



Policy Brief

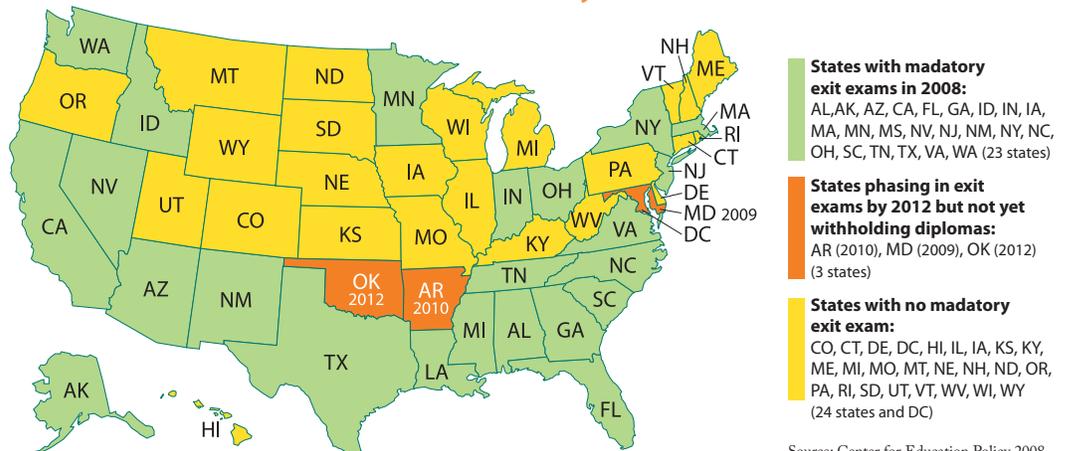
High School Exit Exams and Students with LD

In 2008, 26 states required students to pass a high school “exit exam” to receive a high school diploma—a practice known as “high-stakes” testing (see map). Many other states use these tests to make decisions about equally critical issues such as eligibility for scholarships, advanced placement, and honors classes.

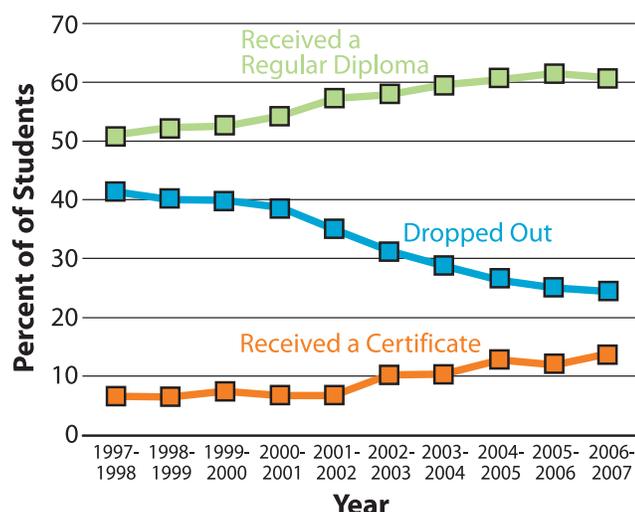
The practice of high-stakes exit exams now impacts 68% of the nation’s public high school students. This affects many of the 2.5 million students with identified learning disabilities (LD). Testing to determine students’ achievement of required skills and knowledge based on high academic standards can provide important information about both teaching and learning. However, many risks emerge when the score on a single test is used to make high-stakes decisions about individual students.

The rate at which students with LD leave high school with a regular high school diploma has been gradually rising for a decade, yet still remains well below the graduation rate for students without special education status. Ten percent more students received a regular high school diploma in 2007 than in 1997 (61% vs. 51%). Meanwhile, the number of students with LD receiving a certificate of completion (something other than a regular high

States with mandatory exit exams



How students with LD exit high school



Source: www.IDEAdata.org, 2007 Child Count

school diploma) has increased dramatically over the past decade. Just 7% of students received a certificate in 1997; in 2007 that percentage doubled to 14%.

It is likely that the increase in the number of states instituting these diploma options (i.e. alternative means of graduating from high school other than a regular high school diploma) such

Alternative Pathways for Students with Disabilities

According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy (www.cep-dc.org), 22 of the 26 states with mandatory exit exams also offer specific alternate pathways for students with disabilities. Fourteen states make available alternative assessments, including portfolio assessments or modified standardized tests, as pathways for students with disabilities who are struggling to pass exit exams while 11 states offer waiver options specifically for students with disabilities.

as a “certificate of completion” over the past decade is directly related to the high-stakes exit exams states are requiring all students to pass in order to receive a regular high school diploma. Since such exams pose difficulty for several groups of students, including students with disabilities, many states have developed alternative pathways (see box). Some alternatives are available to all students, while others are reserved only for students with disabilities. There is little research on the value of such alternative diplomas and certificates; however, many are not accepted by colleges and universities.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities believes education reform efforts are important and useful for all students, including students with LD. However, the proliferation of high-stakes exit exams, coupled with the expanding availability of alternate diploma options, threatens the long-term success of students with LD. As the nation’s public schools are held more accountable for graduating all students to be college- and career-ready, care must be taken to ensure that policies support fully including students with disabilities.

The term “high-stakes” is used to describe tests that have high stakes for individual students. Such high-stakes testing is designed to hold individual students accountable for their own test performance. “System accountability,” on the other hand, is aimed at holding the providers of education accountable — such as states, school districts, and schools.

Many states use part of their exit exams to also satisfy federal system accountability requirements under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, currently known as No Child Left Behind). However, the ESEA does not require or encourage the results of state tests required for school accountability be used for making decisions about individual students.

Policy Recommendations

■ **Test Validity and Reporting.** Students with disabilities are often not included in the sample population used in test development nor are students with disabilities, when included, given appropriate testing accommodations. This results in a lack of test validity and the development of assessments that are, in fact, assessing the students' disability, not his or her ability. Assessments should be designed and validated so as to ensure that the normative sample includes students with disabilities using appropriate accommodations.

Testing results should report both aggregated and disaggregated data and should be reported at the state, district, and school levels.

Graduation rates should also be reported in the aggregate and disaggregated by important student groups, including students with disabilities (IDEA-eligible) at the state, district and school levels. School and district graduation goals used for system accountability should include all students and apply equally to all student groups.

■ **Access to Accommodations.** Students with LD must have access to the same accommodations on the assessments that they use during instruction and routine classroom testing. Decisions about the accommodations to be provided on assessments is the sole responsibility of those involved in the formulation of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Plan, generally a team consisting of the student, his or her parents, and appropriate school personnel. IDEA requires all states to have guidelines for the selection of appropriate assessment accommodations for students with disabilities. However, despite this requirement, test accommodations continue to be a source of both confusion and contention. Policies and procedures regarding test accommodations are uneven across states, and legal challenges continue to be brought on behalf of students who are being denied reasonable accommodations on high-stakes tests.

■ **Access to Remediation and Retesting.** Students who do not pass a high-stakes test should be provided meaningful opportunities for remediation, which is additional instruction to help improve their performance. High-stakes testing policies should include access to remediation. Remediation should focus on improving the student's knowledge and skill level as indicated by performance on the test, not merely on test-taking techniques. Students should have adequate opportunities to retake tests after receiving remediation.

■ **Parent and Student Involvement.** Parents and students should be given clear and accurate information about the assessment system, including accommodations, remediation, retesting, and appeals. The short and long-term effects of non-participation should be fully discussed with parents and students to ensure a complete understanding of the consequences of any large-scale assessment system. The implications of receiving an alternate diploma (such as a certificate of completion, modified diploma, etc.) should be fully explained to parents and students prior to any decisions regarding test participation.

■ **Limit on Use of High-stakes Tests.** Multiple measures of student performance should be used in the assessment system, and no one measure or test score should determine the educational future of students.

■ **Political and Administrative Considerations.** Considerations, such as how the inclusion of students with LD in high-stakes assessments will affect reporting of scores of schools and districts, must not be allowed to override the rights and needs of students with LD nor adversely affect the benefits of the students once included.

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The National Center for Learning Disabilities works to ensure that the nation's 15 million children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities have every opportunity to succeed in school, work and life. NCLD provides essential information to parents, professionals and individuals with learning disabilities, promotes research and programs to foster effective learning and advocates for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

For more information, please visit us on the Web at www.LD.org.