



The California High School Exit Exam

The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) is meant to improve student achievement and to ensure that students who graduate from high school can demonstrate a certain level of competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. The exam is based on California's statewide academic content standards—what students are supposed to learn at each grade level.

What does the exit exam cover and how long does it take?

The exam has two sections: English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In the ELA section, students are tested on material up through the state's 10th grade standards. The test includes multiple-choice questions and one essay. In the mathematics section, students are given multiple-choice questions on material that is covered through Algebra I. (California encourages schools to offer Algebra I in 8th grade, and it is a high school graduation requirement.)

The state sets guidelines for the amount of time students should need to complete the CAHSEE (about three hours for math and about four hours for ELA). However, schools are supposed to give students more time if they need it. The test is given over a two-day period. The state holds schools accountable for their students' test scores and expects those scores to improve over time.

When is the CAHSEE offered and what score must a student receive to pass?

The CAHSEE is offered several times during the year. Students take the exit exam once in 10th grade and have up to five additional opportunities to retake each section of the exam. It is a pass/fail test. Once students pass one section, they do not need to take that section again. Scores range from 250 to 450 for each section, with a score of 350 or higher considered passing. Students must answer 55% of the questions correctly in math and 60% of the questions correctly in English language arts to score 350 and pass each section. (The essay accounts for 18% of the test score in ELA.)

Do students have to pass the exit exam to get a high school diploma?

The class of 2004 was the first class that had to take the CAHSEE. School districts may give students in the classes

of 2004 and 2005 who pass the exit exam a certificate of accomplishment. But districts cannot require students in those classes to pass the exit exam to graduate. However, beginning with the class of 2006, students must pass the exam to earn a diploma. In July 2003, the State Board of Education postponed the requirement to pass the exam from 2004 until 2006 because of the results of an independent study, funded by the state. The study found that although the exam had greatly improved the coverage of state standards in schools, instruction—particularly in math—had not been effective for all students, especially those who had not had the benefit of standards-based education before entering high school.

Passing the exit exam is not enough to get a high school diploma. Students must also successfully complete specific courses, earn a certain number of academic credits, and meet other district or school-specific requirements. If students do not pass the exam or meet other requirements, they can attend adult education classes to earn a diploma or they can take the GED—a nationally recognized high school equivalency exam for adults. Students between 16 and 18 years of age, with their parents' permission, may also choose to take the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE). If they pass, they are free to leave high school and receive the legal equivalent of a high school diploma.

How are schools helping students pass the exam?

The state requires schools to provide extra help to students who are not showing progress toward passing the exam but does not offer districts additional funds specifically for this purpose. For example, schools can direct existing funds for remedial education and summer school to help students succeed on the exam. Districts are encouraged to reduce electives available to students who have failed the exam, allowing them instead to receive supplemental help in English language arts and math during the regular academic year.

Must English learners and Special Education students pass the exit exam?

California requires all English learners to take the CAHSEE in 10th grade with their English-speaking peers and, begin-

ning with the class of 2006, to pass the exam to obtain a high school diploma. However, districts can defer the requirement to pass the exam for newly arrived English learners for up to 24 months after they first enroll in the California public school system. During this period, students must complete at least six months of instruction in English reading, writing, and comprehension to qualify for the deferment. They must also continue to take the CAHSEE.

Students identified for Special Education may have IEPs—individualized education programs—or Section 504 plans. These plans often require adjustments to instruction and testing conditions that enable students with disabilities to participate in as much of the regular education program as possible. These adjustments are known as “accommodations” and “modifications.” An example of a testing accommodation is being allowed to use a word processor with spelling and grammar checks turned off. Modifications, such as using calculators on a math test, alter what the test measures or affect the comparability of scores.

By law, Special Education students must be allowed to take the CAHSEE with the testing accommodations or modifications specified by their plans. But students who take the CAHSEE with modifications will not receive a valid score even if they answer enough questions correctly to otherwise pass the exam. However, at the request of a parent or guardian of such a student, the school’s principal must ask the school district’s governing board for a waiver of the requirement for a valid passing score. The school board may approve the waiver if students: (1) complete the district’s required coursework; (2) have IEPs or Section 504 plans that require modifications; and (3) receive the equivalent of a passing score using those modifications. [11]

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How can I find out more?

- For more on the CAHSEE, including statewide results, released test questions from prior years, and information on accommodations and modifications, visit the exit exam website: www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/cahsee/
- To learn more general information about exit exams and other high-stakes tests, go to the Education Commission of the States website at: www.ecs.org

The pros and cons of high school exit exams

Exit exams—and high-stakes tests more generally—stir controversy among educators, policymakers, parents, students, and others because failing holds serious educational and life consequences for students and their families. These exams have both their supporters and critics.

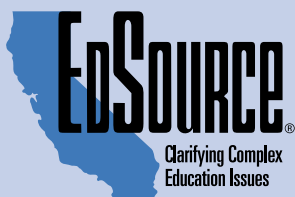
Proponents of exit exams assert that all students must be held to high standards to preserve the overall value or meaning of a high school diploma. In addition, they warn that if all students are not held to high standards, weaknesses in the education system will never be identified or addressed. They say that exit exams also:

- Increase student and teacher motivation;
- Provide schools with tools to identify and address the needs of struggling students;
- Promote consistency across the state in what students are learning;
- Better prepare students for post-secondary education and adult life;
- Raise support for the education system when the public sees yearly gains in achievement.

Critics of exit exams assert that it is unwise to base life-altering decisions on a single, imperfect measure. They say that, in other ways too, the costs of exit exams far outweigh the benefits because the exams:

- Consume valuable instructional time and money;
- Do not assess students on important skills that are not easily measured by a standardized test;
- Put pressure on teachers to focus more time on teaching test content—to the detriment of enrichment and creative activities or other areas of the curriculum;
- May be unfair if they test students on subject matter they have not been taught;
- Lead to higher dropout rates among low-achieving students and those who have difficulty taking tests, particularly English learners and poor, disabled, and minority students;
- Serve as a disincentive for high-achieving students who are less motivated to work hard in school once they have passed the exam.

Research results on the effects of exit exams have been mixed, and both sides can point to data that support their arguments. According to the California Department of Education (CDE), the June 2002 analysis from the independent evaluation of the CAHSEE revealed no evidence that the exit exam has affected grade retention, dropout rates, or students’ post-secondary plans. See: www.cde.ca.gov/statetests/cahsee/eval/eval.html



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