AN INVESTIGATION OF THE IMPACT OF

HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMS ON GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES

By

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to examine the impact, if any, of high school exit exams on graduation and drop out rates. The subjects for this study included five states who require students to pass an exit exam before receiving a diploma. States chosen were those that have had this requirement for three or more years: Florida, New Mexico, Louisiana, Virginia, and Nevada.

Data used in this study was archival and collected from the National Governors Association, the United States Census Bureau, and the subjects' State Departments of Education. Information obtained included descriptive data regarding state graduation exit requirements, 2000 Census data, and state high school graduation and dropout rates up to

five years prior to implementation and up to five years after implementation. Data was analyzed to determine if a relationship existed between graduation and dropout rates and the implementation of graduation exit exams.

The results from this study suggest that high school exit examinations have not had an overall impact on graduation and dropout rates in the subject states. Graduation rates improved in only one of the four subject states after the implementation of a high school exit exam. Additionally, dropout rates improved in only one of the four subject states after the implementation of a high school exit exam.

This data may be helpful to policy-makers who are looking to implement or withdraw graduation exit exams as a requirement to earn a high school diploma.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The education system in the United States is currently bombarded with messages that push for higher standards and accountability. The buzzwords "accountability," "high standards," and "testing" are used in association with current education reform plans. Politicians and policymakers emphasize education reform that holds teachers, students, and schools accountable by testing students' ability and measuring their progress. Education reform was one of the driving forces in President George W. Bush's presidential campaign and is still a priority in his presidential agenda. President Bush's plan for reform includes mandatory testing of students in grades three through eight each year, which some believe will lead to mandatory graduation exit exams and grade promotion exams (Neill & Schaeffer, 1998). Students who do not pass these exams will be retained, and for high school seniors this means their high school diploma will be either delayed or denied. Theoretically, it sounds logical, but many educators warn about the misuses of testing, including using it as an accountability tool. A continuing trend in education has been to increase the amount of standardized testing, and to tie these tests to contingencies such as grade retention and school funding.

Definition of High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes tests can be defined as "standardized tests that solely or in combination with grades decide whether a student graduates or advances to the next grade level" (National Center for Policy Analysis, n.d., p. 1). Tests used in this manner are considered high stakes tests because of the severe implications of one test's results. Any test that is used in this way is considered high-stakes. However, this study will focus

on high school exit exams, which are only one type of high-stakes testing. High school exit exams are tests that students must pass to earn their high school diploma and are also called graduation tests.

Education Reform: Evolution of High-Stakes Testing

While there seems to have been an explosion in the testing movement in recent years, this movement actually began in the first part of the Twentieth Century with the introduction of standardized group tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Lemann, 1999). The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was developed by Carl Bringham and was an adapted version of the Army test. It was used experimentally for college admission for the first time in 1926 but did not gain popularity until James B. Conant, president of Harvard University began utilizing it (Lemann, 1999). Conant became president of Harvard University in 1933 and was concerned that the "United States had gone from being a classless, democratic society to one that was relentlessly falling under the control of a hereditary aristocracy" (Lemann, 1999, p. 5). He "despised the privileged student body at elite schools like Harvard and hoped to attract talented students from a variety of backgrounds" (Lemann, 1999, p. 6). At that time, it was easy to get into Harvard because admission was based family wealth, not academic excellence (Lemann, 1999). One of the first things Conant did when he became Harvard's president was establish a scholarship program to bring outstanding students from modest backgrounds to the university (Lemann, 1999). The SAT became the tool Harvard used to identify these students. Later, the SAT and tests like it, became the primary screening tools for college admission throughout the United States and are still in use today.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, society was concerned that students were graduating from high school lacking reading, writing, and mathematical skills. This trend was referred to as social promotion because some students were promoted without evidence that they learned course content or did the work required for a passing grade. In an attempt to fix the abuses of social promotion, minimum-competency testing was adopted by 35 states (Pipho, 2000). This form of testing measures the acquisition of competency or skills to or beyond a certain specified standard (Digest of Education Statistics, 2000). At this time, many states began requiring minimum-competency, or basic skills testing as a requirement for high school graduation (Linn, 2000).

The late 1980s and early 1990s, saw the beginning of a push for using minimum-competency testing as an accountability tool for educators (Linn, 2000). "Accountability programs took a variety of forms, but shared the common characteristic that they increased real or perceived stakes of results for teachers and educational administrators" (Linn, 2000, p. 5). Former president Bill Clinton and his administration called for content and performance standards in his Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which was passed in 1994. Goals 2000 encouraged states to develop challenging content and performance standards that would guide curriculum and specify how well students should be performing (Linn, 2000). Today, education reform has evolved to a call for continual increases in high-stakes assessments and accountability measures for schools.

States are implementing mandatory tests and the pressure to perform well on these tests, not only affects students, but teachers, administrators, parents, and any person involved with public education. Some newspapers print school rankings and there are

cases where funding incentives are linked to how well students perform on standardized tests.

> Twenty-nine States now authorize the use of sanctions against schools that fail to meet minimum standards of progress and 23 of them have academic bankruptcy or intervention policies…In addition, the Southern Regional Education Board has described a trend toward States providing financial rewards to schools and districts for improved student achievement. (U.S. Department of Education, Goals 2000: Reforming Education to Improve Student Achievement, 1998, p. 6)

President George W. Bush's wants to withhold federal funding from states that fail to meet performance standards and use corrective action against schools that fail to perform academically (Bush, 2001).

Education Reform: The Controversy Surrounding High-Stakes Testing

Researchers, politicians, policymakers, and educators all have their opinions regarding high-stakes testing and discussions about the topic can become heated. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) is specifically "working to end the abuses, misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students and workers is fair, open, and educationally sound" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.c, p. 1). FairTest shows great concern about President Bush's testing plans and they provide a wealth of information about the negative impact of high-stakes testing (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.c). As the public becomes more informed, groups are taking action. May 2001 was designated as "A National Month of Testing Resistance" in which 13 states participated: Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, Ohio, Texas, Washington, Alabama,

Virginia, California, and Maine. The purpose of this campaign was to inform the public and demand more appropriate educational accountability models (Gedlaman, 2001). Another situation involved Wisconsin parents as they rallied together to spread the word about the negative affects of high-stakes testing. They distributed advocacy tool kits, and encouraged participants to spread the word by telling two more people, who would tell two more, and so forth ("How Wisconsin parents worked to roll back high stakes testing," 1999). It is no wonder why high-stakes testing is getting publicity since "18 states now require students to pass a standard exam to graduate, and five more states will implement such tests in the next three years" (Education Commission of the States, cited in National Center for Policy Analysis, n.d., p. 1).

Although high-stakes testing has its opponents, there are also groups in support of it including the American Federation of Teachers (National Center for Policy Analysis, n.d.). Additionally, Lord (2000) stated that no one disputes that public education is failing students. She went on to explain that the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported only one-third of the country's fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders are proficient readers, and far fewer excel in math. Furthermore, Ascher (1990) suggested that the best way to discover where students are having difficulty learning is through testing. The literature supports that proponents and opponents of high-stakes testing agree that school improvement should be a priority. The argument develops when the discussion turns to how this should be accomplished. Bush supporters say that to oppose testing is to oppose accountability. Others say that is not so, arguing that policymakers seem to feel that by just shaking a big stick [testing and punishment for low performance], that schools would somehow respond ("How Wisconsin parents worked to roll back high stakes testing,"

1999). Minnesota Senator Paul Wellsone stated, "Testing, which was supposed to be a way of assessing reform, is now being treated as actual reform. It's as if we all decided that a checkup was as good as a cure" ("How Wisconsin parents worked to roll back high stakes testing," 1999, p. 1).

One may have the impression that states are just jumping on the testing bandwagon, specifically the use of graduation exit exams. Yet, educators and researchers warn about the harm of high-stakes testing. Educators oppose high-stakes testing for a variety of reasons, including forcing teachers to teach to the test, tests are discriminatory against minorities and those with low socioeconomic status, text anxiety, validity and reliability, consequences of scoring errors, tendency to track students, and funding concerns. These same critics of high-stakes testing worry that such consequences may in fact contribute to a higher dropout rate. One must wonder if states have truly weighed the consequences verses the benefits of high-stakes testing. Students in states without high-stakes tests perform better than those in states with them (Neill, 1998). Wheelock, Hartke and Neil (2000) urged Massachusetts to remove the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) as a new graduation requirement, and expressed that the use of a single test to determine graduation is likely to drive up the dropout rate, as it has done in other states with similar high-stakes tests. If this is so, why then is high-stakes testing receiving the green light from so many policymakers? We need to look more closely at the impact of high-stakes testing, especially high school exit exams. Are they worth the cost, financially as well as academically? Are we unintentionally doing more harm than good? Opinions about this are not hard to find, but substantial statistical research regarding the impact of high school graduation exams is very limited. There is a

large amount of information regarding this topic in the popular press and on the Internet, but limited information in scholarly journals. To effectively answer the questions stated above, more research is needed.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of high school exit exams on dropout and graduation rates in five states who have had this requirement for more than three years: Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and Virginia. Data was collected from the National Governors Association, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the subjects' State Departments of Education.

Research Questions

Based upon the proceeding discussion, the following research questions were proposed:

R1. Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on graduation rates in states requiring them?

R2. Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted high school graduation rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and Virginia?

R3. Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on dropout rates in states requiring them?

R4. Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted dropout rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and Virginia?

Definition of Terms

For clarity and understanding the following terms are defined.

Achievement Test: An examination that measures the extent to which a person has acquired certain information or mastered certain skills, usually as a result of specific instruction (Digest of Education Statistics, 2000).

High School Exit Exam: An examination that high school students must pass to receive their high school diploma.

Minimum-competency testing: Tests that measure the acquisition of competency or skills to or beyond a certain specified standard (Digest of Education Statistics, 2000).

Standardized Tests: Objective tests that are usually created by commercial test publishers and are designed to give a common measure of students' performance (Boccella, 2000). Many achievement tests are standardized.

Assumptions

While conducting this study, the following assumptions were made:

1. It was assumed that all data collected was accurate.
2. It was assumed that all data collected represented subject states' true graduation and dropout rates.
3. It was assumed that subject states used universal definitions of the terms dropout and graduate.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature pertinent to high-stakes testing and high school exit exams. Education reform plans of both former President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush will be reviewed and analyzed with regards to these topics. Additional information will be provided about the controversial issues surrounding high school exit exams, as well as information about the subject states' graduation exit exam requirements.

Politics and Education

High school exit exams are currently a hot topic in education and politics. This section provides basic information regarding the two most recent major educational reform plans; Goals 2000 and President Bush's educational reform plan.

During the 1990s there was a strong push for educational reform and in 1994, former President Bill Clinton enacted Goals 2000: Educate America Act. "The Act provides resources to states and communities to ensure that all students reach their full potential" (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, n.d., p. 1). The second and third goals of the Act are most pertinent to the educational issues of this study. The second goal was "the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent" (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, n.d., p. 1). And the third goal states

> "All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, the arts, history, and geography,

> and every school in America will ensure that all students use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy. (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, n.d., p. 1)

Although Goals 2000 seemed to advocate for students, it was not without critics. The third goal suggested that students demonstrate competency, yet Hoagland (cited in Howerter, 1996, p. 2) said, "Goals 2000 is a plan to dumb down America." He especially criticized Goals 2000's plan to get rid of comprehensive testing and competition.

> The brains who thought up this plan believe that to test and grade isn't fair to children who are less gifted and may damage them psychologically if they get poorer grades than their peers. Therefore testing is discontinued and it becomes impossible for anyone to determine whether teachers are teaching and children are learning anything or not. (Hoagland, cited in Howerter, 1996, p. 2)

Goals 2000 fell short of attainment and issues are still being raised about the quality of education in this country. It is now five years later and we have a new president in office, and as presidents change, so do political agendas. President Bush claims that "No Child Will Be Left Behind" with his educational reform plan. He criticizes Congress for producing educational programs over the years without knowing their results. "This program for every problem solution has begun to add up – so much that there are hundreds of education programs spread across 39 federal agencies at a cost of $120 billion a year" (Bush, 2001, p. 2). The three main elements of Bush's plan are assessing student performance, motivating and assisting low-performing schools, and providing school choice options (Education Commission of the States, n.d.). His plan is notorious

for the words accountability, assessment, and high standards. According to President Bush, (2001, p. 3) "states must develop a system of sanctions and rewards to hold districts and schools accountable for improving academic achievement." This includes financial incentives and withdrawal of federal funding for schools that fail his plan's standards. "The Secretary of Education will be authorized to reduce federal funds available to a state for administrative expenses if a state fails to meet their performance objectives and demonstrate results in academic achievement" (Bush, 2001, p. 6). Bush's policy also includes corrective action to be used against schools who do not perform well and if this continues for three consecutive years, students may use Title I funds to attend a school of their choice (Bush, 2001). Bush also proposes to mandate states to test reading and math every year in grades fourth through eighth, currently done every 2-4 years in most states (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.a). Issues regarding the role of the federal government in education are being questioned. States used to have almost complete control over their education policies, but the federal government has become increasingly involved since the 1950s. It appears that Bush's plan continues this trend by increasing the control over State Departments of Education with his mandated testing policies (Education Commission of the States, n.d.). The building blocks for Bush's education proposal come from his home state's plan and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). TAAS consists of criterion-referenced tests based on the statewide curriculum (Allen Independent School District: Explanation of TAAS, n.d.) and was first implemented in 1989. It measures student achievement in math and reading in grades third through eighth and writing in grades forth and eighth. Science and social studies are also tested in eighth grade. Students must pass a graduation exit exam to

receive their high school diploma. This exam tests students in the areas of reading, writing, and math (Allen Independent School District: Explanation of TAAS, n.d.). TAAS has its share of proponents and opponents.

> Proponents of the TAAS, some of whom have referred to the tests as the Texas miracle, point to the rise in test scores as evidence that the system is working. According to data released this year by the Texas Education Agency, students in that state set their seventh straight record-high passing rate on the TAAS. (Sadowski, 2000, p. 2)

TAAS representatives claimed preliminary results in Spring 2000 showed an 80 percent passing rate of students in grades third through tenth (Sadowski, 2000). This passing rate was 27 percentage points over the 1994 passing rate of 53 percent (Sadowski, 2000).

Other researchers claim however, that TAAS passing rates do not give the whole picture. Clark, Haney, and Madaus (cited in Sadowski, 2000) argue that since the implementation of TAAS, high school dropout rates are higher, especially among minority students. Haney (cited in Sadowski, 2000) found that high school completion rates declined among black and Hispanic students from approximately 60 percent in the 1970s and 1980s to 50 percent or lower since the implementation of TAAS. Others charge that Texas' 9th-grade retention rate is dramatically higher than the rate for all other grade levels (Sadowski, 2000). Valenzuela (2000, n.p.) stated, "that some schools are actually retaining students at the ninth-grade level, so that they don't become tenth-grade test-takers who will lower the school average." Additionally, retention rates rose for minority students at the ninth-grade level from approximately 10 percent before implementation to 25 percent after implementation (Valenzuela, 2000).

Any kind of reform brings up the issue of money. Bush is allotting $320 million dollars for his testing mandate. However, the National Association of State Boards of Education said that at least $7 billion is needed to properly fund this mandate (Huffington, 2001). Huffington argued that money made available would be better spent on programs like Head Start, which is currently being funding at only a 50 percent level.

Goals 2000 was developed in the hopes that education and student preparedness would improve, as was President Bush's education reform plan. However, both approaches have come under fire. As Hoagland (cited in Howerter, 1996) criticized Goals 2000 for its lack of testing and accountability, others strongly oppose President Bush's plan because it focuses too much on testing. "In short, half the states test half or less than half the amount Bush would require…Clearly, many states will have to drastically increase the amount of testing they do" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.a, p. 1). There is a strong trend of states using scores on high school exit exams as a system for holding students and schools accountable. Twenty-three states within the next three years will require students to pass a standard exam to graduate (Education Commission of the States, cited in National Center for Policy Analysis, n.d.). Other research suggests that the push for high school exit exams stems from Goals 2000. Rivard (1999) believed that Goals 2000 contributed to states including high school competency testing in their statewide programs. Whether the push for graduation exit exams began with Bush's educational reform plan, Goals 2000, or perhaps the development of minimum-competency testing in the 1970s and 1980s, high school exit exams are a reality that many students and educators will face.

Issues Regarding High School Exit Exams

There are many issues regarding high school exit exams and controversy surrounding these issues. This section discusses they key issues and controversies including teaching the test, discrimination and bias, possible increases in retention and dropout rates, the impact of students not receiving high school diplomas, the impact of testing on students' self-esteem and anxiety, scoring errors, corruption, and cost.

Teach the test.

One of the biggest arguments regarding high school exit exams, as well as all high-stakes tests, is that they limit curriculum and force teachers to teach the test which educators claim in turn, hampers students' learning.

> We have learned a great deal about the nature of teaching and learning, and we know that students need to have opportunities to construct knowledge and connect that knowledge to what they already know. However, many high-stakes assessment procedures still continue to focus on the memory of isolated facts which are destined to be forgotten. Teachers are being given a schizophrenic message: teach one way, but your students will be tested another way. (Bizar, n.d., p. 1)

Teaching the test is often associated with drill-and-kill instruction where teachers are only teaching students to memorize and be good test-takers. If a student gets a good score on a test, one may argue that it proves he or she knows the material. Not so, say some educators who claim that the only thing it suggests is that the student did well on that particular test. If drill-and-kill instruction is used, after a few weeks or even days, the student is likely to have forgotten the material. The concept of teaching the test is similar

to cramming for an exam. The way people learn through cramming does not allow a student to gain content knowledge. Such an approach gets students to pass the test, but does not necessarily equip them with the skills needed on the job, in community college, or at a university (McNeil, cited in Schmidt, 2000). "Being a good test-taker risks becoming more important than any other student characteristic" (The Canadian Teachers' Federation, n.d., p. 2). Educators say drill-and-kill instruction hurts students' critical thinking skills. Neil and Medinal (cited in Bizar, n.d., p. 1) stated "teaching behaviors that are effective in raising scores on tests of lower-level cognitive skills are nearly the opposite of those behaviors that are effective in developing complex cognitive learning, problem solving ability, and creativity." Neil (1998) believes that test-driven curriculum is detrimental and does not provide students with the rich education they deserve. It reinforces drill-and-kill instructional methods that have been proven not to work. While Neil and others argue that researchers know the detriments of high-stakes testing, Shepard suggests we need more research. Shepard (cited in Miller, 2001, p. 1) stated, "High-stakes testing policy is not based on science. If we launched a spaceship with this lack of knowledge and evaluation, the people responsible would lose their jobs." Shepard (cited in Miller, 2001) implied that states and districts are simply implementing high-stakes tests without thoroughly reviewing their possible impact.

Johnston (1992) suggested that time is a concern with drill-and-kill instruction. In 1992, the average high school student lost approximately ten days of regular instruction due to testing. This number does not reflect the time spent preparing. McNeil (cited in Schmidt, 2000, p. 4) stated "In Texas, for example, teachers in low-performing schools are told to set aside their best lessons, and do nothing but prepare students for the state

graduation test." There is too much information to cover and teachers do not have the time to incorporate hands-on experiences, which have been proven to facilitate learning.

Testing advocates on the other hand suggest that there is value in teaching to a well-designed test (Miller, 2001). Miller went on to say that some scholars believe the negative impact of high-stakes testing has been exaggerated. Greene (cited in Miller, 2001, p. 2) pointed out that there are many reasons not to support high-stakes testing but it is worth "stomaching the potential drawbacks if it drives teachers to make sure that students know how to read, write, and do arithmetic." Teaching the test may not be the most effective approach, but it gives structure and coherence that is not present in some classrooms, especially in poorly funded schools (Resnick, cited in Sadowski, 2000). Thomas H. Fisher, director of testing programs for the Florida State Department of Education stated "The responsibility of the state is to provide an education to students, not to simply provide them with a diploma" (cited in Schmidt, 2000, p. 2). Other supporters of high-stakes testing would add that these measures assist in identifying students who need help academically. A Houston high school required every failing student to attend tutoring sessions. This brought the number of failing students from 57 to zero (McGinn, 1999b).

Discrimination and bias.

Another issue regarding high-stakes testing is that it discriminates against minorities and students from low-income families. In addition, students' scores on assessments have been used to determine if in high school they will be placed in the college-bound track, or into a track with lower expectations. This procedure is called tracking. More low-income and minority group students are in low-track programs than

are white middle and upper class students (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.a). Students in low-track programs and those with lower socioeconomic status may have a more difficult time passing a graduation exam. Many standardized tests are unfair because they contain subtle racial, linguistic, class and gender biases (The Canadian Teachers' Federation, n.d.). A Texas court however, approved of a graduation exam although they agreed it may be discriminatory. Federal Judge Prado (cited in Simpson, 2000, p. 9) in his ruling said that the TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] might have had an impact on minorities. "But that likely resulted from other factors such as: socioeconomics, family support, funding, the quality of teaching and educational materials, and individual effort." Simpson (2000) said that critics lambasted the court's decision charging that the ruling means racially biased tests are acceptable.

When school funding is based on property tax, schools in more affluent areas receive more funding than schools that serve poorer students. Schools with more money generally attract better teachers, have more support and better facilities. Some inner-city schools lack an environment conducive to learning and are often the victims of a poor education system. Therefore, students who come from wealthier districts are more likely to score well on assessments including high school exit exams. "The greatest challenge is to improve the academic performance of the lowest-achieving and most disadvantaged students. Forty-three percent of minority children attend urban schools where more than half the students are poor" (U.S. Department of Education, Goals 2000: Reforming education to improve student achievement, 1998, p. 5).

> "Further, it is entirely clear that increasing numbers of poor children, lacking adequate nutrition, housing and health care, often with overworked parent(s), are

> a major reason for any lack of academic achievement… Schools and educators will be asked to do the impossible, still without the resources to do even what is possible, and then blamed for their inevitable inability to do the impossible." (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, n.d.a, p. 3)

Because of these issues of discrimination and bias, some civil rights groups are against graduation exit exams. "The ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] of Massachusetts issued a public advisory about their concern that the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) punishes poor and minority students the most" (Murray cited in Dunne, 2000a, p. 2). "According to the ACLU advisory, there is a testing gap between rich and poor communities" (Dunne, 2000a, p. 2). Twelve percent of students from affluent districts failed a portion of the MCAS compared to 65 percent of students from low-income districts (Dunn, 2000a). Murray (cited in Dunne, 2000a, p. 2) stated "the test [MCAS] is unfair because it is rigid, inappropriate, and inadequate as the sole determinant of a quality education, especially for those who are bilingual or disabled." Furthermore, Expose Racism and Advance School Excellence (ERASE), a group in California said, "exit tests unfairly punish poor students and those of color for attending substandard schools…virtually every state with a high school exit exam has a disproportionate number of students of color who have passed all other requirements but fail to graduate" (Dunne, 2000a, p. 5). Therefore, if a student passed all courses, but failed the graduation exam, they would not be eligible for a regular high school diploma.

Retention and dropout rates.

Surprisingly little research has been done in the area of high-stakes testing and its effect on retention and dropout rates. As more states are using high-stakes tests as a

means to end social promotion and accountability, it is likely that there will be changes in retention and dropout rates. Ideally, students retained would benefit from repeating their current grade level. However, Hauser (cited in Sadowski, 2000, p. 6) stated "nearly all of the research about retention shows that it has a strong negative effects on kids." Similar findings by the Chicago consortium showed that "only one-fourth of retained 8th-graders and one-third of retained 3rd-and-6th-graders in 1997 made 'normal' progress during the following school year" (Sadowski, 2000, p. 6). Holmes (cited in Heubert & Hauser, 1999) reviewed 63 studies on the effects of retention. Fifty-four showed retention had negative effects, while only nine showed positive results.

Attempting to eliminate social promotion by holding students back a grade, is one of the issues pushing high-stakes testing and high school exit exams. "Given the evidence that retention is typically not educationally beneficial – leading to lower achievement and higher dropout – the implications of such a policy are cause for concern" (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, p. 122). "Research data indicated that simply repeating a grade does not generally improve achievement, moreover, it increases the dropout rate" (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, p. 129). In another study, Anderson found that "students who were repeating a grade were 70 percent more likely to dropout of high school than those who were not repeating a grade" (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, p.130). Kreitzer, Madaus, and Haney (cited in Heubert & Hauser, 1999) compared testing practices in the ten states with the highest dropout rates to the ten states with the lowest. They found that nine of the ten states with the highest dropout rates, utilized high school exit exams, while none of the states with the lowest dropout rates used exit exams.

Schwartz (1995) noted that calculating an accurate dropout rate is very difficult because districts and states differ in their definitions and counting methods. However, she found that dropout rates were especially high in urban districts – four out of five had a dropout rate greater than 35 percent. Schwartz (1995) also discovered a correlation between ethnicity and high school completion in that Hispanic and African American students were more likely than white and Asian American students to dropout. Furthermore, a "large majority of dropouts were enrolled in general high school programs, with very few in college preparatory programs…almost one-fifth were held back a grade" (Schwartz, 1995, p. 2).

High school diploma equals greater opportunities.

Opponents of high school exit exams show concern about the broad impact of a society with increasing numbers of individuals without high school diplomas. Huebert (cited in Schmidt, 2000, p. 3) stated that high school exit exams could cause "dramatic reductions in the proportion and numbers of kids getting high-school diplomas." A basic high school diploma is required for many jobs, especially higher paying jobs, the military, and for college admittance. "Those who leave school without diplomas have diminished life chances" (Huebert & Hauser, 1999, p. 131). Schwartz (1995) found that dropouts earned an average of approximately $13,000 per year and they comprise nearly half of the prison population and those on welfare.

High school exit exams are already blocking thousands of students from getting diplomas required for college admission. Furthermore, this is complicating colleges' efforts to recruit minority [black and Hispanic] students, who are more likely then others to fail the tests (Schmidt, 2000). Natalie Martinez was an A/B student offered a full

scholarship to study music at the University of the Incarnate Word. However, she did not receive her high school diploma because she failed the state's required graduation test, and therefore was denied admission to Incarnate Word (Schmidt, 2000). Hauser (cited in Schmidt, 2000, p. 2) stated that exit exams are "going to totally alter the pipeline of kids leaving secondary schools."

Proponents on the other hand, including some colleges "praise exit tests for helping to ensure that freshmen are well prepared" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 2). Thomas J. Vukovich, associate provost for student-enrollment services at the University of Akron believes Ohio's graduation exit exam sends the message "If you want to come to college, you have to prepare for it and be more serious about it in high school" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 2). More prepared freshmen means less remedial education at the college level. Remedial education costs colleges an estimated $2-billion a year (Schmidt, 2000).

Self-esteem and anxiety.

As higher stakes are associated with testing, students are feeling the impact. Take Natalie Martinez, the student who was offered a full scholarship to study music at the University of the Incarnate Word, but was denied admission because she failed her high school exit exam and was denied her high school diploma (Schmidt, 2000). Natalie's situation not only is an example of college consequences, but also self-esteem issues. Natalie said, "I was very ashamed of what happened to me" (cited in Schmidt, 2000). High-stakes testing has the potential to produce high anxiety and low self-esteem in students. Both feelings are justifiable based on the notion that students are aware that one test may dictate their life. One student said that the push for testing "makes students feel like they're under constant jeopardy – like every single test will influence their life"

(McGinn, 1999a, p. 51). Lord (2000) wrote of one parent who started petitioning high-stakes testing when her son began suffering panic attacks and gnawed holes in his shirts while stressing over fourth-grade proficiency tests. Students are not developing these feelings on their own. They are being communicated to them through teachers, parents, counselors and administrators. Albert Arnold, principal at a Los Angeles elementary school notes that teachers are frustrated and the kids are picking-up on that (cited in McGinn, 1999a).

Scoring errors.

As mentioned previously, high school diplomas are crucial for admittance into the military, college, and for many jobs. When so much is riding on one test score, imagine the impact of a scoring error. Almost 9000 New York City students were almost sent to summer school or held back because of a scoring error ("School Tests Scores Botched," 1999). Tennessee, Indiana, Missouri, Florida, Wisconsin, South Carolina, and Nevada have experienced similar errors ("School Tests Scores Botched," 1999). In July 2000, a Minnesota newspaper, the St. Paul Pioneer Press' front page headline read, "Test Goof 'Flunks' 7989 Students." The scoring error was found only because the father of a student who failed the test asked to see it. After persistent requests to see the test, he and a testing specialist found an error, then five more (Welsh, 2000). Due to this error, it is possible that as many as 336 Minnesota students may have been wrongly denied their diploma and the chance to participate in graduation ceremonies (Welsh, 2000). One student took summer school because of a failing score on the Basic Standards Test to find out later that he actually passed (Welsh, 2000). As more states adopt exit exams, the issues surrounding erroneous scores are likely to increase.

Corruption.

Anytime high-stakes are involved, there is a potential for corruption. Pipho (2000) reported that in 1999, teachers and principals in New York City supplied students with answers to test items and may have changed items that students missed. Massachusetts had similar incidents. "This is just the tip of the iceberg of what's going to happen as the stakes related to the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] test get higher and higher" (Hanley, cited in Pipho, 2000, n.p.). Like Bush's proposal, Colorado has suggested giving extra money to school districts that score high on state assessment exams (Pipho, 2000). States that determine funding based on test scores may be asking for corruption within their system.

Cost.

States have nearly tripled the amount of money they spend on testing in the past five years, from $141 million to $390 million. California spends the most per year at $44 million, second is Texas at $26 million, and Florida spends $22 million (Education Commission of the States, n.d.). Tests connected to state standards can range from $25 to $30 a student; standardized tests which are not aligned to state standards are considerably less expensive and range between $4 and $6 per student (Education Commission of the States, n.d.). Linn (2000) claimed that testing is relatively inexpensive compared to implementing changes that would truly improve our education system. He suggested that this is one of the reasons policymakers are attracted to testing. President George W. Bush is allotting $320 million dollars for his testing mandate. However, Huffington (2001) stated that the National Association of State Boards of Education said that at least $7 billion is needed to properly fund this mandate.

States Adopting High School Exit Exams

Currently 18 states require students to pass an exam to graduate, and five more states will implement such tests in the next three years (Education Commission of the States, cited in National Center for Policy Analysis, n.d.). Florida adopted a graduation test over 20 years ago and is currently developing more rigorous tests that some believe will make it more difficult to receive a diploma (Schmidt, 2000). The most controversy, however, seems to come from Massachusetts and New York. "In trial runs, the tests have produced overall failure rates of 25 to 50 percent" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 3). Massachusetts Governor A. Paul Cellucci has proposed sending students who do not pass the graduation exit exam to community college for remediation (Schmidt, 2000). Most states do allow retakes, however many have limits on the number of retakes allowed. Also varying between states is if remediation is required for students who do not pass, as well as if there is state funding for such programs (National Governors Association, 2000).

Subject state's high school exit exam review.

Florida implemented their high school exit exam beginning with the class of 1985 (National Governors Association, 2000). Students can begin taking the exam during their eleventh grade year. This exam is multiple-choice and tests students in the areas of math and communications (reading and writing) (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). Students are allowed up to four re-takes during the eleventh and twelfth grades and as many times as necessary after their senior year (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). Florida is in the process of phasing in a new test with the class of 2004 (National Governors Association, 2000). Florida's assessment system was criticized by FairTest who said the system needs total restructuring (National Center for Fair and Open

Testing, 1997). The high school exit exam is used for accountability purposes and to identify low-performing schools. Schools that score low for three years can face state intervention (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997).

New Mexico's high school exit exam was implemented with the class of 1990 (National Governors Association, 2000). It is administered in the tenth grade and 90 percent of the exam is multiple-choice, while other portions include open-ended questions. Subjects covered include language arts, math, reading, science, social studies, and writing. Students can re-take the exam up to four times prior to the end of their senior year, and up to four times within five years after leaving high school (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). "While the assessment is aligned with previous state standards, the state recognizes it is inadequate for measuring some aspects of the new standards, and it will be revised" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997, n.p.). FairTest believes New Mexico's assessment system needs work, but it commended the state for offering their high school exit exam in Spanish. Other languages can be used for the writing portions of the exam (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997).

Nevada implemented their high school exit exam with the class of 1999 (National Governors Association, 2000). The exit exam is multiple-choice and measures math and reading achievement (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). Students can take the exam up to six times while they are still enrolled in school, and as many times as needed thereafter as long as they participate in the district's remediation program between retakes (National Governors Association, 2000). FairTest suggested that the state's assessment system needs improvement, particularly shifting away from multiple-choice items to performance assessments. They also suggested dropping the graduation

exit exam as a requirement for earning a high school diploma (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997).

Louisiana students were first required to pass a graduation exit exam, beginning with the class of 1999 (National Governors Association, 2000). The Louisiana high school exit exam tests English/language arts, writing, math, science and social studies and "school-level scores are reported publicly" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997, n.p.). Practice exams are provided and students are allowed up to five re-takes (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). FairTest criticized the state for its heavy reliance on multiple-choice items and said the graduation requirement is a serious problem (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997).

Virginia high schools students have been required to pass an exit exam to receive a diploma since 1996. The exam is first given to students in the sixth grade and continually each year to those who have not passed (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). Students are tested in math, writing, and reading comprehension and they must pass all three areas to receive a high school diploma. FairTest believes Virginia's assessment system needs serious help and that the graduation exam should be discontinued (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1997). The state is phasing out this particular assessment system and replacing it with new standards effective 2004 (National Governors Association, 2000).

Summary

This chapter provided an in-depth look into the issues surrounding high school exit exams and the politics that drive them. Controversy arises regarding the possible negative effects of such tests including: teaching the test, discrimination and test bias,

possible increase retention and dropout rates, impact of less students earning high school diplomas, self-esteem and anxiety, scoring errors, corruption, and cost.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will introduce the methodology used in this study including procedures for sample selection, a description of the subjects, procedures for data collection, and the limitations of this methodology.

Selection of Sample

The subjects for this study were states who require students to pass a high school exit exam to earn a diploma. A Graduation Exit Exam Matrix obtained through the National Governors Association (2000) provided descriptive data about state requirements regarding graduation exit exams and was used to choose the subjects for this study. States with less than three years of implementation were excluded from the study because there was not enough data available to identify any trends or impact from high school exit exams. Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, and Virginia were states that have implemented high school exit exams for three or more years, and were therefore chosen as subjects for the study. It should be noted that the Graduation Exit Exam Matrix is open to interpretation; therefore, other states that have had high school exit exams for more than three years may have been excluded from the study. Information regarding the subject states is reported below in more detail.

Description of Subjects

Florida is located in the Southeastern United States with a reported population of 15,982,378 in the 2000 census survey. Sixty-five point four percent of the population is White, 16.8 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 14.2 percent Black or African American. It

is a highly populated state with an average of 269.4 persons per square mile. There was a 23.5% population change from 1990 to 2000 and 22.8% of the population is below age eighteen. Based on 1997 estimates, the median household income was recorded as $32,877. Twenty one point eight percent of children were reportedly living below poverty and 14.4% of all people were living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Florida began implementing their high school exit exam in 1983 and the first graduating class affected was the class of 1985. They allow unlimited number of retakes. Schools are required by the state to offer remediation programs to those who fail the test, but no funding is allotted for such programs (National Governors Association, 2000).

Louisiana is located in the South-Central United States with a reported population of 4,468,976 in the 2000 census survey. The highest ethnic backgrounds reported were White (62.5%) and Black or African American (32.3%). Census data reported 102.6 persons per square mile. There was a 5.9% population change from 1990 to 2000, and 27.3% of the population was reported as below age eighteen. Based on 1997 estimates, the median household income was recorded as $30,466. Approximately 26.8% of children were living below poverty level and 18.4% of all people were living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Louisiana began implementing their high school exit exam in 1989 and the first graduating class affected was the class of 1999. They allow unlimited number of retakes. Schools are funded by the state to offer required remediation programs to those who fail the test (National Governors Association, 2000).

Nevada is located in the Western United States with a reported population of 1,998,257 in the 2000 census. The most reported ethnic backgrounds were White (65.2%), Hispanic or Latino (19.7%), and Black or African American (6.6%). It is not a highly populated state with an average of only 18.2 persons per square mile. However, the state appeared to be experiencing growth as the population from 1990 to 2000 changed by 66.3%. Persons under 18 years of age made up 25.6% of the population and the median household income was reported as $39,280 (based on 1997 estimates). More than 15% of children were reportedly living below poverty, and more than 10% of persons were living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Nevada implemented their high school exit exam in 1998, effective with the class of 1999. There are no limits on the number of retakes and the state provides funding for required remediation programs for students who fail the test (National Governors Association, 2000).

New Mexico is located in the Southwestern United States with a reported population of 1,819,046 in the 2000 census. Based on census data, New Mexico appears to be a diverse state with 44.7 % of the population being White, 42.1% Hispanic or Latino, and 8.9% American Indian and Alaska Native. New Mexico reported a 20.1 % population change from 1990 to 2000 and 28% of the population was under age eighteen. There was an average of 15 persons per square mile. Based on 1997 estimates, the median household income was reported as $30,836, with 27.5% of children and 19.3% of people living below poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). New Mexico implemented their high school exit exam in 1987, effective with the class of 1990.

Students are allowed to retake the exam if needed. Remediation is not required, nor does the state offer funding for remediation programs (National Governors Association, 2000).

Virginia is located in the Eastern United States with a reported population of 7,7078,515 in the 2000 census. Whites (70.2%) and Blacks or African Americans (19.4%) represented the majority of ethnic backgrounds. Persons per square mile averaged 178.8 and there was a 14.4% population change between 1990 and 2000. Based on 1997 estimates, the median household income was $40,209 and, 17% of children and 11.6% of the population were living below poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Virginia implemented their high school exit exam in 1990 and the first class affected was the class of 1996. This particular requirement is being phased out and replaced with a program that allows students more options for their exit exam. Currently, there are no limits on the amount of retakes and required remediation programs are funded by the state (National Governors Association, 2000).

Data Collection and Procedures

All data used in this study was archival and collected from the National Governors Association (www.nga.org), the United States Census Bureau (www.census.gov/qfd), and the subjects' State Departments of Education (see Appendix A for state websites utilized).

A Graduation Exit Exam Matrix (see Appendix B) was obtained through the National Governors Association and was used to identify the subjects for the study: Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, and Virginia. The primary subject selection criterion was that states needed to have three or more years of an implemented high school exit exam. Information obtained from the United States Census Bureau included

2000 census statistics for each of the subject states. Population, diversity, age, education, socioeconomic status, and geographic information were obtained and analyzed to identify factors that may have contributed to changes in graduation and/or dropout rates.

The subjects' State Departments of Education provided state high school graduation and drop out rates up to five years prior to implementation and up to five years after implementation.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed with respect to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and also provided below. Multiple t-tests were used to address each research question of this study.

Research questions.

This study focused on the following research questions:

R1. Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on graduation rates in states requiring them?

R2. Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted high school graduation rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and Virginia?

R3. Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on dropout rates in states requiring them?

R4. Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted dropout rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and Virginia?

Limitations

The following are limitations of this methodology:

1. Data is completely archival and methods of gathering and reporting data may vary between states and from year to year.
2. Only graduation and dropout percentages were used. This did not allow for more detailed information including how many times students needed to take the exit exam to pass, and those who were denied a diploma due to failure of the exam.
3. Definition of graduate and dropout may vary from state to state.
4. The only uncontrollable variables researched in this study were those obtained through the U.S. Census Bureau including state population, diversity, age, education, socioeconomic status, and geographic information.
5. Information from the National Governors Association's Matrix is open to interpretation.

Summary

An introduction to the methodology used in this study has been presented in this chapter. The results of the findings regarding the research questions of this study, conclusions, and suggestions for further research are discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

This chapter will present the results regarding high school exit exams and their impact on graduation and dropout rates. To investigate the research questions of this study, data was analyzed using multiple *T*-tests. The results are presented following demographic information of the sample utilized for this study.

Demographic Information

The sample subjects for the study included Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, and Virginia. Data was collected on state graduation and dropout rates up to five years prior to implementation of the high school exit exam, and up to five years after implementation. New Mexico was dropped from the sample because graduation and dropout statistics were unavailable for the years prior to the implementation of their high school exit exam.

Demographic information regarding the subject states based on the 2000 census is presented in Table 1. Of the four remaining subject states, Florida was the most populated with nearly 16 million people and approximately 269 persons per square mile. The least populated state was Nevada with nearly two million people and approximately 18 persons per square mile. However, Nevada had experienced the highest percentage of increase in population (66.3%) and reported the lowest percentage of children living below poverty (15%). Louisiana had the largest percentage of their population below age 18 (27.3%), the lowest median annual household income ($30,466), and the largest percent of children living below poverty level (26.8%). Virginia reported the highest

household income ($40,209). The most ethnically diverse subject state appeared to be Louisiana who reported the majority of their population being White (62.5%), and Black or African American (32.3%).

Table 1

Demographic Information of Subjects States

State	Population	Persons per square mile	% of population below age 18	Median household income	% of children living below poverty	Diversity %	% of population increase from 1990-2000
Florida	15,982,378	269.4	22.8	$32,877	21.8	White: 65.4 Hispanic or Latino: 16.8 Black/African Am: 14.2 Two or more races: 1.5 Asian: 1.6 Am. Indian & Alaska Native: 0.3 Other: 0.2	23.5
Louisiana	4,468,976	102.6	27.3	$30,466	26.8	White: 62.5 Black/African Am: 32.3 Hispanic or Latino: 2.4 Asian: 1.2 Two or more races: 1.0 Am. Indian & Alaska Native: 0.5 Other: 0.1	5.9
Nevada	1,998,257	18.2	25.6	$39,280 (1997 estimate)	15	White: 65.2 Hispanic or Latino: 19.7 Black/African Am: 6.6 Asian: 4.4 Two or more races: 2.5 Am. Indian & Alaska Native: 1.1 Native Pac. Islander: 0.4 Other: 0.1	66.3
Virginia	7,7078,515	178.8	24.6	40,209	17	White: 70.2 Black/African Am: 19.4 Hispanic or Latino: 4.7 Asian: 3.7 Two or more races: 1.5 Am. Indian & Alaska Native: 0.3 Other: 0.2	14.4

Information regarding the subject states' graduation exit exams is presented in Table 2. Florida began implementing their high school exit exam in 1983 and the first graduating class affected was the class of 1985. Students are tested in math and communications. The state allows an unlimited number of retakes and schools are required by the state to offer remediation programs to those who fail the test, but no funding is allotted for such programs (National Governors Association, 2000).

Louisiana began implementing their high school exit exam in 1989 and the first graduating class affected was the class of 1999. Students are tested in language arts, math, science, social studies, and written composition. This exam was updated in the Spring of 2001, but still assesses the same subject areas. The state allows an unlimited number of retakes and schools are funded by the state to offer required remediation programs to those who fail the test (National Governors Association, 2000).

Nevada implemented their high school exit exam in 1998, effective with the class of 1999. Students are tested in math, reading, and writing. There are no limits on the number of retakes and the state provides funding for required remediation programs for students who fail the test (National Governors Association, 2000).

Virginia implemented their high school exit exam in 1990 and the first class affected was the class of 1996. Students are tested in math, reading, and writing. This particular requirement is being phased out and replaced with a program that allows students to substitute different tests for their exit exam requirement. Currently, there are no limits on the amount of retakes and required remediation programs are funded by the state (National Governors Association, 2000).

Table 2

Information on Subject States' Graduation Exit Exams

State	Name of test	First graduating class affected	Subject(s) tested	Retakes permitted/ limit on # of retakes	Remediation required by state	State funding for remediation
Florida	High School Competency Test	1985	Communications, math	Yes/No	Yes	No
Louisiana	Louisiana Educational Assessment Program - Graduation Exit Exam	1999 Currently being phased out	Language arts, math, written composition, science, social studies	Yes/No	Yes	Yes
Nevada	Nevada High School Proficiency Exam	1999	Math, reading, writing	Yes/No	Yes	Yes
Virginia	Literacy Passport Test	1996 Currently being phased out	Math, reading, writing	Yes/No	Yes	Yes

Data Analysis

Multiple *T*-tests were conducted in the analysis of the data. This method was selected because of the small number of subjects. *T*-tests are used to determine if two means or proportions differ significantly from each other. A similar procedure, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was considered, but was rejected as the *T*-test is the preferred method when small groups are studied. This study utilized the Paired Samples *T*-test. A Paired Samples *T*-test compares two variables with each other. In this study, pre-test graduation rates were compared with post-test graduation rates, and pre-test dropout rates were compared with post-test dropout rates. The results of this analysis are reviewed according to the research questions posed in this study.

Research question 1.

Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on graduation rates in states requiring them?

Only one of the four subject states (Florida) experienced a statistically significant increase in graduation rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. The other subject states showed no significant differences in their graduation rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. These results suggest that high school exit exams had little or no significant impact on graduation rates in these four states.

Research question 2.

Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted high school graduation rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, and Virginia?

The intent was to identify significant differences in graduation rates after implementation of each state's high school exit exam. The results indicated that Florida was the only subject state showing a statistically significant change in graduation rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam. The graduation rate improved significantly after implementation of the test ($t = -3.44$; $p = 0.026$). The mean graduation rate for five years before implementation was 64.9%, while the mean graduation rate for the five years immediately following implementation was 69.47%. Table 3 presents the mean graduation rates for all subjects and Table 4 presents the results of the Paired Samples *T*-test.

Table 3

Mean Graduation Rates Before and After Implementation of High School Exit Exam Requirement

State	Mean graduation rate 2-5 years before implementation	Mean graduation rate 2-5 years after implementation
Florida	64.9	69.47
Louisiana	89.3	91.1
Nevada	79.0	78.66
Virginia	74.57	75.73

Table 4

Results of the Paired Samples T-test – Graduation Rates

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 2	Florida Graduation Rate Before Testing – Florida Graduation Rate After Testing	-4.5680	2.9717	1.3290	-8.2578	-.8782	-3.437	4	.450
Pair 6	Nevada Graduation Rate Before Testing – Nevada Graduation Rate After Testing	.3450	2.8638	2.0250	-25.3851	26.0751	.170	1	.893
Pair 8	Virginia Graduation Rate Before Testing – Virginia Graduation Rate After Testing	-1.1667	1.2503	.7219	-4.2727	1.9393	-1.616	2	.247

Note. The correlation and *t* for Louisiana could not be computed because the sum of caseweights was less than or equal to one.

Research question 3.

Has the implementation of high school exit exams had an overall impact on dropout rates in states requiring them?

Only one of the four subject states (Nevada) experienced a statistically significant decrease in dropout rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. The other subject states showed no significant differences in their dropout rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. These results suggest that high school exit exams had little or no significant impact on dropout rates in the four subject states.

Research question 4.

Has the implementation of high school exit exams impacted dropout rates in Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, and Virginia?

The intent was to identify significant differences in dropout rates after the implementation of each state's high school exit exam. Nevada was the only subject showing a statistically significant change in dropout rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam. Nevada's dropout rates decreased dramatically after implementation of the exam ($t = 41.14$; $p = 0.15$). The mean dropout rate for five years before implementation was 42.4%, while the mean dropout rate for the two years immediately following implementation was 13.6%. Table 5 presents mean dropout rates for all subjects and Table 6 presents the results of the Paired Samples *T*-test.

Table 5

Mean Dropout Rates Before and After Implementation of High School Exit Exam Requirement

State	Mean dropout rate 2-5 years before implementation	Mean dropout rate 2-5 years after implementation
Florida	7.54	6.99
Louisiana	[a]11.16	[b]9.4
Nevada	42.4	13.6
Virginia	3.52	3.0

[a]This mean was calculated by hand because of inconsistencies in data reporting and therefore represents an estimation of the mean dropout rates before the implementation of the high school exit exam.

[b]This number represents Louisiana's 1999 dropout rate. A mean could not be calculated because data from only one year was available.

Table 6

Results of the Paired Samples T-test – Dropout Rates

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Florida Dropout Rate Before Testing – Florida Dropout Rate After Testing	.5480	1.4645	.6549	-1.2704	2.3664	.837	4	.450
Pair 5	Nevada Dropout Rate Before Testing – Nevada Dropout Rate After Testing	28.8000	.9899	.7000	19.9057	37.6943	41.143	1	.015
Pair 7	Virginia Dropout Rate Before Testing – Virginia Dropout Rate After Testing	.5200	.5216	.3012	-.7758	1.8158	1.727	2	.226

Note. The correlation and *t* for Louisiana could not be computed because there were no valid pairs.

Summary

The results from this study suggest that high school exit examinations have not had an overall impact on graduation and dropout rates in the subject states. Graduation

rates improved in only one of the four subject states (Florida) after the implementation of their high school exit exam. Additionally, dropout rates improved in only one of the four subject states (Nevada) after the implementation of a high school exit exam.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings and limitations of this study. A critical analysis of this study in relation to the literature is provided, as well as recommendations for further research.

Discussion

Based on the research of this study, only one of the four subject states (Florida) experienced an increase in graduation rates after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. The three other subject states (Louisiana, Nevada, and Virginia) experienced no significant change in their graduation rates after the implementation of their exit exam requirement. According to the 2000 census data, Florida was the most populated of the four subject states, had experienced the second largest population increase (23.5%) from 1990 to 2000, and had the lowest percentage of their population below age eighteen (22.9%; average was 25.08%). Additionally, Florida reported the second lowest median household income of $32,877, compared to the highest of $40,209 (Virginia). The increase in graduation rates in Florida seem to contradict previous reports that suggest there is great difficulty in improving education in urban and poorer districts (U.S. Department of Education, Goals 2000: Reforming education to improve student achievement, 1998). Poorer districts often lack the funding needed to offer even the basic programs and instructional materials for their students. These districts have a more difficult time attracting quality teachers and often times, school facilities are not conducive to learning. However, since Florida had experienced the second largest

population increase of the subject states, yet had reported the least amount of persons below age 18, one could speculate that Florida's population is largely comprised of people in retirement, therefore the school population would be minimally effected. This may also be a possible explanation for the lower reported median household income.

Florida also had inconsistencies in their reporting data for graduation and dropout rates. For 1980 through 1986, Florida calculated their graduation rate by dividing the total standard diplomas by the fall ninth grade membership four years prior. For 1987 through 1989, the graduation rate was calculated by dividing total completers (standard diplomas, special diplomas, certificate of completion, and special certificates of completion) by first-time ninth graders in the fall four years prior. As Florida changed their data collection, one could expect their graduation rates to increase because they began counting all completers including students who did not pass the exit exam. Thus, this data may not be a true representation of graduation rates. Furthermore, the increase in graduation rates was most likely due to the change in collection procedures, not the implementation of their graduation exit exam. Inconsistencies regarding Florida's dropout rates are discussed further in the Limitations section of this chapter.

Nevada was the only one of the four subject states that experienced a decrease in their dropout rate after the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. The three other subject states (Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia) experienced no significant change in their dropout rates after the implementation of their exit exam. Nevada experienced an enormous population growth from 1990 to 2000. In those ten years, Nevada's population increased by sixty-six point three percent. In a state experiencing such changes, one might expect the education system to have difficulty

accommodating for this growth in population. However, Nevada was still the least populated state and reported approximately 18 persons per square mile, compared to Florida at approximately 270 persons per square mile. Additionally, Nevada reported the lowest number of children living below poverty (15%) and the second highest reported median household income. O.K. Nutting, an Evaluation Consultant with the Nevada Department of Education noted that Nevada has a high number of blue–collar jobs (O.K. Nutting, personal communication, July 5, 2001). Census data indicated an average number (25.6%) of students below the age of eighteen. One could speculate that the districts in Nevada received the funding needed to accommodate its population growth. However, Nevada changed their attendance procedures in 1998 to agree with the National Center for Educational Statistics' guidelines (O.K. Nutting, personal communication, July 5, 2001). The dropout rates provided from the state were for 12th grade only. This is not consistent with the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) guidelines, which calculates rates based on students in grades 9-12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Based on these inconsistencies, one might argue that the sharp decline in dropout rates from 1995-96 (40.1%) to 1996-97 (19.4%) is probably due to their change in collection procedures, not the implementation of their high school exit exam requirement. It is highly unlikely that the dropout rates truly improved over 20 percentage points in just one year.

Interestingly, three of the four states (Louisiana, Nevada, and Virginia) did not experience significant changes in graduation rates after implementation of their high school exit exam, and three of the four states (Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia) did not experience significant changes in dropout rates after implementation of their high school

exit exam. Furthermore, Louisiana and Virginia experienced no significant changes in either their dropout or graduation rates after implementation of their high school exit exam.

Critical Analysis of this Study in Relation to the Literature

The literature provides many issues surrounding the possible negative effects of high school exit exams. Teaching the test is one of the major concerns of opponents of high-stakes testing. Some researchers suggested that teaching techniques used to help students do well on standardized tests might hamper complex cognitive learning (Neil & Medinal, cited in Bizar, n.d.). Time was another concern of opponents. Johnston (1992) noted that in 1992 the average high school student lost approximately ten days of regular instruction due to testing, and McNeil (cited in Schmidt, 2000) reported that teachers in Texas were told to do nothing but prepare students for the state's graduation exam. On the other hand, proponents such as Greene (cited in Miller, 2001) stated that high-stakes tests may by worth stomaching if they help ensure that students are learning. Furthermore, Resnick (cited in Sadowski, 2000) suggested that teaching the test may not be the most effective approach, but it gives structure that is not present in some classrooms, especially in poorly funded schools. Teaching the test may be giving structure in some districts, however, based on the research of this limited study, graduation exit exams do not appear to impact overall student success in high school. Therefore, basing instructional methods around a graduation exit exam and increasing the hype and preparation time surrounding such a test, seems to be a waste of time since the graduation and dropout rates are essentially remaining stable.

Another concern regarding high school exit exams is that they may be a contributing factor for students who drop out of high school. Wheelock, Hartke and Neil (2000) expressed concern that the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was likely to drive up the dropout rate, as it has done in other states with similar high-stakes tests. However, according to this limited study, graduation exit exams do not appear to significantly increase or decrease dropout rates.

The implementation of high-stakes testing has created anxiety in students (McGinn, 1999a). One student said that the push for testing "makes students feel like they're under constant jeopardy – like every single test will influence their life" (McGinn, 1999a, p. 51). Educators seem to be feeling the pressure as well. Pipho (2000) said that New York and Massachusetts experienced trouble with teachers giving students answers to test questions and possibly changing items that students missed. As states adopt funding policies based on test scores, corruption may be an increasing reality (Pipho, 2000).

Testing is costly and takes additional funding. In the past few years, states have nearly tripled the amount of money they spend on testing (Education Commission of the States, n.d.), yet this study suggests that only one in four states will see significant results after implementing high school exit exams. What is interesting is that President George W. Bush supports more testing even though he criticized Congress for producing costly educational programs over the years without knowing their results (Bush, 2001). President Bush is allotting $320 million dollars for his testing mandate. If only one in four states will see a significant improvement in graduation and dropout rates, $320 million dollars seems like a gamble.

High school exit exams create controversy. Educators worry about an increase in dropout rates, teachers are concerned with time and instructional methods, students are worried about the consequences of failing an exit exam, districts are experiencing corruption, and a lot of additional funding is being provided for high school exit exams. Yet, based on this limited study, only one of four states will see a significant increase in graduation rates, or a significant decrease in dropout rates after implementation of a high school exit exam. If these results are extrapolated to all 50 states, only 12.5 states are likely to see a significant change in either their graduation or dropout rates.

Limitations

The following are limitations of this study:

Inconsistencies in data.

The data used in this study was completely archival and methods of gathering and reporting data varied between states and from year to year. Schwartz (1995) noted that calculating an accurate dropout rate is very difficult because districts and states differ in their definitions and counting methods, as was discovered while conducting this study.

Graduation and dropout rates for Florida were gathered for the years 1980 through 1989, yet changes in data collection procedures made it difficult to compare statistics from year to year. The collection of graduation data from 1980 through 1986 is not consistent with the collection of graduation data from 1987 through 1989, and the calculation of dropout rates for 1980 through 1982 is not consistent with the calculation of dropout rates for 1983 through 1989. Additionally, for all years analyzed in this study, Florida included only dropouts who were 16 years of age or older

Nevada did not supply graduation rates in the form of percentages. To calculate their graduation rates, the total number of graduates were divided by the total 12th grade enrollment for the years of the study (1994-2000). Nevada changed their attendance procedures in 1998 to agree with the National Center for Educational Statistics' guidelines (O.K. Nutting, personal communication, July 5, 2001). The information provided by the state was for 12th grade only, which is not consistent with the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) guidelines, which calculates rates based on students in grades 9-12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). These inconsistencies made it difficult to calculate true comparisons of data from year to year.

Louisiana dropout rates represent the total number of student dropouts (grades 9-12) for all schools in the state, divided by the cumulative enrollment (grades 9-12) for all schools in the state for each year analyzed in this study (1996-2000). Louisiana changed its reporting procedures in 1993 and again in 1996. Although the changes did not affect the data in this study, it is important to note that tracking true dropout rates for a number of years is at this point, impossible. Louisiana's graduation rates were calculated by dividing the total number of twelfth-grade enrollment by the number of students that graduated. Specifics regarding the type of graduates are not known (standard diplomas, special diplomas, certificate of completion, and special certificates of completion).

Virginia dropouts were defined as students in grades 7 through 12 and ungraded students ages 12 and older who withdrew from school for reasons other than promotion, transfer, death, or graduation and did not enter another school during the school year. Also included were students who were in attendance on the last day of the school year but failed to return to school by October 31 the following school year. Virginia graduation

rates were based on the percent of ninth grade membership four years earlier. Students who received a certificate of attendance were included as graduates. Therefore, the data does not represent the true impact of the high school exit exam on graduation rates.

Limited information.

Only graduation and dropout percentages were analyzed. This did not allow for more detailed information including how many times students needed to take the exit exam to pass, and those who were denied a diploma due to failure of the exam. Additionally, graduation and dropout rates were calculated for five years prior to and five years after implementation of exit exams, but only 2000 census data was collected and analyzed.

Subjects chosen for this study were based on information from the Governors Association Matrix, which is open to interpretation. Therefore, states that have had a graduation exit exam for three or more years may have been excluded from this study.

Recommendations

There were several limitations of this study, most of which pertained to inconsistencies in data. The National Center for Education Statistics is encouraging states to follow reporting guidelines for both graduation and dropout statistics. Currently only 37 states and Washington DC are following NCES procedures (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). I recommend repeating this study using comparable states, or states that follow NCES reporting procedures. If enough states with high school exit exams followed the same reporting procedures for graduation and dropout statistics, it would be beneficial to expand this study and compare trends within and between states. Additionally, cost of living comparisons would give the researcher a better understanding

of the differences between subject states. However, since many states are either in the process of implementing graduation exit exams or changing their current requirements, it may be years before enough information is available to repeat this study according to these recommendations.

Summary and Conclusions

As more states adopt high school exit exams as a part of their high school graduation requirement, debates regarding these mandates will continue. Unfortunately, the true impact of these exams will not be known until years after implementation, and even then, only if states gather their data consistently from year to year.

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APPENDIX A.

State Education Department Websites Utilized for Study

State Education Department Websites Utilized for Study

Florida:

http://www.firn.edu/doe/index.html

Louisiana:

http://www.doe.state.la.us

Nevada:

http://www.nsn.k12nv.us/nvdoe

New Mexico:

http://www.sde.state.nm.us

Virginia:

http://www.pen.k12.va.us/go/VDOE

APPENDIX B.

Graduation Exit Exam Matrix

Graduation Exit Exam Matrix

Students are expected to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they will need to continue their education or enter the workforce. With the advent of standards-based reforms, policymakers are turning to performance-based accountability measures for districts, schools, students, and educators. A comprehensive, standards-based education accountability system should establish standards for student knowledge and performance; measure student performance relative to the standards; and hold schools, students, and educators accountable for meeting the standards. One element of an accountability system is an assessment system to measure achievement of standards and one component of an assessment system is a high school graduation exit examination. These exit exams are not the minimum competency tests of the past—they are designed to be aligned to the new content and performance standards states have developed.

All states represented in the matrices are at some stage of implementing a graduation exit exam. The first part of the two-part matrix lists states that require students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a diploma and graduate from high school. The second portion of the matrix includes three states in which there is a waiver process available for students or schools.

For more information, read an NGA *Issue Brief,* High School Exit Exams: Setting High Expectations.

Contact Theresa Clarke, 202/624-5387.

States With High School Graduation Exit Exams (as of October 15, 2000)

State and Contact	Name of Test	Implementation Status	Subject(s)	Grade(s)[1]	Month(s) Offered Every Year	Retakes Permitted/Limit on Number of Retakes	Remediation Required by State/State Funding
Alabama Dorothy DeMars 334/242-8038	High School Basic Skills Exit Exam	Will be phased out by 2003	Reading, language, math	11th—all subjects	September, December, March, July	Yes/Yes[2]	Yes/Yes
	Alabama High School Graduation Exam	Class of 2001 Class of 2002 Class of 2003	Language, reading Language, reading, math, science Language, reading, math, science, social studies	10th—all subjects	September, December, March, July	Yes/Yes[3]	Yes/Yes
Alaska Richard Smiley 907/465-8691	High School Graduation Qualifying Examination[4]	Spring 2000; class of 2002	Reading, writing, math	10th—all subjects	Two times per year	Yes/Yes[5]	No/Yes
Arizona Dr. Paul Young 602/542-5031	Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards[6]	Spring 2000; class of 2002: reading, writing; class of 2004: math	Reading, writing, algebra, geometry, measurement, data analysis and probability, combined mathematical structure and logic and number sense	10th	Spring and fall	Yes/No	No/No
California John Carey 916/657-4539	High School Exit Examination	2000–01: optional for 9th graders; 2001–02: required for 10th graders; 2004–05: required for graduation	Reading, writing, math	10th	March	Yes/Yes[7]	Yes/Yes
Delaware Carole White 302/739-2771	Delaware Student Testing Program	Spring 2000; class of 2002[8]	English/Language arts, math, science, social studies	10th—English/language arts, math 11th—Science, social studies	Spring (and fall for retests)	Yes/No	No/No
Florida Jim Swingle 850/488-8198	High School Competency Test[9]	October 1983; class of 1985	Communications, math	11th	October, January, March, July	Yes/No[10]	Yes/No

State and Contact	Name of Test	Implementation Status	Subject(s)	Grade(s)[1]	Month(s) Offered Every Year	Retakes Permitted/Limit on Number of Retakes	Remediation Required by State/State Funding
Louisiana Scott Norton 225/342-3406	Louisiana Educational Assessment Program—Graduation Exit Examination	April 1989; class of 1999 Currently being phased out	Language arts, math, science, social studies, written composition	10th—language arts, math, written composition 11th—science, social studies	April	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
	Louisiana Educational Assessment Program—Graduation Exit Examination (updated version)	March 2001 and 2002; class of 2003	English/language arts, math, science, social studies	10th—English/language arts, math 11th—science, social studies[11]	March	Yes/No	Yes/No
Maryland Mark Moody 410/767-0073	Functional Testing Program	1978–1979; class of 1982 Currently being phased out	Reading, math, writing, citizenship	7th–12th[12]	October, December, January, February, April, July[13]	Yes/No	Yes/No
	High School Assessment	January 2004; class of 2007	English 1, government, algebra, geometry, biology	End of course	January, May	Yes/No	Yes/No
Massachusetts Jeff Nellhaus 781/338-3600	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)	Spring 2001; class of 2003	English/language arts, math, science and technology, history and social science, world languages	10th	May	Yes/No	No/Yes[14]
Minnesota Diane Cirksena 651/582-8759	Basic Standards Tests	Spring 1996; class of 2000	Math, reading, written composition	8th–12th	January, February	Yes/No[15]	Yes/No
Mississippi Jim Simmons 601/359-3052	Functional Literacy Examination (FLE)[16]	Fall 1987; class of 1989	Math, reading, written communication	11th—all subjects	November, March	Yes/No[17]	No/No
Nevada Tom Klein 775/687-9184	Nevada High School Proficiency Exam[18]	April 1998; class of 1999	Math, reading, writing	11th—all subjects	October, February, April, June	Yes/No[19]	Yes/Yes[20]
New Jersey Marlene Gourley 609/292-8736	Grade 11 High School Proficiency Test (HSPT11)	October 1992; class of 1994	Math, reading, writing	11th—all subjects	October, April	Yes/No	Yes/No[21]
	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)	Language arts literacy & math (2001–02); science (2002–03); social studies (2004–05); visual and performing arts, comprehensive health/physical education, & world	Language arts literacy, math, science, social studies, visual and performing arts, comprehensive health & physical education, and world languages	11th—all subjects	March	Yes/No[22]	Yes/No

State and Contact	Name of Test	Implementation Status	Subject(s)	Grade(s)	Month(s) Offered Every Year	Retakes Permitted/Limit on Number of Retakes	Remediation Required by State/State Funding
New Mexico Cynthia Parsons 505/827-6524	High School Competency Exam	February 1987; class of 1990	Language arts, math, reading, science, writing, social studies	10th—all subjects	November, January, February	Yes[23]	No/No
New York Tom Schoeck 518/474-5902	Regents Competency Tests	1987–1988 Currently being phased out	Reading, writing, math, science, social studies (global history), U.S. history and government	9th or 10th—math, science 10th—global history 11th—reading, writing, global history, U.S. history, government	January, June, August	Yes/No	Yes/Yes[24]
	Regents Examinations[25]	June 1999; class of 2005	English/language arts, global history, U.S. history and government, math, science (life and physical), second language (elected)	10th—life sciences, math A, global history 11th—English/language arts, U.S. history and government	January, June, August	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
North Carolina Mildred Bazemore 919/715-1191	North Carolina Competency Tests in Reading and Math	Summer 1994; class of 1998	Math, reading	8th[26]	Fall, spring, summer	Yes/No[27]	Yes/No[28]
	Essential Skills Exit Exam	Graduating class of 2005	communications, processing information, problem solving, and using numbers and data.	11th	Spring (1st time) summer, fall, spring thereafter.	Yes/No[29]	Yes/No
Ohio Jan Crandell 614/466-0223	9th-Grade Proficiency Tests[30]	Fall 1990; class of 1994 Currently being phased out	Citizenship, math, reading, science, writing	9th–12th	October, March, May (seniors only), July	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
	High School Graduation Qualifying Exams	March 2003; class of 2005 Currently being phased in	Citizenship, math, reading, science, writing	10th–12th	March, July, October	Yes/No	Yes/Yes

State and Contact	Name of Test	Implementation Status	Subject(s)	Grade(s)	Month(s) Offered Every Year	Retakes Permitted/Limit on Number of Retakes	Remediation Required by State/State Funding
South Carolina Paul Sandifer 803/734-8295	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)	Spring 1986; class of 1990 Currently being phased out	Math, reading, writing	10th	April, July, October	Yes/Yes[31]	Yes/Yes
	Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT)	Spring 2003; class of 2005	Math, reading/language arts, science 2004, and social studies 2005[32]	10th	April, July, October	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
Tennessee Ben Brown 615/532- 1651	Tennessee Competency Test	Currently being phased out[33]	Language arts, math	9th—all subjects	October, February, June, July	Yes/No	No/No
Texas Ann Smisko 512/463-9087	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)[34]	Currently being implemented	Reading, writing, math	10th—all subjects	October, February, April, July, and May for graduating seniors and out-of-school youth	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
	New assessment per 1999 SB 103	2002-2003	English language arts, math, science, social studies	11th—all subjects	To be determined	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
Utah Barbara Lawrence 801/538-7810	10th Grade Basic Skills Competency Test[35]	Spring; class of 2004	Language arts, math	10th	April at end of 10th, April and November in 11th and 12th, and November after graduation.	Yes/No	To be determined
Virginia Cameron Harris 804/225-2102	Literacy Passport Test[36]	Spring 1990; class of 1996 Currently being phased out	Math, reading, writing	6th	February, July, October (retakes only)	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
	Standards of Learning Tests (SOL)[37]	Spring 1998 Will be implemented effective 2004[38]	English, math, science, history[39]	End of course	Spring/fall; limited summer administration starting in summer 1999	Yes/No	Yes/Yes
Washington David Anderson 360/664-3512 or Bob Silverman 360/664-0655	Washington Assessment of Student Learning—10th Grade (WASL 10)	Will be implemented effective 2001[40]	Reading, writing, listening, math, science[41]	10th	Spring	Yes/No	Yes/No

Endnotes

[1] Grade listed is the first grade in which tests are administered.
[2] Students enrolled in high school are limited to three additional retakes on the High School Basic Skills Exit Exam.
[3] Students enrolled in high school are limited to five additional retakes on the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.
[4] Students who fail to pass test will receive a certificate of attendance and have up to three years after leaving high school to change the certificate to a diploma.
[5] Students are not eligible to take the test three years after their graduation date.
[6] The school district may provide a certificate other than a diploma, but it will not be recognized by the state.
[7] Determined by the number of tests offered.
[8] For the class of 2004, three state high school diplomas will be available: a standard diploma (meets course req., does not pass test), an academic diploma (meets course req., passes test), and a distinguished achievement diploma (meets course req., passes test with honors).
[9] The Florida Department of Education is in the process of phasing out the High School Competency Test in favor of a new test, The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). This test will be implemented for the class of 2004. Students will be tested on reading, writing, and math.
[10] Students have two opportunities during their junior year and three during their senior year to take the test. If students do not pass the test, they are eligible for a 13th year of instruction or a certificate of completion. Students receiving certificates may retake the test an unlimited number of times to earn a standard diploma.
[11] Louisiana is the only state to retain 4th and 8th graders if they do not pass minimum standards test.
[12] The reading, writing, and math tests may be given as early as the seventh grade. The citizenship test is waived for students who complete an approved course in government. Exceptions include students who had already been scheduled in a prior semester to take the citizenship test.
[13] Reading and math tests are given in October and April. The citizenship test is given in January, February, and April. The writing test is given in December and July.
[14] Currently, remediation is not required under law, but the issue is being discussed. The most recent budget included monies for school districts whose students did not perform well to provide extra assistance if remediation was recommended.
[15] District may elect to offer the test in June.
[16] Beginning in school year 2001–02, plans are to phase out the FLE and replace it with mandatory end-of-course tests in Algebra I, Biology I, U.S. History, and English II (with a writing component) to obtain a high school diploma.
[17] Districts are not required to allow individuals take the test after they have been out of school for three years.
[18] If students do not pass the test, they will not receive the standard diploma. However, they will receive a certificate of attendance. Special education students are the only group eligible to waive the exit exam. They will receive diplomas stating that they met all the requirements, except the exit exam.
[19] Students have six opportunities to retake a test or tests not passed before the end of the summer following their senior year. After that, they may continue to take the needed test(s), either through their district's adult education program or a community college, as long as they participate in their district's required remediation program between retakes of the test.
[20] Students can begin to take the Nevada High School Proficiency Test in their junior year. Remediation is required for students who fail one or more of the tests and the school provides the class work. State funds are available to assist schools in the remediation process.
[21] Districts may use federal funds for remediation.
[22] Some special education (SE) and some limited English proficient (LEP) students can be waived from taking the exit exam. If a non-exempt SE or LEP student does not pass the test, he/she will not be able to graduate. However, all non-exempt students who fail any test section are eligible to participate in the Special Review Assessment process (SRA) in the senior year. If a student passes the SRA, he/she is eligible to graduate.
[23] State statute provides that students exiting the school system at the end of grade 12 without having passed the state competency exam shall receive a certificate indicating the number of credits earned and the grade completed.
[24] School districts have discretion in using state funds.
[25] The class of 2005 will be the first class that must pass each of the Regent examinations with a score of 65 or higher to graduate.
[26] Students may only take the reading and math tests in the eighth grade. Students retake the tests in the ninth grade and each year thereafter if they do not pass them the first time. The end-of-grade reading and math tests (grade eight) are the first opportunity to screen for the competency requirement.
[27] School districts are not required to administer the test(s) to individuals above age twenty-one.
[28] Districts may use federal and/or state funds for remediation.
[29] If students do not pass the exit exam, they will receive a certificate of achievement, and not a standard diploma. Students are waived from the exam if they are in the occupational course of study (i.e. special education students).
[30] In 1997 the state legislature decided to phase out the current 9th-Grade Proficiency Tests and replace them with tests that measure high school proficiency through the end of the 10th grade. The new tests will be a graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2005. In spring 2003, sophomores will take the new tests in reading, writing, mathematics, citizenship, and science.
[31] Students may also take the exam in the summer after their senior year if all other requirements have been completed. Adults may take the test if they are enrolled in an adult education program.
[32] A science test will be added to the PACT as a requirement for graduation in spring 2002, and the plans are to add a social studies test as a graduation requirement in spring 2004.
[33] For students entering the 9th grade in 2000–01, the competency tests will be replaced by end-of-course examinations in Algebra I, English II, and biology to meet graduation requirements.
[34] Students may meet the graduation requirements by passing state end-of-course tests. In that case, students are not required to take TAAS. Also, local districts have the option of issuing a certificate other than a diploma, but it is not recognized by the state.
[35] Students receive a certificate of completion (not a diploma) if they do not pass.
[36] If student does not pass, he/she receives a certificate of attendance (not a diploma). Test can be taken any time after graduating to upgrade to diploma. This test will be phased out in 2003.

[37] Students may substitute different tests for the SOL exams, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and SAT-II exams. If student does not pass, he/she receives a certificate of attendance (not a diploma). Test can be taken any time after graduating to upgrade to diploma.

[38] The tests are being administered now. However, the graduating class of 2004 will be the first class for which the tests will be used for graduation purposes.

[39] From 2004 to 2007, students will have to pass six exams—two in English and four in subjects of their choosing. After 2007, they must pass two tests in English, one in math, one in science, one in social studies, and one in a subject of their choosing (as long as it is in one of the above categories).

[40] The state board of education determines when WASL 10 is valid and reliable, which triggers the effective date of the Certificate of Mastery as a graduation requirement. Certificate of Mastery is expected to be effective as a state graduation requirement beginning with graduating seniors in 2006.

[41] Social studies, arts, health, and fitness will eventually be included.

States that Allow Waivers Regarding High School Graduation Exit Examinations (as of October 15, 2000)

State and Contact	Name of Test	Implementation Status	Subject(s)	Grade(s)[1]	Month(s) Offered Every Year	Retakes Permitted/Limit on Number of Retakes	Remediation Required by State/State Funding
Georgia Lynn Thinkett 404/657-0312	Georgia High School Graduation Tests[2]	Fall 1993; class of 1995	English, math, science, social studies, writing	11th---all subjects	Spring, summer, fall, winter	Yes[3]/No	Yes/Yes
Indiana Mary Tiede Wilhelmus 317/232-6614	Indiana Statewide Testing for Education Progress—Plus (ISTEP+) Graduation Qualifying Exam[4]	September 1997; class of 2000	English/language arts, math	10th[5]	September	Yes[6]/No	Yes[7]/Yes[8]
Wisconsin John Fortier 608/266-3361	Wisconsin High School Graduation Test[9]	Spring 2002; class of 2004	English/language arts, math, science, social studies	11th, 12th	Spring, fall	Yes/Yes[10]	No

Endnotes

[1] Grade listed is the first grade in which tests are administered.

[2] Students have the option of undergoing a waiver process if they do not want to take the test to graduate.

[3] Students may take the test five times while in high school and an unlimited number of times after their graduation date if they have been unable to pass one or more of the tests. If students have met all other requirements, they receive a certificate of performance or special education diploma after their graduation date until they pass the exam.

[4] A waiver is available for students who receive a 'C' or above in the courses included in the 22 credits required for graduation. One opportunity for an appeal is available with a recommendation letter and documentation of work (local decision).

[5] Although it is first administered in the 10th grade, the ISTEP+ tests students to ascertain ninth-grade proficiency in English/language arts and mathematics.

[6] Currently, retakes are offered once each semester during students' junior and senior years.

[7] Remediation decisions are made at the local level. Schools must have a remediation plan for students who do not pass the test and may provide preventive remediation to students at any grade who are at risk of not passing the test.

[8] The state provides remediation/prevention grant monies for each local education agency in which the standards are not met for all tested grade levels (3, 6, 8, and 10), and the local school corporation must have a 1:2 match for state funds. The first class subject to the Graduation Qualifying Exam (2000) also received additional remediation funds through the action of the Governor's office and state budget agency ($5 million).

[9] Students are allowed to opt out. Districts can also opt out if they develop their own standards and administer their own test.

[10] Up to four retakes are allowed; students only retake part of test they did not pass.