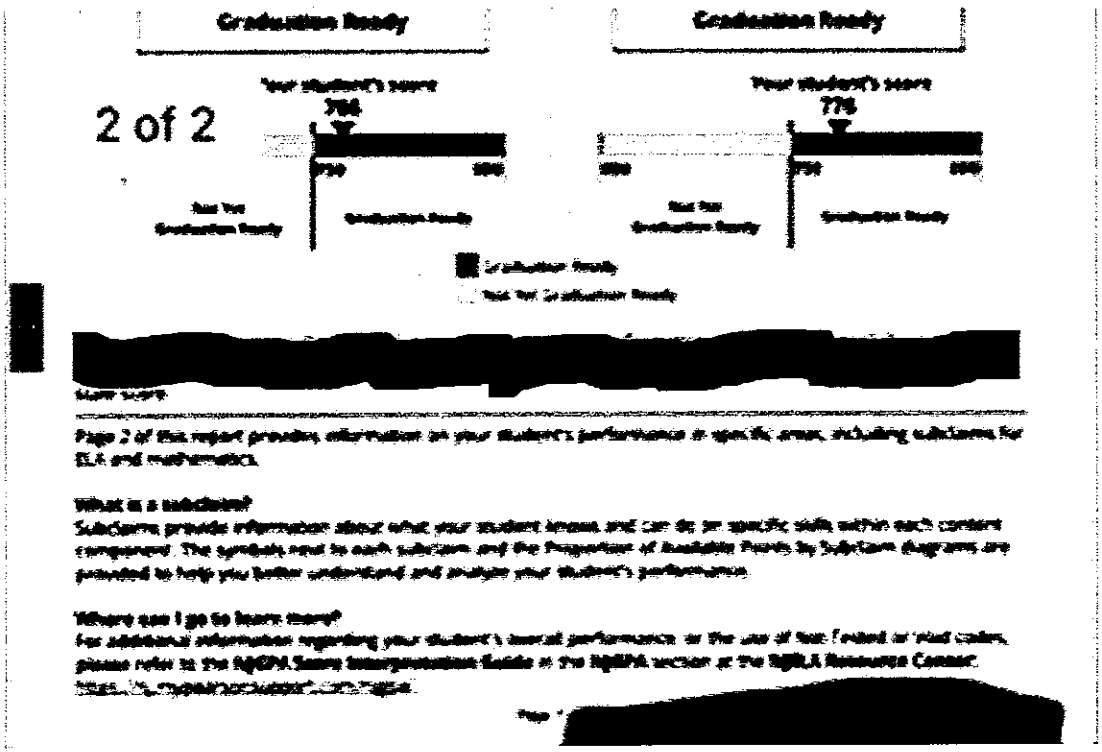
- Statewide 39% of students passed ELA sand 50% passed the Math.
- These low passing rates are a direct result of the State Board's last-minute decision to raise the NJGPA passing score and reject the lower benchmark recommended by the testing vendor and the Department's own assessment officials.
- Raising the proficiency cut score from 725 to 750 likely lowered passing rates approx.15-20%.
- 50-60,000 students would need additional ELA and/or Math tests to satisfy the exit test requirement for graduation

Legislature Makes NJGPA a Field Test

- Passage of A3196/S2349 meant NJGPA is NOT a grad requirement for class of 2023 students.
- Required NJGPA to be used as a "field test" for class of 2023
- "Under no circumstances shall the results of the field test, a substitute competency test, or any other demonstration of proficiency through techniques and instruments other than a standardized test pursuant to section 3 of P.L.1979, c.241 (C.18A:7C-3) be used as a prerequisite for graduation for students expected to graduate as part of the class of 2023.

NJGPA Results Raise Issues

- **ISR reports sent to students/families include misleading info re "graduation readiness."**



"The reported scale score is the best estimate of your student's performance. If your student took the assessment several times, under similar circumstances, your student would likely score within a range around the reported scale score."

Use of NJGPA Results Raise Issues

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The Individual Student Reports for NJGPA prepared by NJDOE and sent home to students/families are inconsistent with use of NJGPA as a "field test."

NJGPA's test data and passing score have not been not been publicly reviewed by the SBOE.

No single standardized test score can reliably determine whether a student is "Graduation Ready" or "Not Graduation Ready."

All standardized tests have "measurement error." High Stakes exit testing for graduation is a misuse of test data.

NJGPA Validity Issues

- NJGPA's test data and passing score have not been not been publicly reviewed by SBOE despite public commitment:

"Whereas, the Department will present to the State Board, by the September meeting of 2022, an analysis from the first administration of the NJGPA test for the board's review of the herein approved cut score. Following the said review, the Department will recommend to either maintain or modify said cut score;"
--Resolution Establishing Proficient Level Cut Score Standards for NJGPA, February, 2022

NJGPA Validity Issues

- *"In general, three years of data are required to establish a trend. For the purposes of the standard validation process and establishing the cut score, typically live data from the administration is used to set the starting point."*—NJDOE Response to SBOE President Goldenberg, comment/response form, February 2022

- The higher passing score adopted by the Board was not based on any public data or test results.

NJGPA Review Still Needed

- Belated release of NJGPA scores will focus attention on results.
- NJGPA will be given again in March to class of 2024 (juniors) as grad requirement
- State Board needs to publicly review test data and revise the passing score BEFORE March administration.
- 725 vs. 750 will make significant difference in % of students passing.

Substitute Assessments Still Need New Passing Scores

Second Pathway—Menu of Substitute Competency Tests

[redacted]

ELA	Mathematics
One of the following: • NJSLA/PARCC ELA Grade 9 • SAT Critical Reading (taken before 3/1/16) • SAT Evidence-Based Reading and Writing Section (taken 3/1/16 or later) • SAT Reading Test (taken 3/1/16 or later) • ACT Reading or ACT PLAN Reading* • ACCUPLACER WritePlacer • ACCUPLACER WritePlacer ESL • PSAT10 Reading or PSAT/NMSQT Reading (taken before 10/1/15) • PSAT10 Reading or PSAT/NMSQT Reading (taken 10/1/15 or later) • ACT Aspire Reading* • ASVAB-AFQT Composite	One of the following: • NJSLA/PARCC Algebra I • NJSLA/PARCC Geometry • NJSLA/PARCC Algebra II • SAT Math (taken before 3/1/16) • SAT Math Section (taken 3/1/16 or later) • SAT Math Test (taken 3/1/16 or later) • ACT or ACT PLAN Math • ACCUPLACER Elementary Algebra • Next-Generation ACCUPLACER Quantitative Reasoning, Algebra, and Statistics (QAS) (beginning January 2019) • PSAT10 Math or PSAT/NMSQT Math (taken before 10/1/15) • PSAT10 Math or PSAT/NMSQT Math (taken 10/1/15 or later) • ACT Aspire Math* • ASVAB-AFQT Composite

https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/requirements/2023_2025.shtml

5 of 8

Substitute Competency Tests Need New Passing Scores

Even if the NJGPA passing score is revised, tens of thousands of students in the class of 2024 will need substitute assessments to satisfy the exit test requirement.

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But the State Board has also failed to adopt new cut scores for the substitute assessments or ratify the previously existing cut scores.

Therefore, in the middle of their junior year, the class of 2024 still does not know what it must do to graduate.

https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/requirements/2023_2025.shtml

Two More Impacts of NJ Exit Testing

- A 2020 USED Performance Review required NJ to change its federal graduation rate calculations. Beginning in 2021, NJ must exclude students with disabilities who receive IEP exemptions from any assessment, course or attendance requirement for graduation. (About 5-7,000 students receive such exemptions each year.)
- As a result, the NJDOE will now report **two versions of the graduation rate:**
- A **state version** that includes all graduates and is comparable to previously reported graduation rates;
- A **federal version** that **excludes students who received modifications or exemptions in their IEP's. This rate must be used for federal accountability.**

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Two More Impacts of NJ Exit Testing

This change will cause NJ's official federal graduation rate to decline.

- In 2021, approximately **2,200** graduates received IEP exemptions for course or attendance requirements. These students were excluded from the federal graduation rate for 2021.
- This resulted in a federal graduation rate of 88.5%, 2.1% lower than the state version of the graduation rate of 90.6%, which includes all graduates.
- ***Graduation testing was suspended in 2021. The impact of this change will increase significantly in years that the exit testing requirement is enforced.***
- [Note: Students receiving exemptions will continue to receive regular state-endorsed NJ diplomas. But they will not be included in NJ's federal graduation rate.]

Federal Graduation Rate Impacts

- **For NJ students with disabilities, the 2021 four-year federal graduation rate was 67.0%, compared to 79% when all graduates are included.**
- 63.1% of NJ high schools now have a federal rate that is lower than their state rate, with about 5% of schools seeing a difference of more than 10%.
- ESSA requires that any high school with a four-year graduation rate at or below 67% be identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI). **The federal graduation rate must be used for ESSA school accountability, so there is likely to be an increase in the number of schools identified in this category next year.**

Impact of Ending NJ Exit Testing

- **The effect of these changes on lowering NJ's official federal graduation rate and increasing the number of high schools identified for intervention under ESSA would virtually disappear if NJ ended exit testing for graduation.**
- There is no federal mandate requiring exit testing for graduation
- The number of states using exit tests has declined from 27 in the early 2000s to 11 today.
- NJSLA already exceeds ESSA's federal accountability mandates. (ESSA requires ELA/Math tests once in high school grades. NJ has 4 high school tests, not counting NJGPA.)

55x

Pending legislative responses

- **Caputo/Turner bill A4639/S3308 would eliminate the high school graduation proficiency test.**

- **Ruiz/Lampitt bill S50/A4364 would continue NJGPA thru 2025 and create new exit test (or tests) for 2026**

x25

Action/Advocacy Steps

- □ **Urge SBOE to revisit and revise NJGPA passing score.**
- □ **Urge SBOE to retain existing cut scores for substitute competency tests**
- □ **Urge legislature to pass A4639/S3308**

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Testimony of Dawn Howlen, Associate Director of Professional Development

Joint Committee on Public Schools

December 6, 2022

Good Afternoon,

My name is Dawn Howlen, and I am an associate director of Professional Development at the New Jersey Education Association. Until this past spring, I was a teacher in Trenton. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Teachers are constantly assessing their students, whether through informal means, such as asking probing questions after a lesson or as follow-up to a homework assignment, or more formal means, such as an end-of-unit test. We believe that educators are best suited to assess their students' learning. They are with their students day in and day out. They learn about their academic strengths and weaknesses, but they also know about their backgrounds, home life, and other factors that are connected to a student's ability to be successful.

Commented [PR1]: Mitigating feels like a deficit model.

Assessment typically falls into two categories, formative and summative. An easy way to remember them is this: formative assessment is assessment for instruction, while summative assessment is an assessment of instruction.

Commented [PR2]: I'm not sure readers or listeners will get what makes this an easy way to remember it. I have two possible suggestions.

First, maybe just delete the "easy way" reference:

Assessment typically falls into two categories, formative and summative. Formative assessment is assessment for instruction, while summative assessment is an assessment of instruction.

Or really hammer home the memory device with bold lettering of the "for" in "formative" and later in the single word "for":

Assessment typically falls into two categories, formative and summative. An easy way to remember them is this: formative assessment is assessment for instruction, while summative assessment is an assessment of instruction.

Formative assessment is an ongoing process of assessing student progress to monitor student learning. These assessments can be as simple as an exit ticket, which is a quick set of oral questions prior to "exiting" a lesson Or as extensive as an end-of-unit assessment. All of this information is taken into account when an educator determines next steps for a student. With this data, an educator can determine if a student needs remediation on a topic. Once we make this determination, and give more instruction, educators can then reassess the student when appropriate.

Summative assessment judges what a student has learned against a standard or benchmark. Teachers use summative assessment to make sure students have learned the material we are teaching them. Summative assessment also provides value because it shows where there may be gaps in teaching and learning, which can help inform methods and curricular decisions.

Teachers are constantly using formative and summative assessments in their classrooms, with both teacher-designed assessments and assessments that may come as part of a curriculum package or textbook.

Educators know when a student may be having the kind of day where their performance is not a true indicator of their knowledge. As a teacher, we can allow them to be assessed at another time. This was a common practice for me. I had students who lived in one room with their entire family. On the night before an assessment, they might not have slept well, or the sibling in their shared bed might have prevented them from getting any rest. These are real-life situations that can occur. So, I always gave my students the opportunity to reassess. They knew that they could let me know if they were not feeling their best, and I accommodated them. This was my prerogative regarding when to administer an assessment so I could get a true judgment of their learning.

A standardized test is a summative assessment that is a snapshot in time, an indicator of what a student could on the day of the assessment. On standardized testing days, giving students grace for their life situations is not an option. The children I taught would be forced to take standardized assessments on the given day and if they performed poorly, there was no recourse for them or the teacher.

In spite of these problems with standardized testing, it can provide useful data for teachers and schools. Standardized tests can show teachers overall gaps in student learning, which could show teachers where they might need to use different methods or materials. They can give educators a global picture of where students are doing to help a school better align its curricula across grade levels or subjects. However, we do not really need state-mandated standardized testing to show this information. Every district has its own form of summative assessment, bet it MAP or STAR testing. These tests yield results sooner than the state tests. And standardized state tests, which disrupt the school schedule over multiple days, cause unneeded stress for data that we already have.

Commented [PR3]: I'm assuming this question has been answered and I wouldn't want it inadvertently left in place.

Here in New Jersey, we also have a high school exit exam, one of only 11 states that still has such a test. NJEA believes that the exit exam for high school students should be eliminated. This test is a snapshot in time, a high-stakes test that shows how well a student did on that particular day. It does not consider the work they did and their grades over the course of their high school career. It does not allow teachers who understand a student's problems to give the student the grace they might need on that given day. The high-stakes nature of these tests makes them stressful for students who fear they might not pass, which can result in weaker performance on the tests.

Commented [PR4]: In NJEA's style, we are NJEA, not *the* NJEA.

The New Jersey Education Association believes...

But

NJEA believes...

Usually, when you want to use an assessment for an event of such incredible magnitude as determining whether a student will graduate high school, that assessment should be field tested first, validated and then considered. This process did not take place for the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA). The current cut score was arbitrarily created, without any reasoning or research. Because of this, we do not know if this test is valid or not.

Commented [PR5]: I'm not sure this is the right word here. I'm googling around articles on standardized tests and not finding "mean" used as a verb for test creation.

How about validated?

Commented [DH6R5]: I like that

When I was in high school, we had to pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) in order to graduate. While I passed the test, many of my friends and classmates—all of whom passed their classes—did not, which led to one of the smallest graduating classes up to that point. Our graduation was on the Trenton Central High School stage. I imagine that if that test were not a barrier, we would have been able to fill the Trenton War of Memorial.

At the end of the day, these choices are affecting the futures and livelihoods of our students. One of my former administrators always asks this question "What about the children?" We have an assessment of student performance in high school, one that is more valid than a snapshot in time assessment: teacher

assessment. As I said earlier, teachers are constantly assessing students. Our assessment of students is more valuable than an exit exam.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

Hearing on Student Assessments
Joint Committee on the Public Schools
December 6, 2022

Good morning Senator Cryan, Assemblywoman Jasey, and members of the Committee. I am Betsy Ginsburg, Executive Director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to share the thoughts of our members on the very important topic of student assessments.

The consensus among my members is that for a standardized assessment to be useful to educators, and, above all, of benefit to students, it has to be well-designed, with a defined purpose or rationale, and thoroughly field tested. Results should be delivered promptly in a format that is as simple and accessible as possible. Recent New Jersey standardized assessments have not always met those criteria.

Our members have asked me to highlight three specific areas today. The first concerns the impending release of the New Jersey Student Assessment results for the spring of 2022. We are concerned that the "analysis" of this data will involve extensive comparisons to the 2019 results, to the detriment of students and educators. Test results have long been used by some individuals and factions inside and outside the education policy-making apparatus as a way of demonizing educators and the public education system. Doing so in the wake of COVID would be unconscionable as well as unproductive.

When the results are publicized tomorrow, we urge legislators and policy makers not to rush to judgment and make unwarranted assumptions based on one set of data. Reactive solutions are rarely the most effective in the long run.

Remember that New Jersey educators have been assessing students and aligning instructional strategies to those students' needs in various ways ever since schools reopened post-COVID. As Rachel Goldberg, superintendent in Springfield put it, "Our strategies are not based on a single assessment taken at a single point in time, but rather continuous points of analysis about a student's level of understanding and processing of critical skill sets."

The delayed release of the NJSLA results will not start the process of learning remediation and acceleration, though educators will certainly take what is most useful and practical from those results. To quote Readington superintendent Jonathan Hart, "There are learning gaps that need remediation - yes. Educators have always identified learning gaps and

provided instruction to close those gaps - this situation is no different. The gaps may be wider and perhaps more unique than we have seen before, but nothing is lost. "

The second issue that concerns us is the NJ Start Strong assessment. The vast majority of my members believe that the test is unnecessary now that the state is once again administering the NJSLA. Teachers and administrators are nearly unanimous in saying that the administration of Start Strong this past September upended schedules, disrupted students' acclimation to school routines and procedures, and took away valuable instructional time.

In effect, the 2022 Start Strong test was an attempt to quantify delayed learning by delaying learning.

We suggest that if Start Strong is not abolished all together, it be made optional for districts in the fall of 2023. In the words of a Kelly Wentz, a 17-year veteran high school teacher in Union City, "We continually squander limited resources attempting to prove learning loss. The existing data is definitely sufficient. It would be a far more prudent allocation of resources to discuss tangible and practical ways to support growth before the [available] resources are depleted completely."

We also take issue with the rollout of the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (GPA), which was done in a way that was detrimental to our students. The Legislature intervened to make the GPA a field test, but that did not change the fact that we subjected our students to an assessment that had never been thoroughly field tested before it was administered for the first time. The reporting of results has been equally botched, forcing superintendents to explain to parents that a test report that states that a student is not "graduation ready" has no meaning for that student. There was absolutely no benefit to students, educators or families in the 2022 GPA. If we must use a standardized assessment as a graduation requirement, that assessment should at least have some validity.

No student was ever healed, comforted, inspired or instructed by a standardized assessment. No matter what we hear tomorrow when the NJSLA results are revealed, let us keep our focus on creating humane and creative solutions for our students and school communities.

Julie Larrea Borst
julieborst@saveourschoolsnj.org

6 December 2022

Joint Committee on the Public Schools
Testimony on Assessments

Thank you to the Committee for the invitation to provide testimony today. I am Julie Borst, executive director of Save Our Schools NJ Community Organizing. Save Our Schools NJ is a grassroots organization of 36,000 parents and other public education supporters across the state who believe that all children in New Jersey should have access to a high-quality public education.

During the pandemic, there was a lot of talk about how we could do education differently. Do it in a way that is more equitable and sustainable. A system where students are met where they are and are challenged in strong supportive environments. Instead, we returned to more testing than ever before.

New Jersey Students Take A Lot of Tests
New Jersey students take Start Strong, NJSLA, and now NJGPA as part of the graduation requirement. On top of that, all Title I schools must have standardized benchmark tests and most districts also have some form of this, with tests given throughout the school year. And, of course, whatever teachers develop for their own classrooms. In other words, NJ students take a lot of tests. It is not credible to say we don't know how the students are doing or know where resources need to go.

More testing does not equal better outcomes for students. Perhaps, more to the point, this is not a system that supports critical thinking and comprehensive literacy. This is not a system that treats educators as professionals. This is not a system that treats students as human beings.

We all want "accountability." No one disputes that. Asking for valid and reliable tests that are not used punitively is not "anti-testing." We want accountability to include understanding the effects of a 40-year-old state statute that requires a high exit exam, and more recently, the increased number of state standardized tests given which is much more than federally required – how many lives have been negatively impacted by not having a high school diploma, the effects of drastically underfunding our schools, and understanding that schools – that is, teachers and administrators, can do only so much with so little. Tests do not create equitable

schools. Funding, economic development, public policy aimed at eradicating poverty, ending discriminatory housing practices, and so on move us toward equity.

What Is Required for Federal Accountability vs How Many Tests NJ Administers
It is instructive to review what assessments are required for federal accountability purposes versus what the State does. As you can see, depending on when and what a student takes in high school, it can result in two extra math tests and one extra English language arts (ELA) tests, plus the exit exam. Potentially four extra tests on top of AP tests and college entrance tests, like the SAT. **How many millions of dollars is that, that could be used directly supporting students?**

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has specific assessment requirements with which every state must comply:

1. ELA and math
    a. Every year in grades 3-8
    b. Once in high school (the grade is at the discretion of the state)
2. Science
    a. Once in elementary, middle, and high school (the grade is at the discretion of the state)

The State of New Jersey looks like this:

1. ELA and math
    a. Every year in grades 3-8
    b. ELA in grades 9-10
    c. Math in grades 9-11, depending on which math the student took, Algebra 1, Algebra 2, and Geometry.
2. Science
    a. Grades 5, 8, and 11

The State's graduation requirements, up until December 31, 2018, when the Appellate Court struck down the high exit test regulations looked like this:

1. For Classes up to and including 2019, a menu of choices without the need to sit for any of the PARCC tests
    a. PARCC ELA 9 or 10
    b. PARCC Algebra 1, Algebra 2, or Geometry
    c. OR, a passing score on:
        i. PSAT
        ii. SAT
        iii. ACT
        iv. ASVAB
        v. Accuplacer

vi. Portfolio review

2. For Class of 2020, the menu choices available to 2019, BUT the student had to take (and fail) every PARCC test they were eligible for – potentially five test – ELA 9, 10 and Algebra 1, 2, and Geometry before accessing the rest of the menu.
3. For Classes of 2021 - 2022
   a. PARCC ELA 10
   b. PARCC Algebra 1
   c. Portfolio, but only after taking and failing the PARCC tests and re-takes.

Beginning with Class of 2023, students must take New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA) before they can use any of the alternatives.

1. Class of 2023 administration became a field test, so no test is required to graduate.
2. Classes of 2024 and 2025 must take NJGPA before the alternatives are available to them to graduate.

Over the last several years, we have delivered over 60,000 letters from parents, turned in 13,000 signatures to the Legislature, and 10,000 signatures to the State Board of Education, asking for shorter standardized tests (NJ still has the longest state tests in the country), fewer of them so they match the federal compliance, for the elimination of the high school exit exam, and calls for the state to participate in USDOE's pilot for alternative assessments. There has been no leadership on assessment.

New Jersey's testing regime reduces time available for teaching and provides no additional information regarding student performance. Any school district or charter school that wants additional information about their students can use one of the many standardized assessments available to collect that data without forcing every other public school in our state to do so and the taxpayers of New Jersey to pay for it.

End Exit Testing

It should be noted that for high school exit testing, New Jersey is 1 of 11 states that still uses this regressive form gate-keeping. It is not a federal requirement, unlike the other state testing. It costs millions of dollars to administer and for what purpose? The financial costs are not justified and the societal cost of the school to prison pipeline, which is filled with people without high school diplomas and with disabilities, is immeasurable.

Exit assessments do nothing for the students that pass. However, this policy is most detrimental to the students with least institutional and personal resources to pass this arbitrary roadblock to a high school diploma, specifically students who are low income, of color, and/or disabled. In other words, it hurts the students that stand to gain the most by obtaining a high school diploma. And, in the post-secondary world of college and technical schools, exit assessments mean nothing. Those schools never see the scores, nor do they ask to. Studies have

documented that exit testing produces no educational benefits; increases high school dropout rates; and feeds the school-to-prison pipeline. States that have recently dropped their exit test requirement, like California, also retroactively awarded diplomas to students who otherwise had met all graduation requirements.[1]

SOSNJ also reminds this Committee that there are other minimum state requirements needed for a student to graduate. They include specific number of years of certain classes, a minimum number of credits, seat time, and passing grades. Individual school districts can decide to add other requirements, like community service hours or more than the minimum number of credits. Adding on an arbitrary standardized test at the end of all of this work is simply not necessary. It is no different than a student attending college, completing their degree course work and receiving a diploma. A high school diploma is the culmination of 13 years of schooling. The work and grades[2] are most relevant to post-secondary success vs. a standardized test.

New Jersey Students' Scores

As the NJSLA and NJGPA scores are shared with the public soon, there will be a lot of concern over how poor they are. Indeed, there has been a lot of similar noise around the NAEP scores. I urge you all to remember that our children have lived through a pandemic that has claimed over 1 million lives in the U.S. Their formal education was disrupted to varying degrees. Many lost family members. That the scores are lower than they would have been without the affects of the pandemic should be no surprise to anyone. The "gaps" were there before. They are more glaring now. We aren't afraid of the scores or discussions about them. We want something done that will actually help students. Testing won't do that. Ever.

Understanding NAEP Scores

About NAEP, it is vitally important to understand what the scoring actually means. NAEP "proficient" does not correlate to grade level. "Students performing at or above the NAEP Proficient level on NAEP assessments demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter. It should be noted that the NAEP Proficient achievement level does not represent grade level proficiency as determined by other assessment standards (e.g., state or district assessments)."[3] And, National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) which oversees the NAEP, expressly says that point gains and losses can't be calculated to "grade level" and certainly not to portions of years. There is also no reason to expect the next set of NAEP scores won't go back up.

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[1] https://fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated/

[2] Hodara, M., & Lewis, K. (2017). How well does high school grade point average predict college performance by student urbanicity and timing of college entry? (REL 2017–250). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs.

[3] https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/guides/

James Harvey, executive director of the National Superintendents Roundtable: The Roundtable has taken strong exception to NAEP's definition of proficiency. The Roundtable's 2018 report, *"How High the Bar?"* concluded that not even 40% of fourth-graders in Finland and Singapore (nations typically thought to be world-class in terms of student achievement) can be deemed proficient in reading by the NAEP standard. The fact that uninformed policymakers and advocates conflate "proficiency" with grade-level performance is one of the absurdities of the current national conversation about schools.[4]

Recommendations
End exit testing. It is punitive and inequitable. Stop making our most vulnerable students jump through the most hoops in order to graduate. Use those financial resources directly for students.

Explore alternatives. The NY Performance Standards Consortium provides a strong roadmap for how NJ might do assessment differently and in a way that actually benefits students, particularly in high school.

You can read more about the Consortium here: http://www.performanceassessment.org/

To see what a student defense looks like, go here and click on the one for math: http://www.performanceassessment.org/studentwork

Research has also been done about how Consortium graduates do in post-secondary, specifically at CUNY schools. Dr. Michelle Fine has produced research that it not too surprising – students that spend 4 years doing work in a similar fashion to college, do well. You can read about the research here: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report

Links for further reading:
The Case Against Exit Exams
https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/the-case-against-exit-exams/

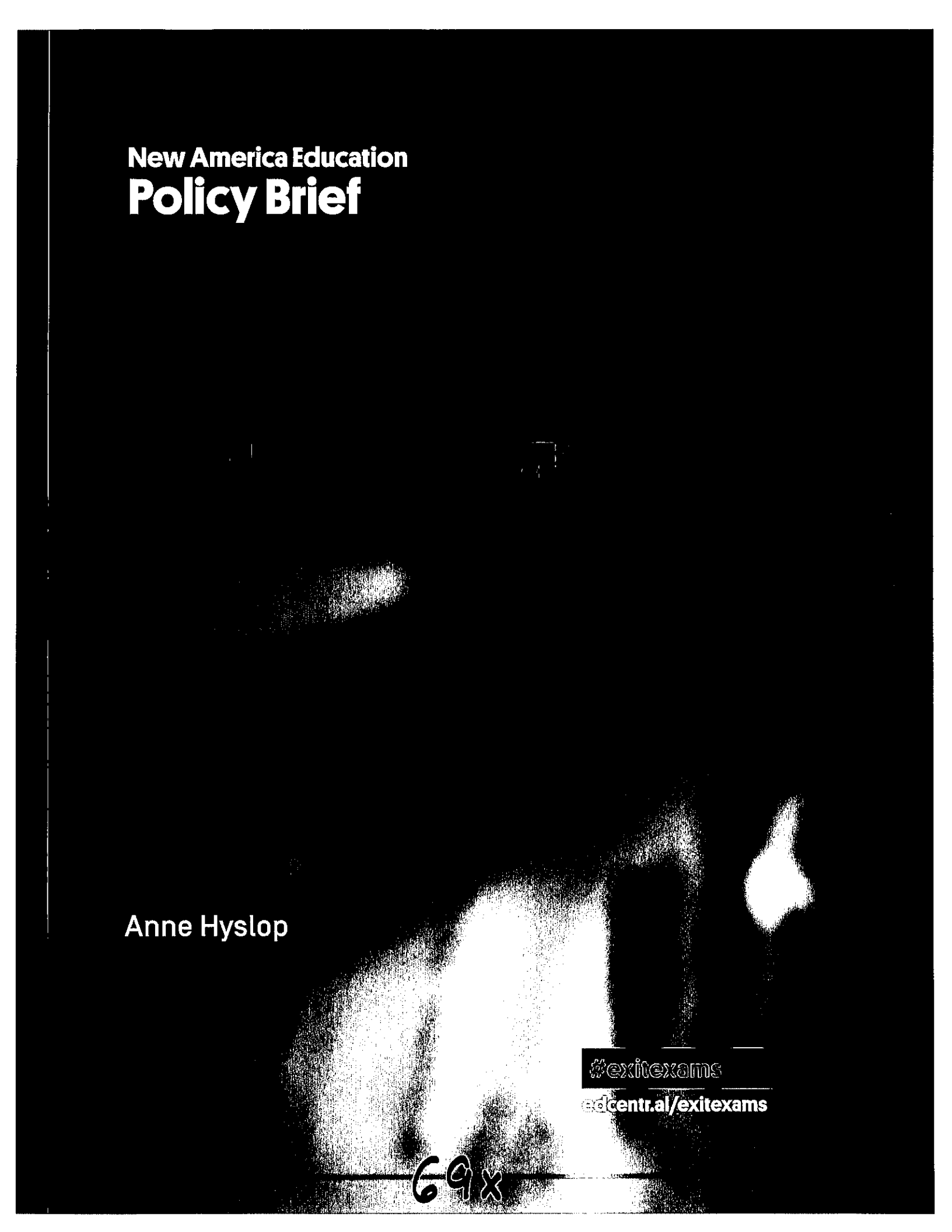
How High the Bar?
https://www.superintendentsforum.org/archives/2019-2/how-high-the-bar-report

Thank you for your time and consideration. As always, I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

[4] https://dianeravitch.net/2022/05/24/james-harvey-the-lies-promoted-by-naeps-absurd-benchmarks/

New America Education

Policy Brief



Anne Hyslop

#exitexams

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69x

About the Author

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Acknowledgments

My appreciation to the researchers, analysts, and experts who graciously shared their insights and knowledge with me and to those who took the time to review an earlier draft of this report, especially Bob Rothman, Diane Stark-Rentner, and Kedda Williams. Thanks also to Kevin Carey and Laura Bornfreund for their guidance in writing and editing, Ross van der Linde for his design and production support, and to Honey Ghods and Cary Lou for their research assistance.

This report was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. New America thanks the foundation for its support. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author alone.

About New America

New America is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States.

The New America Education Policy Program's work is made possible through generous grants from the Alliance for Early Success; the Annie E. Casey Foundation; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund; the Grable Foundation; the Foundation for Child Development; the Joyce Foundation; the Kresge Foundation; Lumina Foundation; the Pritzker Children's Initiative; the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; and the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation.

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THE CASE AGAINST EXIT EXAMS

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THE CALL: MORE COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY STUDENTS

High school graduation is the final act in the American teenage rite of passage. Each spring, "Pomp and Circumstance" plays, speeches are delivered, and cameras flash as graduates cross the stage to receive their diplomas. But finishing high school provides students with something far more valuable than photos and memories. It is a prerequisite for life-long economic stability. Without a high school degree, college—let alone the federal financial aid to pay for it—is off the table. And good luck trying to get a well-paying job, or any job, as a high school dropout.

But a high school diploma is no guarantee for long-term success either. Forty years ago, seven of ten jobs only required a high school education, or less. Today, the opposite is true: By 2020, 65 percent of all available jobs will demand some postsecondary training, often a two- or four-year degree (Figure 1).[1]

Unfortunately, many students never get that far. In 2012, two-thirds of high school completers nationally enrolled in higher education within a year of earning their diplomas, but many of them will not complete their degrees, even years later.[2] According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, just over half of students graduate within six years of starting a two- or four-year degree.[3] Newly released federal data are equally grim. Among over 13,000 high school sophomores in 2002, nearly half had no postsecondary degree ten years later. These students were more likely to be unemployed than their peers who had completed a college program, whether undergraduate certificate, Associate's degree, or Bachelor's degree (Figure 2).[4]

Given the clear economic benefits, why do so many high school graduates drop out of college? Poor preparation is partly to blame. A high school diploma is not synonymous with postsecondary readiness—and students pay the price for this mismatch between high school and higher education in time, in tuition, and in their chances for earning a degree.[5] Lacking the required skills and knowledge, many high school grads are placed in noncredit-bearing, remedial coursework in college to master basic content they should have learned in high school. Over half of students entering a two-year college require remediation, and the same is true for 20 percent of students at four-year colleges. The numbers are even worse for low-income and minority students at these institutions.[6]

Too often, remediation is a college completion death sentence. Students are diverted from college-level work, requiring more time to earn their credentials and spending more money in the process, even though research shows many could likely do well in more difficult courses.[7] And once students enrolled in remedial classes actually finish them, many never go on to complete related, college-level work, and they are less likely to graduate than students who avoided remediation. According to Complete College America, remediation is a "Bridge to Nowhere." Only one of ten community college students placed in remediation finishes a two-year degree within three years.[8]

These challenges create an uncomfortable dilemma for those trying to improve educational attainment. On the one hand, a high school education has never been more important. Without it, a student's future is bleak, and educators know it. High school graduation is more than just a rite of passage—it is practically a "right" of passage, and the decision to withhold this right is fraught from a legal perspective and from an educator one.[9] Teachers care deeply about students and want to see them succeed. Further, high schools are held accountable for their graduation rates, creating additional incentives to ensure as many students graduate as possible. On the other hand, many high school diplomas are not rigorous enough. Students complete their requirements and don their caps and gowns only to walk straight from their graduation ceremony into remediation. These students may attain a high school degree, but they are less likely to attain the postsecondary credential they also need.

Increasing numbers of states have responded to this dilemma with a particular solution: high-stakes exit exams. Up from 18 states in 2002, 24 states now require high school students to pass a state assessment in various subjects in order to graduate. In theory, this motivates them to meet higher standards and prevents unprepared students from earning a high school diploma.[10] But this testing is controversial. And forced to choose between holding students accountable for meeting high expectations or denying students a diploma, states prioritize the latter and set the passing bar low enough so that the majority of test-takers can pass on their first try (often in ninth or tenth grade). Many states also offer students multiple re-takes of the exam, special waivers, or alternate testing options.[11]

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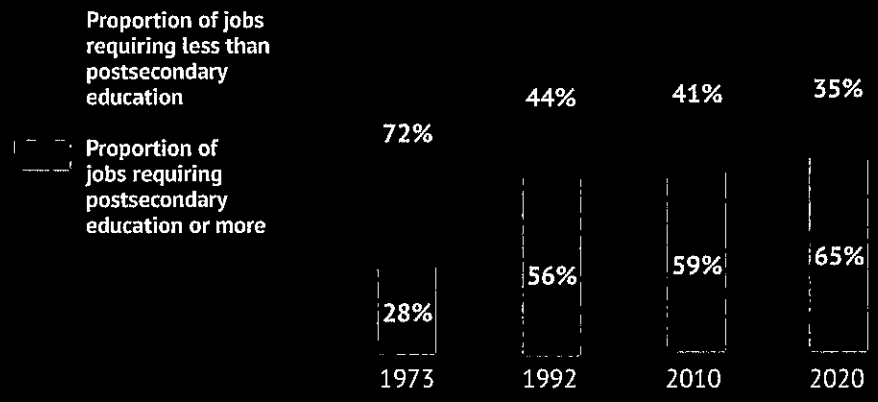
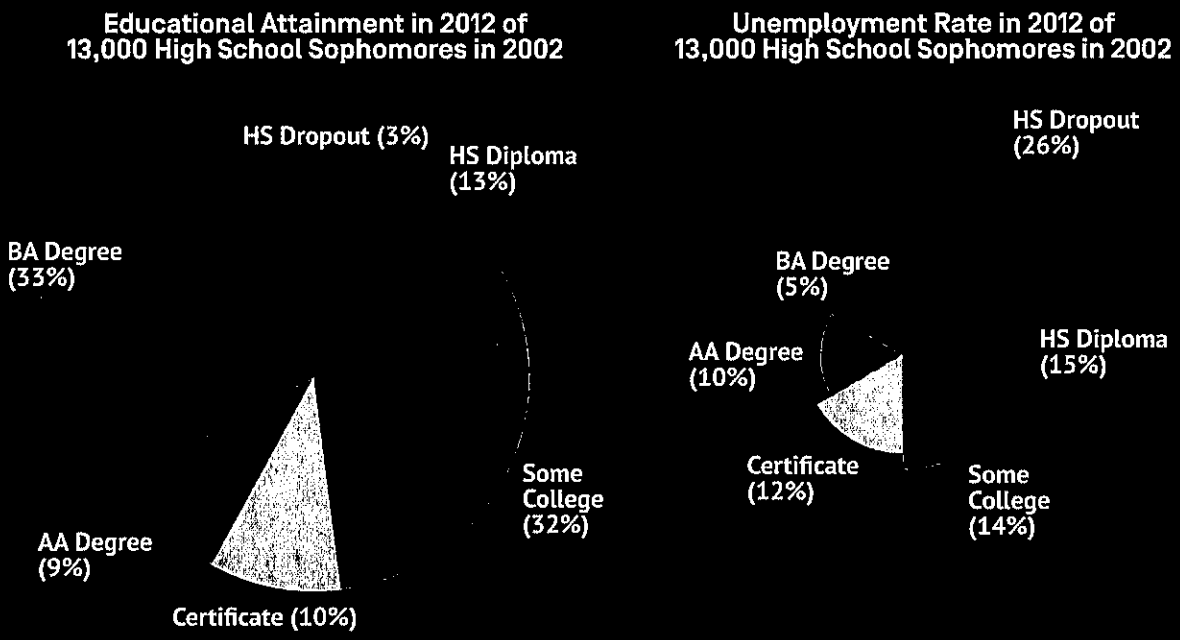
Figure 1. Proportion of Jobs Requiring a Postsecondary Education (1973-2020)



Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2013.

Figure 2. The Link Between Higher Educational Attainment and Employment

The students in the ELS:2002 sample (13,000 high school sophomores followed for ten years) who had earned Bachelor's degrees saw the lowest rates of unemployment, while students who lacked postsecondary credentials had the highest unemployment rates. The small proportion of the sample that dropped out of high school was the worst-off: over a quarter was unemployed.



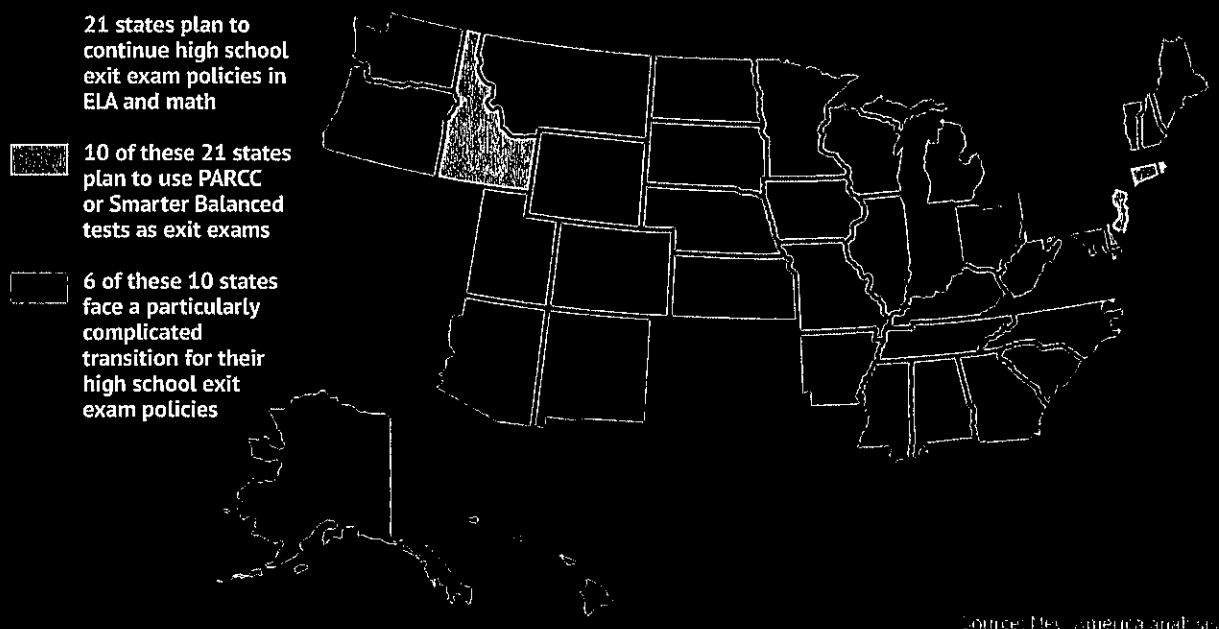
Source: L. Lauff and S. Ingels, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002): A First Look at 2002 High School Sophomores 10 Years Later (NCES 2014-363) (U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

These tensions between higher standards and higher educational attainment will only amplify as states embark on the latest effort to increase rigor in K–12 education: the Common Core State Standards, a set of academic standards adopted by over 40 states that define what students need to know by the end of high school to be ready for college and careers. Students will likely be caught in the middle of this shift. Transition to the new standards creates a ripple effect across the entire K–12 system, from testing to textbooks to accountability systems, as policies must be updated to reflect the new college- and career-ready expectations. But how quickly should students be expected to master the more challenging standards? The Common Core-aligned tests being developed by two state consortia are expected to be harder than ones states administer now, and, particularly at first, fewer students will pass them. Given that so many states require students to demonstrate mastery, via proficiency on a state exam, in order to graduate from high school, should these policies remain in place with the new standards? What could happen if they do?

To answer these questions, this report considers evidence from past high school exit exams, while taking stock of states' current high school assessment policies and any planned changes to them as they transition to college- and career-ready standards.[12] We find that states, in general, have suffered many of the negative consequences of high-stakes exit exams, like higher dropout rates, but reaped few of the promised rewards, including better college and workforce outcomes. Further, many states are in danger of repeating history as they implement the Common Core or similar college- and career-ready standards. **As many as 21 states plan to continue their exit exams in English Language Arts and math during the shift to higher standards.** Further, 10 states may use Common Core-aligned tests designed by one of two state consortia as exit exams once old assessments are phased out. Of these states, six consortia members are choosing a transition strategy that is particularly challenging—and complex—in its execution, as they attempt to maintain continuity in their exit exam policies and hold students accountable, while phasing in new assessments and higher standards (Figure 3).

States' new assessments are being designed to include more critical thinking and complex items than previous standardized tests, with performance tasks, computer-adaptive features, and open-response questions. While better assessments are certainly welcome, a better assessment used as an exit exam is still an exit exam. States also need better policies for how their assessments are used. Exit exams have forced states to choose between two worthy goals: enforcing higher academic standards and making higher education an option for as many students as possible. But states do not have to make that choice. Unlike school accountability, which is shaped in part by federal policy, the stakes attached to tests for students are the result of state and local policy choices alone. More important, states have other options, beyond exit exams, that allow them to pursue both goals, without pitting them against one another.

Figure 3. As States Begin Using College- and Career-Ready Standards and Tests in 2015:



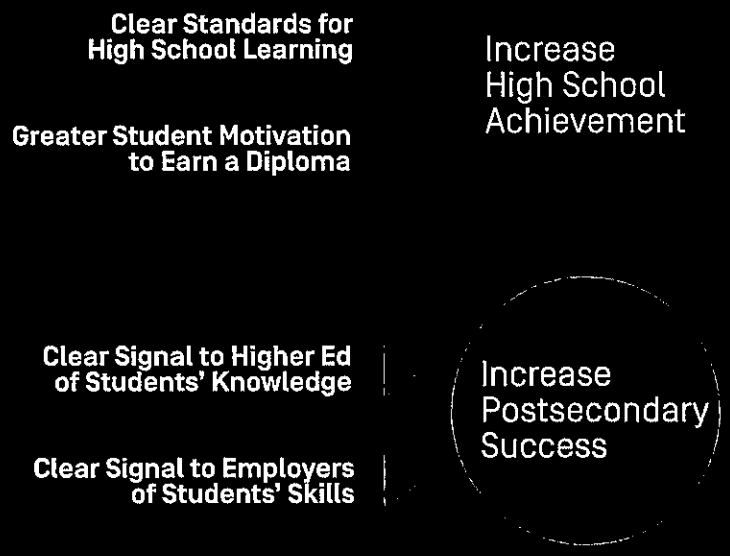
Source: New America analysis

THE CONTEXT: HISTORY OF HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS

The idea to raise graduation standards first gained traction during the economic uncertainty and stagflation of the mid-1970s, as critics argued that a high school diploma was no longer a meaningful credential for employers, due, in part, to weak standards and social promotion. In response, states began to require high school students to take standardized tests of basic skills, and by the early 1980s, 19 states not only administered such minimum competency exams (MCEs), but also required students to pass them to graduate.[13]

These early high school exit exams (HSEEs) were seen as one way to elevate and signal the value of a diploma to students, employers, and the public, but the early versions were typically pegged to basic, often middle school-level, skills. It took the landmark 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education, and its claim that a "rising tide of mediocrity" was directly linked to these minimum expectations, for states to reconsider the design of their exit exams.[14] As the modern standards-based reform movement took root from the 1980s through the 2001 enactment of federal standards-based

Figure 4. The Goals Behind High School Exit Exams



accountability in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states steadily updated their exit exam policies and increased the rigor of the tests over time.

But regardless of the difficulty of states' exit exams over the years, they all shared common attributes. Each iteration was premised on two basic goals (Figure 4). First, an exit exam would increase student achievement overall by setting a clear standard for high school learning and by motivating students to earn the more meaningful, and valuable, diploma. Second, an exit exam would improve students' postsecondary success by providing a clear signal to employers or colleges that graduates possessed valuable skills.

The reaction to exit exam policies has also been consistent. Linking high school graduation to a test score has always been met with trepidation by those who worried that the new requirements would exacerbate high school dropout and lower educational attainment, particularly for disadvantaged students. Many also worried exit exams would produce unproductive responses from schools and educators seeking to increase passing rates at all costs, even if that meant narrowing high school curricula or diluting the standards.

Research on decades of exit exam policies have produced very few conclusive findings on whether these twin goals were accomplished, but in many studies, the fears were confirmed. In short, typical students do not appear to be any better off after the exit exam policy, and those that were already vulnerable, including low-income and minority students, often became more so. In one of the broadest findings, a blue ribbon commission formed by the National Research Council, the Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability, found that high school exit exams nationwide had not increased student achievement, but rather decreased graduation rates by two percentage points, on average.[15] Although the experience in some states, like Massachusetts, has been more positive, even in this best-case scenario, there have been negative effects, particularly for at-risk students, as a result of exit exams. (See sidebar, "Massachusetts: A Model High School Exit Exam Policy?")

Massachusetts: A Model High School Exit Exam Policy?

Massachusetts is often considered the archetype for effective high school exit exam implementation, and for good reason. The state is known for its high-quality, rigorous standards and tests, and its impressive student outcomes.[16] The state first used its high school assessment, the MCAS, as an exit exam for the class of 2003—and, critically, this policy was accompanied with added funding and resources for schools to help students meet the new standard. The passing score was also set at a "Goldilocks" level initially, according to former State Commissioner David Driscoll, and increased gradually over time so that students and schools could adjust to the new requirements.[17] And many in the Bay State believe that the exit exam increased students' motivation to learn more rigorous material, and schools' motivation to help them. As Paul Reveille, a former state Board member and Secretary of Education, put it, "People underestimated the effort of teachers and students once they focused on a clear set of goals."[18]

All of this may be true, but even in the best case implementation scenario—the Massachusetts example—exit exam policies have exacted a cost on a particular subgroup of vulnerable students. For most students in the Bay State, barely failing the MCAS in 10th grade has no effect on their high school graduation prospects. But 2010 research by John Papay, Richard Murnane, and John Willett found that low-income, urban students who barely fail the math portion of the MCAS have graduation rates that are eight percentage points lower than similar students that barely pass. These students are also four percentage points more likely to drop out of high school the year following the test.[19] While Massachusetts allows retakes of the exam, low-income urban students are not as successful in their subsequent attempts at the MCAS as similarly skilled, but more affluent, suburban students.

Now that the Bay State is implementing new college- and career-ready expectations in the Common Core State Standards, the question is whether there are policy alternatives that can still encourage all students to reach for the higher standards, but do so in a way that does not limit opportunity for the state's most disadvantaged students.

Along similar lines, a 2010 meta-analysis on the effects of high school exit exams, including minimum competency versions and newer, more rigorous tests, found that, in general, the "evidence indicates that exit tests have produced few of the expected benefits for students overall and nearly all of the expected costs for disadvantaged and at-risk students."[20] Across 46 studies, the authors examined student outcomes related to exit exam policies and high school achievement, high school graduation, postsecondary education, and workforce participation, as well as the effects of failing an exit exam on students in terms of achievement, dropout, and postsecondary outcomes. Across all outcomes studied, exit exam policies often resulted in mixed or inconclusive findings, and were rarely associated with positive outcomes for students (Figure 5).

Figure 5. All Costs, Few Benefits: How Exit Exam Policies and Student Performance on Them Affects High School Attainment and Postsecondary Success

How to read this table:

MCE refers to older **minimum competency exams. HSEE** refers to newer **standards-based exit exams.**

Indicates a **decrease in the performance outcome** (e.g., lower K–12 student achievement, lower dropout rates and GED attainment, lower rates of college success, and lower rates of workforce success)

Indicates an **increase in the performance outcome** (e.g., higher K–12 student achievement, higher dropout rates and GED attainment, higher rates of college, and higher rates of workforce success)

▷ Indicates **no general effect on the performance outcome** (e.g. no change in K–12 student achievement, dropout rates and GED attainment, college success, and workforce success)

Indicates **inconsistent or inconclusive effects** on the performance outcome

Effect of Exit Exam Policy	Expected Effect?	Actual Effect? (MCEs)	For Which Students?	Actual Effect? (HSEEs)	For Which Students?
K–12 Student Achievement			It is inconclusive whether students, especially low-performing ones—those the policy most sought to motivate—improve.	▷	There is no impact on overall student achievement, or for low-performing students.
Dropout and GED Attainment		▷	MCEs did not exacerbate typical student dropout, but may increase dropout for low-performing students and for black males. MCEs are not conclusively linked to greater GED attainment or delays in graduation.		More difficult HSEEs, are associated with higher dropout rates and GED attainment rates, and delays in high school graduation, especially for minority students and students in high-poverty areas.
College Readiness					Research has found a negative association between HSEE policies and state ACT and SAT scores, but the studies' methodologies prohibit drawing definitive conclusions.
College Success			There is no definitive evidence that college enrollment rates increase with MCEs. Some studies found positive effects, especially for particular student groups, but others found no association.	▷	There is no impact on college enrollment rates for typical students.
Workforce Success			The effects on employment or wages for students overall are mixed (both positive and negative). Some studies of only high school graduates found positive effects on wages for specific subgroups and cohorts.	▷	HSEEs are likely not associated with higher employment or earnings for students overall. However, heterogeneous effects (both positive and negative) were observed for particular subgroups of students.

Effect of Exit Exam Performance	Expected Effect?	Actual Effect? (HSEEs)	For Which Students?
K–12 Student Achievement		▷	Students barely missing the HSEE passing score on the first try see no effects on their subsequent achievement, and do not appear to be more motivated or more discouraged.
Dropout			Students that score below the HSEE passing score on "last chance" exams have an increased probability of high school dropout, and the effect seems to be stronger for low-income, minority, and low-achieving students.
College Success			Students that fall just below the HSEE cut score are less likely to attend college, and those that do, earn fewer credits compared to students just above the cut score.
Workforce Success			Failing a "last chance" HSEE is associated with reduced earnings just after high school, but disparities decreased over time, relative to students that just barely passed the last chance exam.

Source: Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson, and Rebecca W. Cohen, "Assessing the Effects of High School Exit Examinations," Review of Educational Research, December 2010 (80): 476–526, doi: 10.3102/0034654310383147

Since the 2010 meta-analysis, new evidence has reinforced the conclusion that exit exams disproportionately affect a subset of students, without producing positive outcomes for most. A 2013 study from Olesya Baker and Kevin Lang found that more rigorous exit tests, not MCEs, were associated with lower graduation rates, particularly in states that had not previously had a MCE policy in place. Further, the lower graduation rates were not fully offset by increased GED attainment. As with other studies, Baker and Lang found that there was no relationship between exit exam policies and labor market outcomes. They also examined incarceration rates as another long-term cost of exit exam policies. They found that both MCEs and more difficult HSEEs increased the likelihood of incarceration, but the findings were only significant for the more rigorous tests. In fact, these kinds of exit exams were associated with a 12.5 percent increase in incarceration rates.[21]

> Exit exams have tended to add little value for most students but have imposed costs on already at-risk ones

Another 2013 study, by Steven Hemelt and Dave Marcotte, examined the relationship between exit exams and high school completion, with a particular focus on dropout rates by grade and the impact of alternate diploma pathways. They found that, across all grades combined, exit exams had no effect on dropout, but did increase dropout by 11 percent when only examining the twelfth grade cohort. Further, in states with no alternate pathways for students that failed the exit exam, dropout rates were 23 percent higher than in states that provided other routes to graduation. And yet again, there were greater negative effects for particular subgroups. Exit exams increased dropout for Hispanic and black students, particularly when there were no alternate routes to graduation.[22]

There is also new research that clarifies how just failing an exit exam affects future high school course-taking patterns and achievement. In a 2014 study by Thomas Ahn, students in North Carolina that barely failed their Algebra I exit exams in ninth grade were five percentage points less likely to take a more rigorous, college preparatory math sequence than students that just passed the exam. These decisions could have long-term implications for students' postsecondary success, including higher education admissions and placement.[23]

In other words, the research is not conclusive, but it is fairly consistent: exit exams have tended to add little value in terms of increasing achievement or better preparing most students for life after high school, but have imposed costs on already at-risk students in the form of higher dropout rates and GED attainment—and lower chances for college and career success.

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THE COLLISION: HIGHER STANDARDS vs. HIGHER ATTAINMENT

Given the less than encouraging results of decades of research on exit exams, why do states continue to administer them? A 2012 survey by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University asked this question of 25 states with exit exams, and the answer was straightforward: rigor matters. Fifteen states maintained their exit exams in order to "attribute greater meaning or significance to a high school diploma," while 12 also sought to "ensure students who receive a high school diploma are ready for college and career."[24]

And state policymakers are not alone in caring about rigor. It is a popular argument as well. In her 2013 *New York Times* bestseller, *The Smartest Kids in the World*, Amanda Ripley, a former Emerson Fellow at the New America Foundation, identified high standards and rigor as key distinctions between the United States and high-performing nations like Finland, Poland, and South Korea—all countries that administer exit exams with far higher stakes than any test given in the United States and that see better student results on international achievement tests. Ripley explains:

> Finland had required a graduation test for 160 years; it was a way to motivate kids and teachers toward a clear, common goal, and it made a high school diploma mean something. Korea rerouted air traffic for their [sic] graduation test. Polish kids studied for their tests on nights and weekends, and they arrived for the exam wearing suits, ties, and dresses.
>
> In America, however, there were still many people who believed in a different standard, one that explained a great deal about the country's enduring mediocrity in education: According to this logic, students who had passed the required classes and come to school the required number of days should receive their diploma, regardless of what they had learned or what would happen to them when they tried to get a job . . . Those kids deserved a chance to fail later, not now. It was a perverse sort of compassion designed for a different century.[25]

Ripley is right. Sending high school graduates to college or work unprepared is often just sending them to fail somewhere else. And it is the norm in most states across the country. The same 2012 CEP survey found that only eight of the 25 states with exit exams in 2012 gave an exam that was aligned to college- and career-ready standards, and 22 provided alternate paths to general education students who could not meet the testing requirements.[26]

When it comes to high school course requirements, more states have established college- and career-ready expectations. Achieve's *Closing the Expectations Gap* 2013 found that 19 states and Washington, D.C. had adopted college- and career-ready high school graduation requirements, but only seven states and Washington, D.C. made these requirements mandatory. In other words, most states with college- and career-ready course requirements also offered less rigorous pathways for students that chose not to take the college- and career-ready curriculum. Further, seven of the 19 states allowed students to opt out of individual courses in the recommended sequence, especially advanced math, but still awarded these students the same diploma as those that had completed the full college- and career-ready curriculum.[27]

This kind of misalignment between secondary and postsecondary expectations is one reason why states, with federal encouragement, have adopted new, college- and career-ready standards in reading and math for K–12 schools. The new standards—either the Common Core developed with backing from the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School

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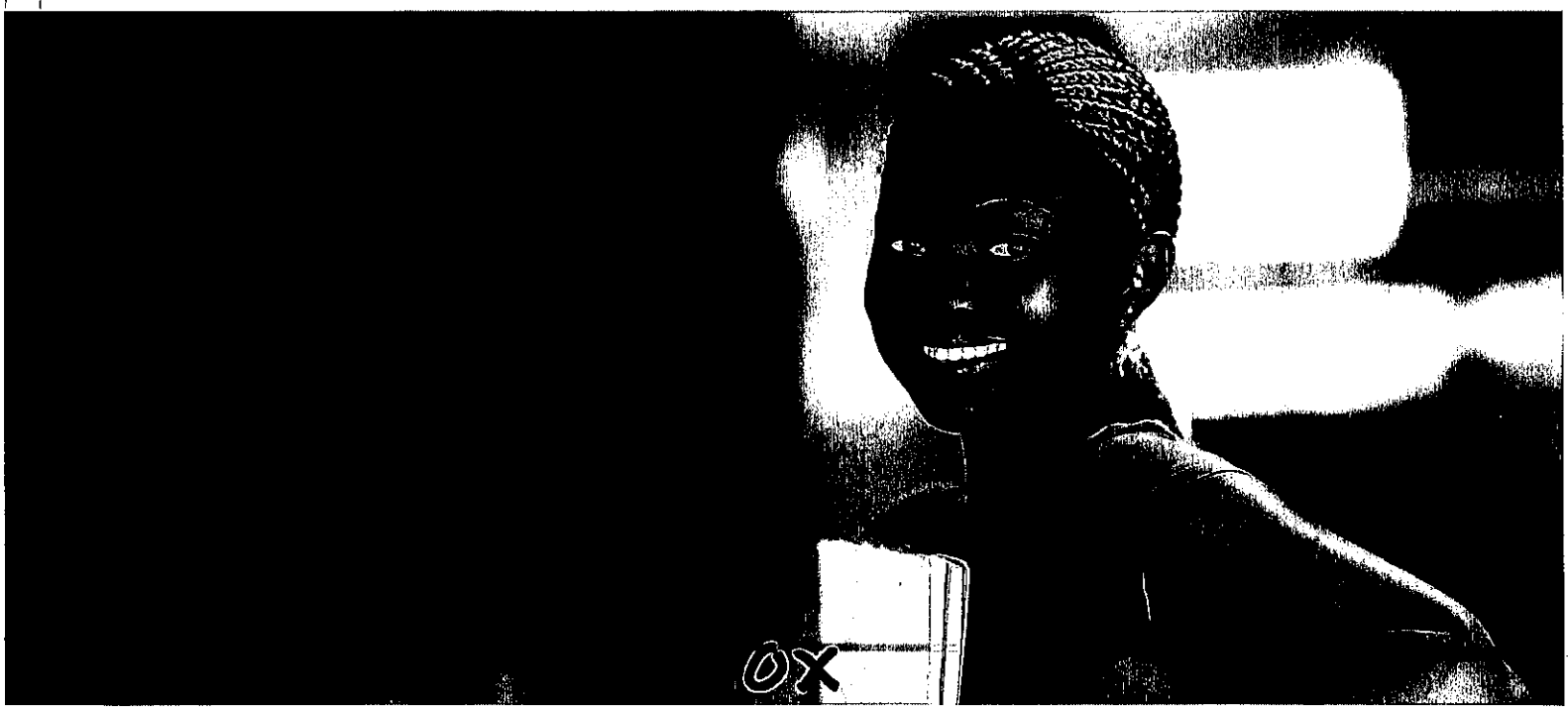
Officers (CCSSO), or standards unique to individual states, like the updated Virginia Standards of Learning—are perceived as more rigorous and challenging than previous academic standards. By bridging the gap between high school and higher education, these efforts explicitly aim to ensure students mastering the K–12 standards will be ready to enter credit-bearing courses in college, the military, or job training programs.

As teachers shift their instruction to reflect the new standards, states are also developing new standardized assessments in English Language Arts and math to measure student learning against them. Some states are choosing to do so collaboratively via two consortia that are designing Common Core-aligned tests with support from the federal government and philanthropy: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced). Other states plan to use assessment systems developed by ACT. And still others continue to develop their own tests with assistance from vendors, like Pearson or AIR (see "The Changes: States' High School Assessment Plans"). Regardless of the assessment chosen, however, most states will administer their new tests next year, although some have already implemented updated assessments.

Given the large number of students that currently require remediation in college, as well as the latest results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other tests, it seems certain that many students will fail to meet the new standards if cut scores on the new tests are set to accurately reflect postsecondary readiness. Drawing on ten years of research, in 2013, the National Assessment Governing Board produced data on twelfth graders' academic preparedness for college, based on their NAEP scores, for the first time. Only 39 percent of the nation's high school seniors were prepared for college-level math, and only 38 percent were prepared in reading.[28] Moreover, many students are far from that standard: 35 percent scored below basic in math, and 25 percent did so in reading.[29] And among ACT test takers nationally, only a quarter met all four college- and career-ready benchmark scores in English, reading, math, and science in 2013.[30] The experiences of early adopters of college- and career-ready tests are also instructive. While changes in proficiency rates from one year to next are crude growth measures, as different student cohorts are included in the year-to-year comparison, Kentucky and New York saw steep, double-digit declines in reading and math proficiency rates when they adopted college- and career-ready tests in 2011 and 2012.[31]

> "Two key elements of state policy are about to collide as states launch their new standards and assessment systems

Thus, two key elements of state policy are about to collide as states launch their new standards and assessment systems. If college- and career-ready standards and tests are simply fitted into states' existing infrastructure of high-stakes exit exams and graduation requirements, the pipeline of students from high school to college and the workforce could suddenly, catastrophically, clench shut. But if history is any indication, that is unlikely to happen. Instead, the impulse to avoid this outcome would be predictable: the dilution of the college- and career-ready standards and/or lower cut scores on the new assessments so that more students can pass and graduate. (See sidebar, "Responses to Accountability".)



Responses to Accountability

As standards-based accountability has been implemented widely, schools' and educators' responses have sometimes sacrificed rigor to avoid punitive consequences. So-called "gaming the system" has been especially problematic in places where administrators and educators lack the capacity, resources, or skills to adjust their practice to meet more challenging standards. For example, under NCLB, some states tinkered with their school improvement goals or their proficiency cut scores rather than engage in NCLB's regimen of improvement activities for greater numbers of schools.[32] And many blame high-stakes school and educator accountability for high profile cheating scandals in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and other districts.[33]

In this regard, updating accountability systems over the next several years to adjust to states' college- and career-ready standards will be especially fraught. Because educational accountability relies, in part, on standardized tests to differentiate between levels of performance and quality, states' new college- and career-ready assessments will play a critical role in how students, educators, and schools are held accountable for meeting the more rigorous expectations. And by all accounts, most stakeholders expect these tests to be much harder and demanding.

As the new tests are implemented, school and educator accountability systems aren't the only kinds of accountability susceptible to gaming or tinkering. In the past, high-stakes accountability for students has also put pressure on districts and states to reconsider the rigor of assessments or graduation requirements, or find easier pathways for those that can't meet them. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District adopted a plan in 2005 to require all students to pass the state's college prep curriculum, known as A-G requirements, starting with the class of 2016. But as the deadline crept nearer, the district adjusted the new rules during initial implementation, allowing students—temporarily—to pass their A-G classes with a 'D' despite the fact that the state university system sets a 'C' as the passing mark.[34] More recently, Texas eliminated its longstanding requirements for high school students to pass Algebra II to graduate, even as the state is simultaneously implementing college- and career-ready standards.[35] And this spring, New York lowered the cut scores on its college- and career-ready version of the Regents exams, worried about the effects of lower passing rates. The new scores are so low that students can answer two-thirds of the Algebra I questions incorrectly, and still earn a passing mark.[36] While these kinds of changes are often reasonable responses to ensure students are not subjected to unrealistic requirements or denied higher education opportunities, they do illustrate the tensions inherent in high-stakes, student accountability policies.

As more and more states embed college- and career-ready standards and assessments within their accountability measures, policymakers must be especially careful to design these systems in ways that avoid, to the greatest extent possible, detrimental responses from educators and local officials. These designs could include a gradual phase-in of accountability, or the creation of two different performance standards—one for graduation and another for college and career readiness. States, the testing consortia, and the federal government should also establish mechanisms to monitor the rigor of the standards and assessments as implemented, and should consider the kinds of training, resources, and skills local educators need to adjust their practice based on the information and data that accountability systems produce.

Neither outcome is ideal. No state wants to deny large numbers of students the opportunity to graduate from high school, especially when these students have not even been taught based on the new standards for the majority of their time in the K–12 system. Moreover, there are legal implications if states choose to withhold diplomas based on new college- and career-ready assessments: students must first be provided with adequate notice of the test requirement, and a fair opportunity to learn the material which they are required to master, which would likely be more difficult to demonstrate with standards that have only been in place for a few years.[37] But if states weaken the intent of college- and career-ready standards or the assessments in order to ensure students can graduate from high school, it will counteract their efforts to increase rigor and student achievement, build stronger curricula, authentically evaluate students' postsecondary readiness, create buy-in from higher education institutions, and use the assessments as one way to place students in college-level coursework.

The danger of this collision happening is real: at the time of the 2012 CEP survey, over 70 percent of Common Core-adopting states with exit exams planned to replace them wholesale with a consortia-designed assessment in English Language Arts and math. Given the obvious tensions between holding students accountable for higher standards and promoting higher educational attainment, the key question for parents, educators, policymakers, business and civic leaders, and advocates remains: **how can we best increase the rigor of a high school diploma and the number of students obtaining one simultaneously?**

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THE CHALLENGE: HOLDING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

From 1975 well into the new millennium, national high school graduation rates were essentially stagnant, fluctuating between 71 and 75 percent.[38] But in 2009, America's high schools broke through the 75 percent barrier, and by 2012, the nation's average four-year high school graduation rate reached 80 percent for the first time, despite any negative association between exit exams and high school graduation rates.[39] While there are still sizable graduation rate gaps between minority and white students, students of color have made some of the biggest gains in the last decade. In its annual Grad Nation report, America's Promise Alliance cited better data and school accountability as two possible reasons for the recent progress.[40]

But as states develop school, educator, and student accountability systems aligned to their new standards, getting students to graduate is no longer the only goal. The goal is to graduate them college- and career-ready. Balancing these two goals will be challenging, particularly as the standards and assessments are first implemented and students will not have experienced instruction aligned to these expectations for most of their time in the K–12 system. Too much emphasis on college and career readiness within accountability systems, and schools could be rewarded for neglecting, or even pushing out, students that are far below that standard. But with too great an emphasis on graduation rates, efforts to improve students' postsecondary preparedness and implement the new standards could be ignored or undermined.

As states transition to their new standards and assessments, the following sections analyze when and how they will administer college- and career-ready assessments in English Language Arts and math for high schools and how these assessments will be used for high-stakes accountability decisions for students. Given the disappointing research on the effectiveness of high school exit exams and past state and district responses to greater accountability, we are particularly concerned for states that plan to continue their exit exam policies and potentially use a college- and career-ready score as the passing mark. There are simply too few proven benefits for individual students as a result of exit exams, and some of the potential benefits of the new standards and assessments, including using them as one measure of student readiness for college-level courses, could be undermined if these policies continue. This is because it is very likely that states will manipulate or alter the college- and career-ready benchmark to allow more students to graduate if that benchmark is incorporated into exit exam policies. Fortunately, many states are avoiding this result—either by eliminating the exit exam requirement, phasing in the higher passing scores slowly, or setting two distinct scores, one for graduation and another for college and career readiness.

> “Getting students to graduate is no longer the only goal: they must also be college- and career-ready

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THE CHANGES: STATES' HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENT PLANS

Profiling States' High School Assessment Choices

Today, there are 44 states (including Washington, D.C.) that are implementing the Common Core standards, and 34 states committed to either PARCC or Smarter Balanced as governing members. But in the past year, states' assessment choices have become increasingly complicated and controversial. (See sidebar, "Just How Common is the Common Core?") And the high school assessment picture is even more so. For example, six states that are, ostensibly, governing members of PARCC or Smarter Balanced are not fully committed to using these assessments in high schools, even as they plan implement them in grades 3–8. Another seven states in the consortia face so much political uncertainty over their assessment policies that it is difficult to predict which tests will be administered to high schools, or to all schools, in the coming years.

Taking this information on states' policies and politics into account, we categorize states into five different college- and career-ready assessment profiles: the Honor Roll, the Exchange Students, the Loners, the Varsity Athletes, and the Drama Club (Figure 6).

Just How Common is the Common Core?

Five years ago, nearly every state used a different standardized assessment in its K–12 schools. Of course they did—states did not share academic standards, so each needed to develop a test that would be aligned to its particular expectations for students. That began to change in 2010, when the final draft of the Common Core State Standards was released by NGA and CCSSO on behalf of 48 states and Washington, D.C., the culmination of years of work by governors, state chiefs, nonprofits, educators, and national and state content experts.[41]

That year, the U.S. Department of Education also began accepting state applications for its first Race to the Top competition as part of the federal stimulus program, where states that committed to certain education reforms, including common college- and career-ready standards and assessments, could win a share of over $4 billion—an unprecedented figure for a federal competitive grant at a time when state education budgets sorely needed the funding.[42] In 2010, Race to the Top funds were also awarded to help form two consortia of states, PARCC and Smarter Balanced, to develop shared assessments aligned to the Common Core. States did not need to adopt Common Core or participate in either consortium to apply for Race to the Top, but they were awarded extra points in their applications for doing so, and all the eventual state winners did both. While state surveys have shown that the rigor of the standards was the predominant reason for adopting the Common Core, Race to the Top funding was also a factor.[43]

In total, by the fall of 2011—just 18 months after the first Race to the Top awards—45 states and Washington, D.C. had adopted the common standards and were participating in at least one of the groups developing common assessments, although the number of governing states in the testing consortia was lower: 20 states in Smarter Balanced and 15 in PARCC. Governing states commit to not only participating in test development, but also to piloting the new tests in 2013–14 and fully implementing them in 2014–15. Over time, the ranks of governing states grew as more and more states made their Common Core assessment choices. From March 2012 to July 2013, there were 41 governing states in either PARCC or Smarter Balanced, and nearly all the others were at least considering using one of the new shared college- and career-ready assessments.[44]

This level of interstate coordination in the name of common academic standards and assessments

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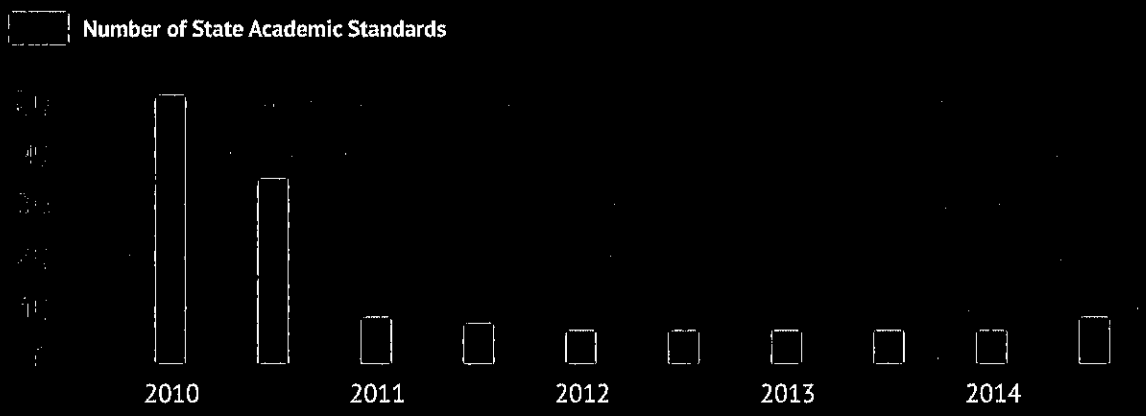
was astounding and unparalleled. Even by a more conservative count inclusive only of governing members, in less than three years, states committed to a plan where the U.S. education system would transition from using 51 different K–12 academic standards to as few as six, and from using 48 different statewide testing systems to as few as 12. This level of cohesion, however, would not last.

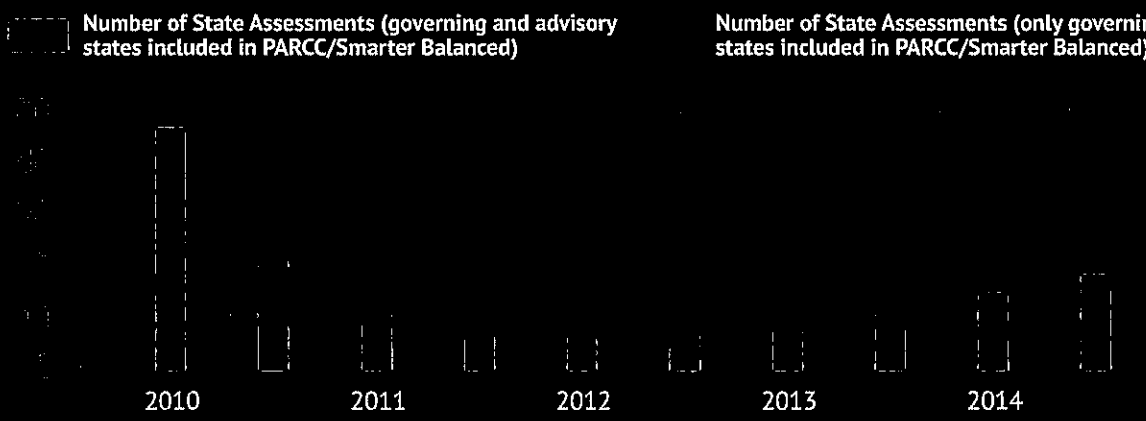
Over the last year, the robust coalition of states supporting the Common Core and the assessment consortia has started to fray. Now, concerns about the Common Core and the consortia have grown to dominate state education policy and politics, especially as the 2014–15 school year—the first year of full implementation for the tests—approaches. The criticisms run the gamut from the specific content of the standards (No calculus? Too much emphasis on informational texts?), to higher costs and technological requirements for the online testing systems (Do schools have sufficient bandwidth? Can we afford to spend $10 more/student?), and even outright conspiracy theories (Left-wing indoctrination? A Muslim Brotherhood plot?).[45]

Despite the outrageous nature of some of these critiques, the pushback against common standards and tests has gained momentum. **Since January 2013, 12 states, including those like Florida that were once among the strongest proponents of common assessments, have instead chosen to continue using tests particular to their individual states.**[46] And in the spring of 2014, in the midst of implementation, Indiana and Oklahoma became the first states to un-adopt the Common Core standards. Further, recently enacted legislation in South Carolina requires the state to adopt new academic standards before the 2015–16 school year, with similar bills under consideration in Missouri and North Carolina.[47]

Common Standards and Assessments Over Time

From 51 sets of state academic standards and 48 different state tests before the Common Core officially launched, to nine sets of standards and 19 different state tests in development today, states have generally converged around the idea of shared academic standards and assessments over the last four years. However, common assessments have become less appealing than the common standards as the 2014–15 school year approaches, with 10 states choosing to exit the consortia and build their own assessment system in the last 12 months. Further, as of June 2014, three states have left the common standards effort as well: Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina.





Source: New America analysis.

Figure 6. Who's Who: A Profile of State Assessment Choices

The Honor Roll

States that have adopted Common Core and plan to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced for grades 3–8 and high schools.[1]

23

PARCC: Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, Washington, D.C.

Smarter Balanced: Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia

The Exchange Students

States that were planning to give common tests, but ultimately, went back to their own countries.[2]

10

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Utah

The Varsity Athletes

States that are part of consortia for grades 3–8 but may make an exception and give special treatment (like using other tests) to high schools.[3]

6

California, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Wisconsin

The Loners

States that stayed to themselves and avoided the common standards and tests altogether.[4]

5

Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, Virginia

The Drama Club

States that may be involved with consortia but face legislative and executive conflicts around the new tests, for all grades or for high schools only.[5]

7

Arizona, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Tennessee, Wyoming

1. Rhode Island will plan to use PARCC in its high schools for only one year (in 2015). 2. Alabama, Kentucky and Wisconsin plan to administer tests developed by ACT as their statewide assessment in high school. Alabama is using the ACT Aspire system for grades 3–10 and high school, while Kentucky and Wisconsin only use ACT-developed exams in high schools (this includes ACT-developed end-of-course exams in Kentucky and the ACT Explore exam in Wisconsin). 3. All of these states are governing members of one of the consortia. California will be administering Smarter Balanced in high school, but has not taken steps to also eliminate the California High School Exit Exam. Some of these states (e.g., Massachusetts, New York) could eventually use Smarter Balanced or PARCC assessments for [illegible] Balanced. 4. Minnesota has adopted the Common Core in English Language Arts only. 5. All of the states, except Louisiana and Tennessee, are governing members of one of the consortia. Louisiana and Tennessee will both issue competitive bids to vendors, one of which could include the consortia, for their college and career ready assessment. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal has announced his plan to withdraw the state from PARCC, but Louisiana's Superintendent of Education, John White, is a supporter of PARCC and does not want the state to leave the consortium. However, White has also pledged that there will be at least a two-year delay of the PARCC tests for high schools and is receptive to selecting a different high school assessment. The North Carolina Board of Education has postponed adopting any new assessments until 2016–17, and there is legislation pending to reconsider the state's standards altogether. Iowa, Michigan, and Wyoming also face legislative and structural barriers in implementing new college and career ready assessments. For example, Michigan governor Rick Snyder recently signed a budget that prevents Smarter Balanced from being implemented in the 2014–15 school year. Though the state may be able to purchase some test items from the consortia to use in its state-developed assessment.

The stakes attached to high school tests for students, like those applied by exit exams, may be one reason for the additional hesitance and hand-wringing over high school testing. While the tests administered in grades 3–8 today usually matter for school accountability and, in a few places, educator accountability, they are not often linked to consequences for individual students in the elementary and middle grades. In other words, there may be greater anxiety about the consequences of switching tests in high schools, particularly when any costs (or benefits) directly affect a student's ability to progress from high school to college. A state knows how many students typically pass its state exit exam, but it has no idea how they will fare on the new Smarter Balanced or PARCC tests. And the majority of the 13 states that fit either the Drama Club or Varsity Athletes profile currently administer assessments that students must pass to graduate from high school, or that count for a portion of students' final course grades in certain subjects.

But this hesitance to administer the new college- and career-ready tests in high schools is, in some ways, counterintuitive given that the high school-level PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests are the ones that should give states the best gauge of whether students have actually met the new, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards in English Language Arts and math. What kind of message does it send when states adopt college- and career-ready standards, but do not use the accompanying assessments as the final measure of whether students are actually prepared?

Yet when policies—like exit exams—potentially pit readiness for higher education against access to it, it is little wonder that some states are especially cautious about using a new test, with different content and different features, if it could affect high school graduation rates or limit students' postsecondary opportunities.

Figure 7. Testing Colleges and Career Readiness in High School: A Mix of Timelines and Developers

The Honor Roll

States that have adopted Common Core and plan to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced for grades 3–8 and high schools.[1]

2015: Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, R. Island, Washington, D.C. (all PARCC), Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia (all Smarter Balanced)

2016: Rhode Island (PARCC)

The Exchange Students

States that were planning to give common tests, but ultimately, went back to their own countries.[2]

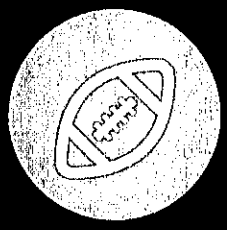
2012: Kentucky (ACT)

2013: Pennsylvania (Data Recognition Corp.)

2014: Alabama (ACT), Utah (AIR)

2015: Florida (AIR), Georgia (CTB/McGraw-Hill), Kansas (KU CETE), Oklahoma (vendor unknown), South Carolina (vendor unknown)

2016: Indiana (vendor unknown)



The Varsity Athletes

States that are part of consortia for grades 3–8 but may make an exception and give special treatment (like using other tests) to high schools.[3]

2014: New York (updated Regents exams)

2015: California (Smarter Balanced+ETS), Missouri (CTB/McGraw-Hill), Nevada (vendor unknown), Wisconsin (ACT)

?: Massachusetts (PARCC), New York (PARCC)

The Loners

States that stayed to themselves and avoided the common standards and tests altogether.[4]

2010: Nebraska (Data Recognition Corp.)

2012: Virginia (Pearson)

2014: Texas (Pearson)

2015: Alaska (KU CETE), Minnesota (Pearson)

The Drama Club

States that may be involved with consortia but face legislative and executive conflicts around the new tests, for all grades or for high schools only.[5]

2015: Arizona (vendor unknown)

2016: Tennessee (vendor unknown)

?: Louisiana (PARCC), Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Wyoming (all Smarter Balanced)

Notes: These timelines may be particular to the high school assessment only. For example, New York updated its 3–8 exams before the 2013–14 school year, and Massachusetts plans to decide if it will implement the PARCC exam in grades 3–8 after the 2014–15 school year, but will take longer to make a decision for its high school tests.

Transition TImelines and Diverse Developers

States' high school assessment implementation timelines also vary—even within states of similar profiles, as practical and political concerns have come to light (Figure 7). Thirty-four states are adopting new high school tests in the spring of 2015, but eight have already made changes to their high school assessment programs. While the transition timeline is a source of confusion, an even greater one is that many states have not yet selected vendors for a new high school assessment, or their entire K–12 testing system. This is especially problematic in states that, until recently, were governing members of PARCC or Smarter Balanced, including Arizona, Indiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Other consortia members have not yet decided to implement a new high school assessment—or state politicians will not let them. Massachusetts and New York are both in the undecided camp. Massachusetts' school districts can decide whether to use PARCC in 2014–15 or continue with the current testing system, the MCAS. The state board of education will not make a decision on which test to use in grades 3–8 until fall 2015, and will likely wait longer to make a decision for its high schools.[48] In New York, PARCC should be implemented in grades 3–8 in 2015–16 (although further delays are not out of the question), but there is no timeline for a similar high school transition, and the state is concurrently updating its long-standing Regents exams to be more aligned with the Common Core.[49]

Politics are also delaying the transition in Louisiana and North Carolina. In the course of a few months, Governor Bobby Jindal has become one of the most vocal conservative opponents of the Common Core and PARCC, proposing to pull Louisiana from both efforts against the wishes of the state board of education and Superintendent of Education John White.[50] White would like to maintain Louisiana's PARCC transition plan, in large part to provide teachers greater stability. He argues policymakers must give teachers "time to settle in and lead the way" on the Common Core.[51] But even if Jindal's effort is unsuccessful and Louisiana sticks with White's plan, it is uncertain whether the state will ever use PARCC in its high schools. It will be 2016–17, at least, before Louisiana could use the high school PARCC tests, and White would rather "wait and see how the marketplace resolves itself" before making a decision on the high school exam.[52] In North Carolina, the state board of education has already decided to delay its transition to new tests until the 2016–17 school year, with a task force making recommendations in the fall of 2014 about which test to use.[53] But now that both chambers of the state legislature have voted to direct the board to develop new standards that could replace the Common Core, the fate of Smarter Balanced in the Tar Heel state is less certain than ever.[54]

> “Other consortia members have not yet decided to implement a new high school assessment—or state politicians will not let them

State legislation is also a potential roadblock for new testing systems in Iowa, Wyoming, and Michigan. Wyoming needs to amend current law to retire its existing testing system, and a task force in Iowa is currently meeting to make recommendations to its state board and legislature on whether any new test should be implemented.[55] Meanwhile, Michigan's legislature has denied funding for Smarter Balanced to the state education agency for 2014–15, despite the fact that the state had suspended development of its own test to plan for the Common Core assessments and has recommended using Smarter Balanced after studying all the possible testing options.[56] Now, the state education agency is exploring purchasing some of the Smarter Balanced questions to enhance its existing state test.[57] "If we don't have Smarter Balanced, we won't have a test," according to State Superintendent Mike Flanagan.[58]

End-of-Course or Comprehensive College- and Career-Ready Exams

The choices states are facing as they decide whether to give Smarter Balanced or PARCC and when also have implications for the overall design of high school assessment systems. Our analysis shows that the trend toward high school end-of-course exams (EOC), rather than a comprehensive assessment given at a certain grade, will likely continue in the Common Core era, even though the two consortia typify both models (Figure 8).[59] Smarter Balanced is planning to deliver a comprehensive exam in grade 11, with the option for states to administer similar exams in grades 9 and 10, while PARCC is developing exams that can more easily adapt to an end-of-course model, including Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, English I, English II, and English III. Many states use—and will use—a combination of both kinds of tests, particularly when including exams in other subjects, like science, or college entrance exams the state administers for free to all students, like the ACT or SAT.

88x

Figure 8. End-of-Course Exams vs. Comprehensive College- and Career-Ready Exams

NOW	FUTURE
25 states administer only comprehensive assessments in high schools, including college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT, where the state administers them to all students. Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming	**18 states plan to administer comprehensive high school assessments, and no state is transitioning to this kind of system. Most of these states are members of Smarter Balanced.** Alaska, California, Connecticut, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming
10 states administer only EOC assessments in high schools. Indiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Virginia	**18 states plan to administer only EOC exams as their high school assessments. These states are PARCC members or will use their own tests.** *Arkansas, Arizona, Georgia,* Indiana, *Illinois*, Maryland, *Massachusetts,* Mississippi, *New Jersey, New Mexico,* New York, *Ohio*, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Virginia, *Washington, D.C.*
16 states administer both kinds of assessments, EOC and comprehensive exams, in high schools. Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Washington, Washington, D.C.	**15 states plan to administer both EOC and comprehensive tests. These states represent both consortia and non-consortia members.** Alabama, *Colorado*, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, *Idaho,* Kentucky, Louisiana, *Missouri, Nevada,* North Carolina, *Rhode Island,* South Carolina, Tennessee, Washington

Notes: Italicized states are those that plan to change the format of their future high school assessments. Assessments surveyed include all subjects, and assessments must be required of all of the state's high school students. Of the seven states whose assessment plans are particularly uncertain (see Figure 7), the format of their high school exams will likely not change regardless of their choice of assessment, with the exception of Massachusetts. If Massachusetts does not implement PARCC in high schools, the state will continue to use both EOC and comprehensive exams.

Source: New America analysis.

States switching from comprehensive to EOC exams may face the most significant changes, especially because students are often tested in only one grade in a comprehensive system, whereas EOC tests are administered whenever a student takes the course. Illinois and Rhode Island, for example, only test high school juniors with their current exams, but will be using course-specific exams in more grades as they transition to PARCC. The same is true in Ohio, which currently has a tenth-grade assessment. Missouri is the only state moving away from an EOC-only system as it starts to also offer the ACT to all students. During these transitions, students will experience both systems—taking some, but not all, of the new EOC tests as juniors or seniors, or taking the old comprehensive exam in the tenth grade and a new EOC the following year. States will need to carefully explain these changes to students and their families, particularly if the tests are used as part of course or graduation requirements, or if schools are planning to start offering college entrance exams free of charge for the first time.

The design of states' high school assessments also affects how they can be used for student accountability—a particularly important consideration for states that are weighing the potential trade-offs in moving toward more rigorous standards while maintaining their exit exam policies. A series of EOC exams is often more versatile than a comprehensive exam. For example, students could be required to pass a certain percentage of EOC tests, to earn a certain cumulative score across the entire series, or to pass only the exams in lower-level courses (like Algebra I, but not Algebra II). Further, EOC exams can be used as part of final course grades, rather than as an exit exam requirement. A comprehensive high school assessment does not lend itself as well to these kinds of variations in exit exam design.

89x

College-and-Career Ready Benchmarks

Obviously, many states are planning significant changes to their high school assessments in the coming years, but the most important question may not be whether a state chooses PARCC, Smarter Balanced, or the ACT, but whether these assessments are—or will be—benchmarked to a college- and career-ready performance level. In other words, will these tests actually measure whether students are prepared for college and the workforce? And if they do, using these assessments as exit exams may create a dilemma for state officials: how to hold students accountable for higher standards without erecting additional barriers to opportunity or limiting access to higher education.

Much as the College Board and ACT have conducted validity studies to establish a particular score on their tests that is associated with a high probability of success in higher education, both PARCC and Smarter Balanced have determined that a certain performance level on their assessments will indicate a student is likely to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses. While the particular scale score at these levels has not been determined, PARCC has set its college- and career-ready distinction at level four out of five, and Smarter Balanced at level four out of four (although students at level three on Smarter Balanced may subsequently demonstrate their readiness in twelfth grade).

> The most important question is whether high school assessments will be benchmarked to a college- and career-ready performance level.

Both consortia plan to establish cut scores for each level by the summer of 2015, at the latest, and reaching a consensus within the consortia will likely be a delicate process.[60] The future stakes on these scores are high, and states are accustomed to making these decisions independently. The cut scores may influence not only which states are perceived as "better" within the consortia, but also which schools are low-performing, which educators are most effective, and of course, which students are ready for college. And for states with exit exams policies there is added pressure to get the score "right," since the exams determine both who is ready for college, and also who can access it by earning a high school diploma. For these reasons, many states are considering how to decouple the two, setting a different score for graduation requirements than for a college- and career-readiness determination.

Because PARCC and Smarter Balanced have only set performance level descriptors, and not actual scores associated with each level, the vast majority of states have not yet incorporated scores on these exams into their official policies, preferring a wait-and-see approach. One exception is Colorado, which has set a score of four on the PARCC exam as one way students will be able to meet new competency-based graduation requirements. Colorado has also identified the necessary scores on other exams, including ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and will be approving other locally designed options for students to demonstrate mastery of the college- and career-ready competencies.[61] These policies have not yet gone into effect, but as they are implemented, state officials will be watching closely to ensure there are a number of options for students that cannot meet the "college- and career-ready" level on PARCC, especially vulnerable student groups like English language learners and students with disabilities.

More states currently use college- and career-ready benchmarks established by the College Board or ACT in various policies, even if these tests are not administered to all of the state's students. For example, **17 states** use SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement, and/or International Baccalaureate test scores in some way in their school accountability systems.[62] Additionally, a few states have created college- and career-ready benchmarks on state assessments. California students can opt to take the Early Assessment Program (EAP) test, developed with the California State University (CSU) system, to measure college readiness in English and math. EAP results are then used by all CSUs and many California community colleges to exempt students from college placement tests, helping them avoid unnecessary remediation.[63] The EAP, however, will likely be discontinued with the advent of Smarter Balanced in California.[64] And since 2012, Kentucky, which uses the ACT as part of its high school assessment system, has had common indicators of college readiness for public institutions of higher education across the state.[65] As cut scores are established on the PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams, more states may begin to adopt similar policies to bring their secondary and postsecondary systems into greater alignment.[66]

90x

THE CHANGES: STATES' STUDENT ACCOUNTABILITY POLICIES

As states are making dramatic changes to their high school assessments, and facing increasing levels of uncertainty over what those assessments will be and when they will be administered, it would be easy for policymakers to ignore questions about how their tests of college and career readiness will be used, or push these decisions off to a later time. After all, it seems counterintuitive to determine how an assessment should be used before selecting that assessment, administering or piloting it, and examining the results.

But these policy choices will be essential to the future success of whatever college- and career-ready assessment a state selects—and to successful implementation of college- and career-ready standards overall. State policy is likely to have an outsized influence on how the new tests are received by teachers, students, parents, and the public. What are the stakes involved, and for whom? Are there any punitive consequences for poor performance, and how and when would they be applied? These decisions, and how they are explained to stakeholders, will be critical in shaping the environment in which the new tests will eventually operate. In this way, it is precisely the states that have made the most changes, or that face the greatest uncertainty, that should now pay greatest attention to their policies around the use of assessments. Even if legislators or policymakers cannot definitively say what test will be given in 2015 or 2016, they could help stabilize and clarify the transition for educators, students, and families by addressing key policies that will apply regardless of which test is selected.

But high school exit exam policies will not just affect individual students. Because they operate at the crucial transition between high school and higher education, they also affect states' larger efforts to increase college and career readiness through the adoption of new standards, like the Common Core. On their own, the college- and career-ready assessments only aim to determine *who is ready* for college. But when used as an exit exam, they could now also determine *who is able to go* to college by earning a high school diploma. States that continue to use exit exams as they shift to college- and career-ready standards will have to consider the trade-offs between these two uses of assessments. While both higher standards and higher educational attainment are important policy goals, they could work against one another if states' new college- and career-ready tests are used as exit exams without careful thought and a deliberate transition strategy.

Past, Present, and Future: State High School Exit Exam Policies

In 2012, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) found that **25 states** required students to pass an exit exam to graduate high school, and in future years, two states planned to phase out their policies, while one state planned to add an exit exam. Further, two states had recently dropped their exit exam policies for the 2011–12 school year, North Carolina and Tennessee. When CEP asked specifically about how the transition to the Common Core affected their exit exams, 14 of the 22 responding states indicated that they planned to maintain an exit exam requirement, and just six were unsure.

However, our analysis reveals the extent to which states' policies have—and have not—changed in the last two years. Today, many states still have their exit exams in place, but the number of states that could potentially continue these policies moving forward is higher than the 14 reported in 2011–12. Based on a scan of current state policy and assessments in all subjects, **24 states** had an exit exam requirement in place for the class of 2014, and **as many as 21 states** could have an exit exam as they transition to college- and career-ready standards and assessments.[67] In these states, officials will be confronted with the dilemma of how to hold students accountable for higher academic standards while making higher education an option for as many of them as possible. Since the CEP survey, only Arkansas has eliminated its exit exam. Moving forward, Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Minnesota, and South Carolina will also eliminate their exit exams, while Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island may adopt an exit exam policy (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Past, Present, and Future: State High School Exit Exams

THEN [Class of 2012]	NOW [Class of 2014]	FUTURE
25 states have an exit exam requirement Alabama, Alaska, *Arkansas*, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts , Minnesota, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington	**24 states** have an exit exam requirement *Alabama, Alaska, Arizona*, California, Florida, *Georgia*, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, *Minnesota*, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, *South Carolina*, Texas, Virginia, Washington	**As many as 21 states** could have an exit exam requirement California, **Connecticut,** Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, **Pennsylvania, Rhode Island,** Texas, Virginia, Washington
14 states plan to maintain an exit exam requirement after adopting Common Core Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon	**9 states** use high school tests as a portion of students' final course grades Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, *Texas*	**At least 11 states** plan to use high school tests as a portion of students' final course grades **Alabama, Arizona,** Florida, **Georgia,** Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee
2 states plan to eliminate an exit exam requirement Alabama, Georgia		**7 states** will have eliminated an exit exam requirement Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Minnesota, South Carolina
6 states undecided on a future exit exam requirement after adopting Common Core Indiana, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, Washington		

Note: Italicized states are those that plan to eliminate their policy in the future; [illegible] states in bold are those that plan to adopt the [illegible]

Source: 2011-12 data are from the Center on Education Policy's 2011 study, "State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition." Questions about states' exit exam plans related to Common Core did not include states that had not adopted the standards (e.g., Texas). New 2014 data are from a New America analysis, which does not include state surveys but is inclusive of all 50 states, plus Washington, D.C.

The shift to college- and career-ready standards is one reason states are reconsidering their exit exam policies. For example, South Carolina is removing its exit exam requirement, and instead will require students to take, but not earn a certain score on, the ACT WorkKeys and a college readiness test. As Melanie Barton, director of the state's Education Oversight Committee, put it, "the [exit exam] doesn't give students any information to move forward. It's a bare-minimum criteria to get a diploma ... The bar has been raised. The diploma is no longer enough."[68] The assessment policy changes have also been welcomed by local educators across the state as a way to help and encourage all students to succeed after high school. As one district superintendent explained, it "means that we have to look at all options to help students be successful and not look at selecting and sorting students into being unsuccessful."[69]

Unlike requiring students to earn a particular test score to graduate, some states use standardized tests as final exams and incorporate performance on them into course grades. **Nine states** currently use high school assessments toward students' final grades, and **at least 11 states** plan to do so in the future. This is one alternative to high-stakes exit exams, and it works particularly well in states that administer end-of-course exams, as opposed to comprehensive ones that can cover content taught in several grades or subjects. When EOC tests are used for course grades, rather than as an exit exam, the assessments can still be used to inform students, families, higher education, and employers of an individual student's postsecondary readiness, and there is still an incentive for students to work hard and perform well on the test, since there are consequences for poor performance. But rather than deny students a diploma, this poor performance is reflected in their grade point averages.

Where High School Exit Exams and the Consortia Collide

States' exit exam policies are evolving, however, in tandem with their efforts to adopt college- and career-ready assessments. Will states use consortia-designed tests to both determine students' preparedness for higher education and their ability to access it by earning a high school diploma? If so, efforts to increase high school graduation rates and college and career readiness could collide with, rather than complement, one another. If a particular cut score is tied to graduation, most states, at least initially, will try to designate a score that the vast majority of students can meet—which will likely be below the college- and career-ready determination, or even in-between the performance level descriptors set by the consortia. This least-disruptive strategy is preferable to requiring students to suddenly meet college- and career-ready benchmarks to graduate, but it does make it even more critical to communicate clearly with students. If one score is used for graduation requirements, while different scores are used for college placement, school accountability, or other purposes, achieving clarity about what signifies college and career readiness will require more nuance and explanation.

High school assessments have not always been used for these purposes. In 2004, only Georgia indicated to CEP that it used exit exams to ensure students were prepared for college and careers, but twelve states did so in 2012: Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington. This shift is likely due, at least in part, to the increased urgency and attention toward improving students' preparation for college and the workforce. Along these lines, **18 states** in the 2012 survey reported that they planned to replace their current exit exam with a new assessment aligned to the Common Core standards. Only California planned to continue administering its current exit exam rather than update it to align with the new standards.[70]

> States' exit exam policies are evolving in tandem with their efforts to adopt college- and career-ready assessments

Even though the number of states with exit exams has not changed dramatically since 2012, our analysis shows that the tests states are using—and plan to use—in English Language Arts and math for these purposes have changed (Figure 10). This reflects both greater certainty on the part of some states, who finalized their testing decisions over the last two years, as well as greater uncertainty in other states over the use of the Common Core and/or the consortia-developed tests. **Half of the states that were planning to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced as their exit exam in 2012 have reversed those plans, or are uncommitted to transitioning to the consortia tests in the future.** This includes seven of the 13 states that were previously planning to use the PARCC tests, and one of the three that were planning to use Smarter Balanced as exit exams. Two states (South Carolina and Washington) that were unsure of their plans in 2012 have now solidified their exit exam policies, but they have been replaced by more states on the fence about how they will use tests for graduation or course grades.

93x

Figure 10. States' Changing Plans to Use PARCC or Smarter Balanced as Exit Exams

THEN (2011–12)	NOW (2013–14)
16 states planned to replace their exit exam with a consortia-developed test (PARCC or Smarter Balanced) *Arizona, Arkansas, Florida,* Idaho, *Indiana, Louisiana,* Maryland, *Massachusetts,* Mississippi, *Nevada,* New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, *Oklahoma,* Oregon, Rhode Island	**10 states** plan to replace their exit exam with a consortia-developed test (PARCC or Smarter Balanced) Connecticut, Idaho, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington
3 states planned to use their existing exit exam or replace it with a new state-developed test *Alabama,* California, *New York*	**8 states** plan to use their existing exit exam or replace it with a new state test California, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia
	6 states plan to use their existing exam or a new state test toward students' final course grades Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, Pennsylvania
2 states were uncertain about what their future exit exam will be *South Carolina, Washington*	**3 states** are uncertain about what their future exit exam will be Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York
	5 states are uncertain about what their future end-of-course exam toward students' final grades will be Arizona, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee

Notes: [illegible] states are those that changed their plans since the CEP 2012 survey.

Sources: 2011–12 plans are from the Center on Education Policy's 2012 state survey "State High School Exit Exams: A Policy in Transition." One topic about states' current plans related to Common Core tests did not include [illegible] that had not adopted the standards (e.g., Texas). Data are from a New America analysis, which does not include state surveys and so includes all 50 states plus Washington, D.C.

Figure 11. The Overlap Between States' Assessments Choices and Exit Exam Policy Choices

The Honor Roll

States that have adopted Common Core and plan to use PARCC or Smarter Balanced for grades 3–8 and high schools.[1]

43% Plan to use their high school assessment (PARCC or Smarter Balanced) in a high-stakes capacity for students: Connecticut, Idaho, Maryland, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington

57% Do not plan to use their high school assessment (PARCC or Smarter Balanced) in a high-stakes capacity for students: Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Washington, D.C.

43% Have High Stakes Policy

The Exchange Students

States that were planning to give common tests, but ultimately, went back to their own countries.[2]

80% Plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: *Alabama,* Florida, *Georgia,* Indiana, *Kentucky,* Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, *South Carolina*

20% Do not plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: Kansas, Utah

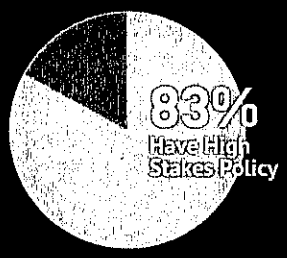
80% Have High Stakes Policy

The Varsity Athletes

States that are part of consortia for grades 3–8 but may make an exception and give special treatment (like using other tests) to high schools.[3]

83% Plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: California, Massachusetts, *Missouri,* Nevada, New York

17% Do not plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: Wisconsin



The Loners

States that stayed to themselves and avoided the common standards and tests altogether.[4]

40% Plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: Texas, Virginia

60% Do not plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska

40% Have High Stakes Policy

The Drama Club

States that may be involved with consortia but face legislative and executive conflicts around the new tests, for all grades or for high schools only.[5]

57% Plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: *Arizona,* Louisiana, *North Carolina, Tennessee*

43% Do not plan to use their high school assessment in a high-stakes capacity for students: Iowa, Michigan, Wyoming

57% Have High Stakes Policy

[illegible] the assessment as an exit exam.

Additionally, there appears to be a relationship between states that plan to continue using assessments as an exit exam (or toward a final course grade) and the uncertainty of their assessment choices (Figure 11). Four out of ten PARCC and Smarter Balanced states are considering using those tests in high-stakes ways in English Language Arts and math, but the proportion for states that have abandoned the consortia for their own state-developed assessments is much higher. Eight out of ten states in the "exchange student" and "varsity athlete" profiles deploys their high school tests in a high-stakes way for students. While there are many reasons for states to choose another assessment, on top of the deepening ideological and political fault lines surrounding the Common Core, the stakes involved with these testing decisions for students—and not just schools or educators—only add to the importance of selecting a college- and career-ready test and transitioning to it in a smart, intentional way. And it is hardly surprising that states would be especially cautious about switching their assessments if those tests determine whether students graduate from high school, setting up a conflict between measuring preparedness for college and careers and helping students to get there via earning a high school diploma.

State Strategies for Maintaining Student Accountability while Transitioning to College- and Career-Ready Assessments

Given the stakes, states have made several kinds of changes to their exit exam policies as they begin to administer college- and career-ready assessments. While the three states that are planning to adopt exit exams in the future (Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut) may not have to grapple with reconciling an exit exam policy across two different assessments, the 24 states with existing exit exams will. College- and career-ready exit exams require states to balance the tensions between the higher expectations and higher educational attainment: the more prepared for college and careers students must be to pass the exit exam, the less likely it is that most students will be able to meet that standard and graduate from high school. And much as states are pausing or modifying their accountability systems for teachers and schools by suspending the designation of new low-performing schools or delaying when teacher evaluations will inform personnel decisions, most states are taking a careful, deliberate approach to their exit exams, adopting various timelines and transition plans as the more rigorous expectations take effect (Figure 12).[71]

How States Plan to Lower the Stakes on High School Tests

Over the next three years, **10 states with high-stakes tests for students plan to ease those stakes** as full implementation of college- and career-ready assessments begins. Two states plan to adopt end-of-course exams and use the results toward students' grades as a replacement for their exit exams (Strategy #2: Alabama, Georgia), while four have passed legislation to eliminate the exit exam altogether (Strategy #1: Arkansas, Alaska, Minnesota, South Carolina). And although the state is not participating in the Common Core, Texas has also modified its exit exam policy by reducing the number of required assessments. Originally, Texas students in the Class of 2015 would have had to pass 15 end-of-course exams to graduate, but the state legislature changed this requirement before it had even taken full effect, maintaining just five of the tests (Strategy #3).[72]

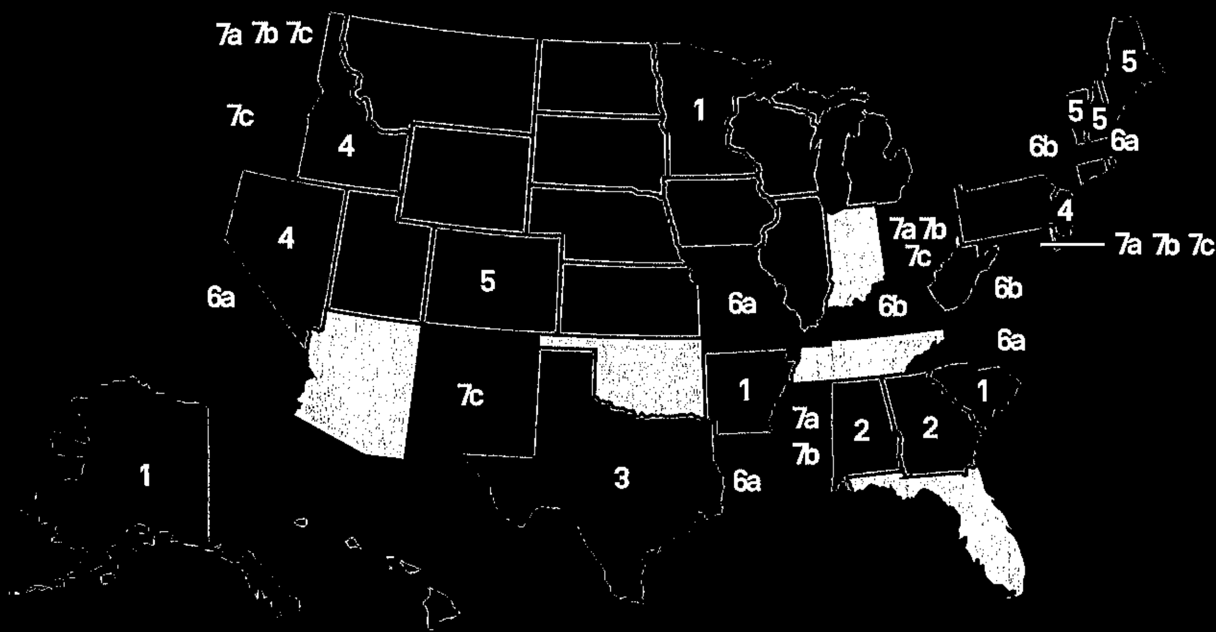
Idaho, Nevada, and New Jersey have taken a slightly different approach. Rather than lowering the stakes for students, they plan to pause them to allow schools to teach the new standards for several years before incorporating them into exit exam policies (Strategy #4). For example, New Jersey students in the class of 2014 still needed to pass the comprehensive High School Proficiency Assessment in reading, writing, and math to graduate, but this was the last year the test was administered—and it will likely be at least 2019 before the PARCC exam is used in a similar way.[73] Idaho will have a one-year pause: students in the class of 2016 will have to pass neither the Smarter Balanced exam, nor the existing Idaho Standards Achievement Test, to graduate from high school.[74] Nevada is developing its own end-of-course exams for high schools, which will be launched in the 2016–17 school year to replace the Nevada High School Proficiency Exam, but will not use the new course-specific tests for graduation purposes until the class of 2019.[75] These pauses allow states to effectively manage the transition to new tests in the short-term, but they still need to indicate the passing score students will need to attain in the long-term—weighing the potential benefits of holding students accountable for college- and career-ready standards against the potential costs of preventing them from graduating from high school.

Other states are experimenting with competency-based requirements, allowing some or all students to demonstrate that they are proficient on the new standards in more flexible ways (Strategy #5: Colorado, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont). Here, New Hampshire is the trailblazer, abandoning the use of seat time to measure students' learning in 2005, so that all high schools were awarding course "credits" based on competencies for the class of 2012. While these systems are still a work in progress, the state has subsequently updated its competencies to reflect college and career readiness and is relying on local school districts to ensure that there will be appropriate assessments in place for high school students to show their mastery, in addition to the state's Smarter Balanced test.[76]

Because the consortia tests share some elements with competency-based approaches, like performance tasks, Paul Leather, New Hampshire's Deputy Commissioner of Education, sees Smarter Balanced as a "bridge" between the old system of standardized, end-of-year tests and a new competency-driven one, and other states seem to agree.[77] Colorado, Maine, and Vermont have

96x

Figure 12. How States with High-Stakes Testing Policies are Transitioning to College- and Career-Ready Assessments



New Policies to Lessen the Stakes on High School Assessments

- 1 — Strategy #1: eliminate high school exit exams
- 2 — Strategy #2: replace exit exam with EOC exams for final grades[1]
- 3 — Strategy #3: require fewer end-of-course exams to graduate
- 4 — Strategy #4: pause the exit exam requirement
- 5 — Strategy #5: move toward competency-based requirements[2]

Transition Strategies to Keep the Stakes on High School Assessments

- 6a — Strategy #6a: use the same exam with the same cut scores[3]
- 6b — Strategy #6b: use the same exam with higher cut scores[4]
- 7a — Strategy #7a: use a new exam but offer old exam during transition
- 7b — Strategy #7b: use a new exam but only for lower-level courses
- 7c — Strategy #7c: use a new exam but a two-cut-score approach

Other Transition Strategies

- Uncertain Transition Plans[5]
- States Implementing Exit Exam Policies for the First Time

1. Georgia is eliminating all of its exit exams in favor of end-of-course exams, with the exception of its comprehensive writing test.
2. The four states moving toward competency-based approaches do not currently use their assessments as exit exams, nor do they plan to do so in the future.
3. California and Missouri plan to continue their current graduation testing requirements and have not announced a timeline for retiring their current assessments, although California will also be administering the Smarter Balanced exam. Louisiana, Massachusetts, and North Carolina may retire their current high school graduation tests, but these changes would affect the classes of 2019 or 2020, at the earliest.
4. [illegible] in 2012. New York will not require graduating students to meet college- and career-ready benchmarks on its Regents exams until the class of 2022, at the earliest. These tests could be updated Regents exams or the PARCC exams.
5. There are competing accounts as to whether Florida will use its new state tests developed by AIR for the 2014–15 school year, as [illegible], and if so, how the state will navigate the transition. Arizona, Nevada, and Tennessee have not articulated high-stakes testing transition policies, likely because they have not selected a vendor for their college- and career-ready end-of-course assessments. [illegible] may be phasing out its end-of-course exams as a current graduation requirement, and is [illegible] its comprehensive testing system into [illegible] exams, in addition to its rejection of the Common Core standards in June 2014. Oklahoma's future high school testing policies are particularly volatile.

also articulated plans to develop competency-based systems, including graduation requirements, in the future. Although none of these leading states have exit exams, the competency-based approach could become a prominent alternative to exit exams, as several states with graduation test requirements are considering this kind of system.[78] Achieve's Competency-Based Pathways State Partnership includes states with high-stakes high school assessment plans, like Kentucky, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Rhode Island. The Partnership is assisting these states in competency-based approaches to college and career readiness, including graduation requirements.[79] Further, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has noted that only nine states do not offer districts the option to define the credit hour more flexibly.[80]

How States Plan to Keep the Stakes on High School Tests

While seven states are easing high-stakes accountability permanently for students during the transition to college- and career-ready tests, **twice as many states are planning to maintain their current policies without a pause.** They are facing an array of possible choices as they seek to implement rigorous standards and assess students' preparedness faithfully, without stifling access to higher education or lowering students' educational attainment (Figure 12).

One possible choice, however, is more of a non-choice: **five states are maintaining their exit exams by default**—remaining noncommittal to new assessments and keeping their current testing regimes for the foreseeable future (Strategy #6a). California, for example, is unwavering in its plans to use the Smarter Balanced tests and even won a special testing waiver from the federal government to fully transition to Smarter Balanced a year earlier than planned.[81] But the state continues to use the California High School Exit Exam as a graduation requirement, even though it is not aligned to the Common Core standards being taught in schools. While the state has contemplated using part of the Smarter Balanced test to replace the exit exam and is considering possible alternatives, an official plan has not been announced.[82] Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, and North Carolina are also maintaining their current tests, and hence, their high-stakes policies, for the time being.

Kentucky, New York, and Virginia are similarly avoiding the consortia tests, except they have already started to use other assessments that are aligned to more rigorous standards (Strategy #6b). Rather than an exit exam, Kentucky adopted end-of-course tests developed by the ACT in 2012 as part of students' final course grades, and these tests are linked to the ACT's college-ready benchmarks. Virginia phased in new cut scores on its state-developed tests in 2012 and 2013.[83] It is unclear, however, how rigorous unique state college- and career-ready determinations, like those in New York and Virginia, will be, as they lack the external pressure from other states to set their scores at a certain level, and are not linked to an established college-ready benchmark used by postsecondary institutions. It is particularly telling that when Virginia first established its new scores, proficiency rates for elementary schools fell more significantly than at the secondary level.[84] And just as the new tests were launched, New York lowered the cut scores on its college- and career-ready version of the Regents exams, worried about the effects of lower passing rates. The new scores are so low that students can answer two-thirds of the Algebra I questions incorrectly, and still pass.[85] This lower proficiency score may be appropriate for a graduation requirement, especially as the new tests are first introduced, but it should not be confused with a sign of college and career readiness if that is not what the lower cut score is measuring.

In some ways, states that have opted to keep their existing tests have an easier path forward than those that are simultaneously implementing a new college- and career-ready testing system and attempting to hold students accountable for the results. In these states, their potential policy choices could pit the success of the new consortia exams, and their ability to accurately gauge students' mastery of the Common Core, against the success of students and their future educational opportunities. To avoid this outcome, our analysis finds that **six of the 10 states that are planning to use Smarter Balanced or PARCC assessments for high-stakes graduation decisions have created the most nuanced, intricate, and complicated transition plans**: Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, and Washington. Unlike Idaho and New Jersey, where the exit exam will be put on hold as the consortia assessments are launched, these states are trying to manage a multi-year process of phasing-in new tests, retiring old ones, and determining graduation requirements and alternative options for each subsequent cohort in a way that reflects both the urgency of college and career readiness for all students and the need for fairness and thoughtful implementation of higher standards.

It is no easy task to create a seamless process for students between the old graduation tests and the new ones coming from PARCC and Smarter Balanced. One common approach is to phase-in the new tests over several years (Strategy #7a: Maryland, Mississippi, Ohio, Washington). This overlap allows states to continue using their existing tests for current students, and only require the consortia tests as an exit exam for younger students, often those that are now in middle school. Another tactic—particularly for states that use end-of-course exams—is to use the exams associated with lower-level courses for graduation requirements, but not the exams associated with more advanced subjects (Strategy #7b). For example, Maryland will offer the PARCC exams in English 9, 10, and 11 and in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, but only the English 10 and Algebra I tests will be used as exit exams. In this way, the state can avoid pitting the new expectations against students' graduation prospects, with only the most advanced tests used for measuring postsecondary readiness, including whether students require remediation in college.[86] Mississippi, Ohio, and Washington are also taking this approach in tandem with a gradual phase-in of the new tests.[87]

Put another way, these states will offer two graduation tests (the old state-developed test and PARCC or Smarter Balanced) and will split how the suite of consortia tests are used (some for graduation, others for college and career readiness). But there is another element of bifurcation in their plans. **Most are also establishing two cut scores**—a college- and career-ready score, and a lower score, or composite score, for graduation (Strategy #7c). Maryland and Ohio plan to establish composite scores on the end-of-course exams that are required for graduation (which do not include English 11 or Algebra II), implying

98x

that the graduation score will not be the equivalent of the college- and career-ready benchmark. Washington's state board has also implied that it will use two different scores. New Mexico is arguably the clearest, explicitly stating that its passing score on the PARCC exam will be a three out of five (although the state has not indicated if this applies to every PARCC exam, or just a sampling).[88] And Oregon is prohibited by state law from establishing a cut score on its new Smarter Balanced exit exam that is more rigorous than its current exam, the OAKS, until 2019—and even then, the state may not choose to increase its passing benchmark at all.[89] Mississippi, however, has not yet communicated what its new cut score will be.[90]

A two-cut-score approach is appealing because it reduces the incentive for states to manipulate and/or lower the college- and career-ready benchmark score in order to meet graduation rate accountability targets and maintain the pipeline of students from high school to higher education. And although there are trade-offs to this strategy, they are relatively minor. With multiple scores used for different purposes, it could become confusing for students why one score is good enough to graduate, but not good enough to escape remediation in college—particularly if the K–12 system makes it appear that a high school diploma signifies college and career readiness, regardless of students' mastery of the standards by the time they graduate. Communicating these differences clearly should be a priority for states that take the two-score approach. Finally, it is worth noting that even within a two-cut-score system, states still face pressure to choose the "right" scores, especially on the lower one used for graduation. This could have implications for the quality or validity of the new tests at the lower-end of the readiness spectrum, even if the higher college- and career-ready score is set at a rigorous level.

The Evergreen State: A Model Transition Plan

Washington offers a good example of how these three approaches to the new English Language Arts and math assessments come together in a single state plan (Figure 13). The class of 2014 must pass the reading and writing High School Proficiency Exams (HSPE), along with an end-of-course test in Algebra I or Geometry to graduate. But the classes of 2015 and 2016, who will experience both old and new assessment systems, could graduate meeting the old HSPA requirements, or by passing a number of other exams in their place: a tenth grade English Language Arts test aligned to the Common Core, end-of-course exams in Algebra I or Geometry aligned to the Common Core, or the eleventh grade Smarter Balanced tests in both subjects. Because Smarter Balanced is not developing end-of-course tests, Washington will be developing a Common Core-aligned tenth grade English Language Arts test and math end-of-course exam especially for the transition—a kind of bridge assessment between the old HSPE and the comprehensive eleventh grade Smarter Balanced tests. However, the state will also continue to offer the HSPE in 2015 and 2016, maintaining continuity for students and giving them numerous opportunities to meet the testing requirements. In other words, the classes of 2015 and 2016 will have three options for graduation tests (old, bridge, or new assessment), and an option to meet the requirements through tests that only cover the content taught in lower-level courses (English 10, Algebra I or Geometry).

Figure 13. Washington State High School Testing Transition

Assessment Requirements for Certificate of Academic Achievement (CAA) / High School Diploma

Subject	Classes of 2013 & 2014	Classes of 2015 & 2016	Classes of 2017 & 2018	Class of 2019
English Language Arts	Reading and Writing HSPEs*	Reading and Writing HSPEs* **- OR-** 10th-grade ELA Exit Exam based on the Common Core** **- OR-** 11th-grade Smarter Balanced ELA Test**	10th-grade ELA Exit Exam based on the Common Core **- OR-** 11th-grade Smarter Balanced ELA Test	11th-grade Smarter Balanced ELA Test
Math	Algebra 1/Integrated Math 1 EOC **- OR-** Geometry/Integrated Math 2 EOC	Algebra I/Integrated Math 1 EOC **- OR-** Geometry/Integrated Math 2 EOC **- OR-** Algebra 1/Integrated Math 1 EOC Exit Exam based on the Common Core** **- OR-** Geometry/Integrated Math 2 EOC Exit Exam based on the Common Core** **- OR-** 11th-grade Smarter Balanced Math Test**		11th-grade Smarter Balanced Math Test

Reading and Writing HSPEs will be available to 11th and 12th graders in spring and summer 2015 and to 12th graders in spring and summer 2016.
* This test is not available until spring 2015.
[illegible] http://www.k12.wa.us/assessment/StateTesting (accessed June 17, 2014).

Meanwhile, the classes of 2017 and 2018 can meet their graduation requirements through any of the Common Core-aligned tests, but the HSPE will no longer be an option. And eventually, the tenth-grade and end-of-course bridge assessment options will also be phased out—the class of 2019 will be the first that must meet the passing standard on the Smarter Balanced exam in both subjects to graduate. Although the Evergreen state has not specified the Smarter Balanced performance level (out of four) that is equivalent to "meeting standard," it appears likely that the benchmark for graduation will be lower than the Smarter Balanced college-ready distinction. The state board of education's draft recommendations for using the eleventh-grade Smarter Balanced assessment note that the board is weighing the ramifications of a "two-cut-score system (one requirement for graduation, another for demonstration of college readiness)."[91] Using a score of three on Smarter Balanced would also provide consistency during the transition, since Washington designates a score of three out of four as the passing score on its current tests.[92]

Communication and Clarity as a Remedy for Uncertainty

Communicating transition plans like Washington's clearly to the public and making them easily accessible on state education websites is nearly as important as finalizing the plan, especially if states' choices could affect how and whether students graduate from high school. The Evergreen State does relatively well on both counts, with an easy-to-read rubric for each graduation cohort and a prominent, easy-to-find location on the state education agency's assessment webpage. But while each of the six states that are keeping their high-stakes testing policies and using the consortia tests could improve the specificity of their plans, they are, arguably, in better shape in terms of communication than those states that plan to keep their high-stakes policies, but have not settled on their high school assessment choices.

The Common Core chaos and/or high school testing uncertainty leaves students particularly vulnerable in Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. This is especially true in the five states where the stakes involved are not just final course grades, but possibly high school graduation as well: California, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. It is difficult enough to navigate and meet existing testing requirements without the added insecurity of what those tests will be. Even if these states are unable to choose a new high school assessment in the near-term, they could ease anxiety over the college- and career-ready transition by clearly articulating policies for how these exams will be used for student promotion, and when. For guidance these states could look to Massachusetts and New York. The Empire State is still uncommitted to giving the PARCC exam in its high schools, but despite this instability, state leaders have firmly established a policy that no student will be held accountable for meeting college- and career-ready standards on whatever assessment is used until the class of 2022. Students, families, and educators could be more assured and better prepared if they also knew what those graduation tests would be, but at least they have a partial understanding of what is expected of students in the coming years and they know that any new requirements will be phased in gradually.[93]

THE CASE: MOVING AWAY FROM HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS

Students today cannot afford to be high school dropouts any more than they can afford to enter college unprepared. Luckily, the transition to college- and career-ready standards across the country offers states the opportunity to fully reimagine how they can best ensure students not only graduate from high school, but do so ready to succeed in higher education and in the workforce.

The new standards open possibilities for richer instruction, better curricula, and deliberate alignment between secondary and postsecondary learning. And the new assessments will play a critical role in the successful implementation of the new standards. They need to tell public officials whether schools and educators are positively influencing learning and encouraging student growth. They need to tell teachers whether their individual students are making progress and whether their instructional practices are effective. They need to tell families whether their students are on track to college and career readiness. And they need to tell students—especially high school students—whether they are likely to need remediation before starting college-level classes.

But the new assessments do not need to be exit exams. For starters, the research on the effectiveness of exit exams is murky, at best. These tests have not consistently improved student achievement, high school graduation rates, postsecondary attainment, or workforce outcomes—and have often made vulnerable students even more so. Further, exit exam policies make states' efforts to introduce college- and career-ready expectations compete against their efforts to ensure more students get those opportunities, instead of complementing those efforts. While the desire to motivate high school students to work hard, to make a high school diploma both a meaningful achievement and a valuable credential to employers and colleges, and to assess college and career readiness or mastery of state standards are all worthwhile goals, each can be accomplished in another way, without relying on exit exams.

1) Students can be motivated to work hard in high schools by **using assessments toward final course grades**, rather than as graduation requirements. And now that the English Language Arts and math assessments will also measure students' readiness for postsecondary education, the new tests could be given positive, rather than punitive, stakes.[94] **Students could be rewarded for scoring at the highest college- and career-ready levels** on the assessments in a number of ways, including:

    a) opportunities to take accelerated coursework like dual enrollment and Advanced Placement,

    b) access to state merit-based financial aid or scholarship programs for college, and

    c) automatic placement into credit-bearing courses at in-state public colleges and universities.

    These sorts of policies give students a "stake" in doing well on the new assessments, without jeopardizing their ability to graduate if they are not suddenly able to meet the higher expectations. And the positive incentives will be most powerful if higher education institutions, in addition to high schools, recognize the college- and career-ready assessments as meaningful measures and integrate common college- and career-ready definitions into their policies, including remediation and course placement. Greater alignment between K–12 and higher education systems should be a top priority for states and for the consortia moving forward. Moreover, these approaches could actually be effective. The National Research Council's blue ribbon commission, the Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability, found that "several experiments with providing incentives for graduation in the form of rewards, while keeping graduation standards constant, suggest that such incentives might be used to increase high school completion."[95]

2) In addition to personal incentives for students, states could add meaning to high school diplomas for colleges and employers by indicating on transcripts that students have earned a **college- and career-ready distinction** by performing at the highest levels on the state assessments, in addition to taking a college preparatory curriculum, completing a series of courses in a career pathway, or mastering other core competencies. Graduation requirements that are entirely competency-based also hold potential to add greater meaning to a high school diploma, providing a clear signal of what students have learned in high school and articulating how these skills transfer to other educational and workforce settings. While not yet realized at-scale in any state, as competency-based assessments are developed further they could offer students multiple, high-

quality pathways to demonstrate their proficiency, beyond a single, statewide end-of-year assessment or exit exam.

3) Using the new college- and career-ready assessments as exit exams could also jeopardize their biggest asset: the ability to accurately gauge students' readiness of college and careers. By tying graduation to a particular score, states will most likely establish that score well below the college- and career-ready benchmark and be pressured to dilute the rigor of the new standards so that nearly all students can attain the passing score. But instead of offering just a backward view of students' educational progress—did the student master enough content to be deemed proficient and graduate?—**the new assessments would be much more valuable as a forward-looking tool:** given the content students have mastered thus far, what should they learn next? By measuring whether students are ready for college and career, the tests could be used in a more diagnostic way for students' benefit.

   For high school students already college-ready, accelerated coursework could be the diagnosis, helping them earn college credits before graduating and reducing the time and cost to earn a postsecondary degree. But for those not ready for college and career, high schools could use the test results to **offer targeted remediation before students enter higher education and are placed in noncredit-bearing courses.** Districts and states must also recognize the need for smarter, and earlier, interventions for struggling students and provide resources and supports to ensure that they are given the opportunity to learn and catch up to their more advanced peers. And given the importance of high-quality, effective remediation within the broader effort to see all students college- and career-ready, more research is needed to determine which remediation models are most successful and find ways to execute them at-scale.

While some states are already moving to implement these policies and systems, our analysis found that **as many as 21 states, including 10 in the PARCC or Smarter Balanced consortia, are planning to have an exit exam requirement,** and many states have not yet made a firm decision about what test they will be using, when, and for what purposes. While states are using a multitude of tests, transition strategies, and timelines, policymakers in these states face common issues as they shift toward using college- and career-ready assessments for graduation requirements.

1) **Provide clarity.** States that have not yet chosen a college- and career-ready assessment should do so as soon as possible, or at minimum, set a timeframe and process for selecting the assessment. In the meantime, state policymakers could still consider whether the new assessment will carry any stakes for students, the timeline for switching to the new testing requirements, what subjects or grades the tests should cover, whether the passing scores should be similar to proficiency benchmarks on current state tests, whether the state would phase out the old test gradually, and the alternatives for students that need testing accommodations or who do not meet the new standards, including retesting options, individual student waivers, or other assessments.

2) **Protect test quality.** States that plan to use their new college- and career-ready tests, especially those developed by the consortia, as exit exams should prioritize the validity of their assessment systems to accurately measure college and career readiness above all. Rather than tinkering with the college- and career-ready cut scores agreed to by the consortia, states should use a two-cut-score approach. This decreases the likelihood that the college- and career-ready performance level will be manipulated for the sake of maintaining graduation rates. However, this strategy does increase the chances that the lower cut score would face this kind of downward pressure, and states should consider appropriate and effective alternatives for students that cannot meet the required graduation score, no matter where it is set. States will also need to communicate carefully to students and their families what the different cut scores mean and how they are used to avoid conflating graduation requirements with any college- and career-ready requirements.

3) **Communication is key.** States with exit exams should post transition timelines for their assessments clearly and prominently on their state education agency websites, including the specific assessments and scores students must attain in each graduating class for varying purposes (graduation, college and career readiness, etc.). Further, states could develop materials for districts and schools to share with affected students, and schools and districts could conduct more direct outreach to explain these changes, using in-person conferences and forums, direct mail, social media, and other marketing tools. If particular choices have not yet been made because states are waiting for more information on the new assessments, the time frame for settling these outstanding questions should also be communicated and included in the transition plan. These plans should also include the last administration dates for exams that will no longer be offered, and states should consider whether they want to administer these assessments as long as current students could theoretically use them to meet graduation requirements.

4) **Gather data and reassess.** States that continue to use exit exam policies should gather student-level data on how these policies affect students once the new standards and assessments are in place. If exit exams are meant to ensure that students are college and career ready in English Language Arts and math when they leave high school, are students' scores strongly related to their postsecondary outcomes? Are students who pass the exam on the first try any better off than those who take the exam multiple times? Are students who do poorly on the exit exam getting pushed out into GED programs or dropping

out at higher rates, or are the interventions they receive in high school working? These questions should also be asked of exit exams that states administer in other subjects, including science and social studies. In addition to adding to the research literature on the effects of high school exit exams, this information could also encourage better policymaking. If exit exams are not meeting their stated goals, states should consider other policy alternatives.

While states are grappling with when and how to use new college- and career-ready standardized test scores for evaluating schools and educators, it is time for this conversation to extend to the stakes placed on test scores for students. The new English Language Arts and math tests hold great potential to help states measure whether students are prepared for college or the workforce. But this promise could be squandered if the new assessments are also used as exit exams, forcing states to choose between using the tests to determine whether students are prepared for college or whether students are able to go to college by earning a high school diploma. And states do not have to make this choice. Unlike exit exams, there are alternative policies that encourage and reward students for meeting higher expectations, without jeopardizing their ability to graduate from high school.

There is no doubt that students leaving the K–12 system need to be better prepared for college and the workforce, but they will never get a fair chance to succeed in college or on the job without a high school diploma. Given this dilemma, states need policies that allow them to simultaneously pursue college- and career-ready academic standards—and accountability for meeting them—and college and career attainment for more students. High school exit exams just don't measure up.

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ADDITIONAL APPENDIX MATERIALS

SUBMITTED TO THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

for the

December 6, 2022 Meeting

Submitted by Christopher Tienken, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Education Administration, Seton Hall University:

Christopher H. Tienken, "Accountability for Learning," *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, April-June 2018,