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COMMENTARY

Does California Need a High School Exit Exam?

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Research by Sean Reardon and Michal Kurlaender shows that CAHSEE has had none of the positive effects anticipated when the exam put in place, and that it in fact damages the prospects of a significant number of young people. Moreover, CAHSEE sets a very low bar for student performance, requiring students to demonstrate mastery at only the 7th or 8th grade level in mathematics, and at the 10th grade level in English.

The policy question is whether California needs an exit exam at all, and if the answer is yes then what is the appropriate level of performance that should be required for students to pass it?

These are complicated questions. On the one hand, setting a meaningfully high bar in the exit exam—for example, at the EAP level of readiness for baccalaureate-level coursework in college—would increase the number of students who fail to graduate far beyond any politically imaginable level. On the other hand, abandoning the exit exam entirely would remove one of the few incentives now encouraging students to stay in school and engage even at a minimal level with their academic work.

As California and other states work to develop new assessment systems aligned to theCommon Core Standards over the next few years the question of how high (or low) to set the bar on CAHSEE will have to be faced directly, and the difference between high school graduation and readiness for college and careers will become visible in new and uncomfortable ways. Abandoning the exit exam altogether is probably the most likely outcome.

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