

California high school exit exam gets a failing grade in Stanford study

April 22 2009

Graduation rates for low-achieving minority students and girls have fallen nearly 20 percentage points since California implemented a law requiring high school students to pass exit exams in order to graduate, according to a new Stanford study.

The new study said that the exit exam, which is first given in 10th grade to help identify [students](#) who are struggling academically and need additional instruction to pass the test, has failed to meet one of its primary goals: to significantly improve student achievement.

The study also said the exam is not a fair assessment of the basic skill levels of [minority students](#) and girls, because it takes higher skill levels for them to pass the test.

Those are some of the major findings of a 60-page study released Tuesday by the university's Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice.

"Clearly the exam has had a disproportionately negative impact on students of color and girls," said Sean Reardon, an associate professor of education at Stanford and the study's lead author. "That is consistent across all four school districts we studied. It's a statewide phenomenon, not just a problem of one or two districts. These findings are troubling."

The study also found that the exam does not motivate low-achieving minority students and girls--those who scored in the bottom 25 percent

on state standards tests given in the ninth and 10th grades--to work harder and study more in order to earn a diploma.

"There is no evidence that the exit exam policy as currently implemented has any benefits for students," Reardon said. "It does not serve students well, and appears to have sharply inequitable effects."

The exit exam has two sections: mathematics and English language arts. Students who fail the exam in 10th grade have at least five opportunities to retake the sections they have not passed--twice in 11th and 12th grade, and at least once after high school.

California, like the other two-dozen states with exit exams, spends millions of dollars and a considerable amount of time administering the exam, preparing students to take the test and offering remedial classes to students who fail the exam, the study said.

"Our analysis suggests that, to date, this is neither money nor time well spent," Reardon and three co-authors wrote.

The researchers found that minority students--blacks, Hispanics and Asians--received lower scores on the exit exam than white students who had the same level of prior and current academic achievement. They also found that girls received lower scores on the math section of the exit exam than boys who had the same level of prior and current academic achievement.

The researchers ruled out differences in school quality, as well as racial and gender bias in the test, as explanations for the large racial and gender differences found in the study.

Instead, they attributed the differences to a phenomenon known as "stereotype threat," which prevents minorities and girls from doing as

well as they could on the high-stakes test.

While white students and boys may experience stress from fear of failing the test, minority students and girls taking the test "experience stress from two sources: fear of failing the test and concern about proving a negative stereotype," the study said.

"If exit exam policies like California's are to be retained it is imperative that they be accompanied by serious efforts to ameliorate their negative effects on minority students and girls," the researchers wrote.

The study used longitudinal student data from school districts in Fresno, Long Beach, San Diego and San Francisco to estimate the effects of the exit exam requirement on student persistence (whether students stayed in school through the 11th and 12th grades), their academic achievement (as measured by their scores on another state standardized test given in 11th grade), and their graduation rates.

The study compared the persistence, achievement and graduation rates of students who were not subject to the exit exam requirement (those who were scheduled to graduate in 2005) with students who had to pass the test in order to receive high school diplomas (those who were scheduled to graduate in 2006 and 2007).

Reardon presented the study, "Effects of the California [High School](#) Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement and Graduation," last week at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego.

The co-authors are Allison Atteberry and Nicole Arshan, doctoral students in Stanford's School of Education, and Michal Kurlaender, an assistant professor of education at the University of California-Davis.

Source: Stanford University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: California high school exit exam gets a failing grade in Stanford study (2009, April 22)
retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-04-california-high-school-exit-exam.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.