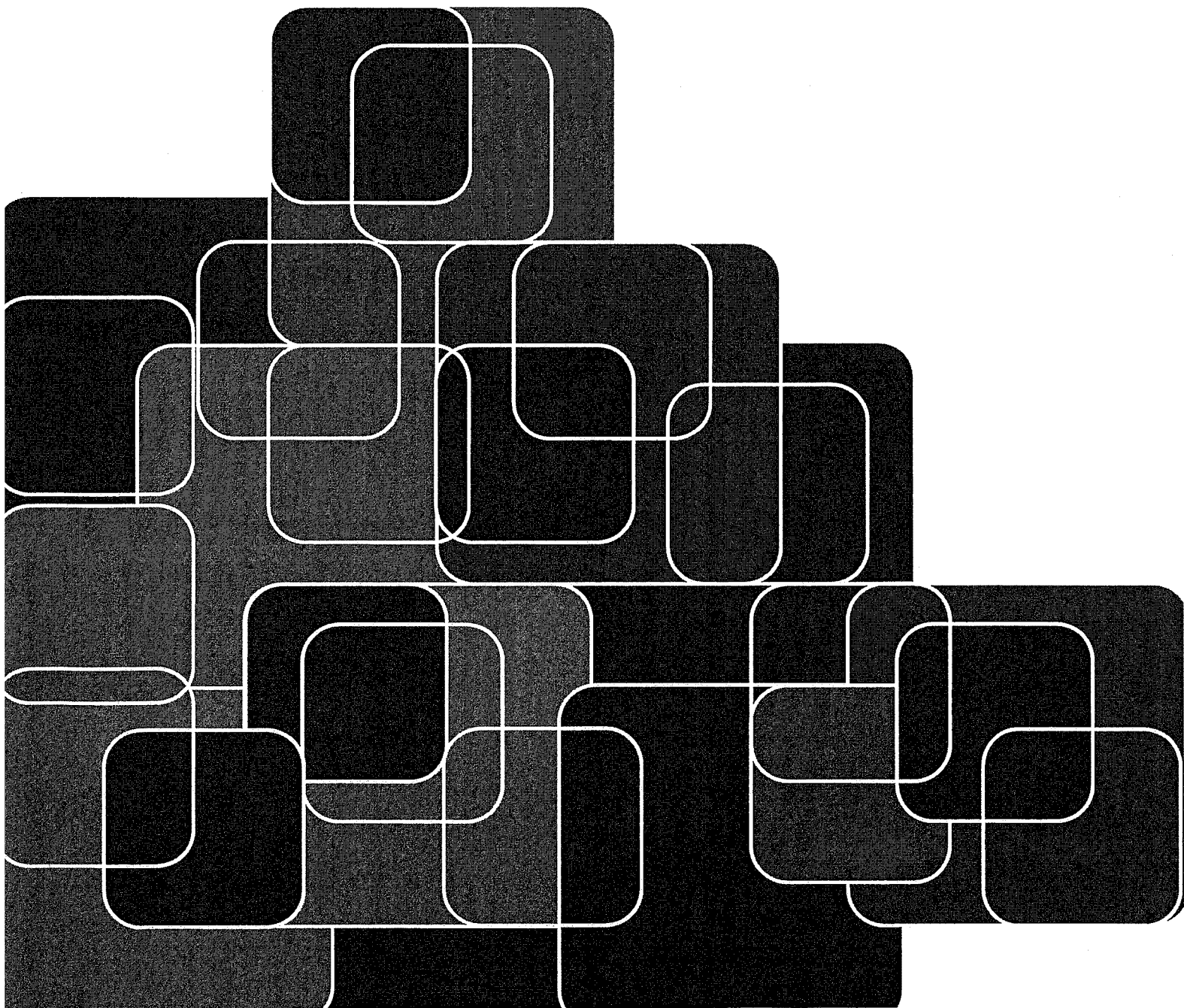


State High School Exit Exams: A Move Toward End-of-Course Exams

August 2008

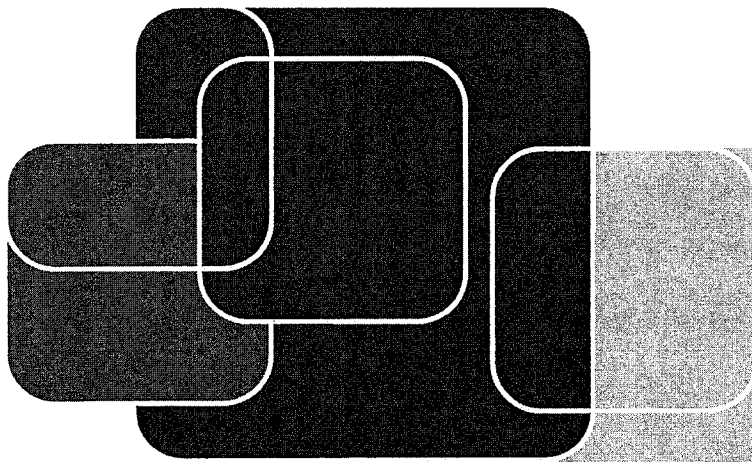




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About the Center on Education Policy

Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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Executive Summary and Study Methods

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent nonprofit organization, has been studying state high school exit examinations—tests students must pass to receive a high school diploma. This is CEP's seventh annual report on exit exams. The information in this report comes from several sources: our survey of states that have mandatory exit exams, media reports, state Web sites, and interviews with state and district officials.

This report focuses on new developments in high school exit exam policies that have occurred over the past year. It specifically focuses on the states' move away from minimum-competency exams and comprehensive exams that are aligned to state standards in several subjects, and toward end-of-course (EOC) exams that assess mastery of the content of a specific high school course.

The bulleted points that follow summarize CEP's major findings from this year's study and our recommendations for improving the implementation of state high school exit exams.

Key Findings

Impacts of Exit Exams

- **During 2007-08, the number of states withholding diplomas based on students' performance on state-mandated high school exit exams increased by one (Washington State).** Now a total of 23 states require students to take and pass those tests to receive high school diplomas. Three more states (Arkansas, Maryland, and Oklahoma) will begin withholding diplomas within the next few years, leading to a total of 26 states with such policies by 2012.
- **The number of states with current or planned exit exam policies remains the same as last year at 26 states.** Three additional states (Connecticut, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) have considered adopting high school exit exams. In the face of public opposition, Oregon and Pennsylvania state officials have opted to allow the use of multiple measures, including the option of passing state exams, in their requirements for graduation.
- **High school exit examinations have a significant impact on American education.** Today, 68% of the nation's public high school students attend school in the 23 states with such policies. By 2012, when three more states implement high school exit exam requirements, approximately 74% of the nation's public high school students will be affected.

- **The impact of exit exams is even more striking for students of color.** Today, 75% of students of color attend public schools in states that require passage of exit exams; by 2012, more than 84% of students of color will live in such states.

New Developments

- **California settled a lawsuit that challenged the fairness of its high school exit exam, but Arizona continues to struggle with two longstanding lawsuits.** One lawsuit challenges the constitutionality of Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)—the state's exit exam. The other lawsuit seeks to suspend AIMS as a graduation requirement for English language learners.
- **States continue to develop and refine alternative paths to graduation.** All 23 states that currently withhold diplomas based on students' performance on mandated high school exit exams have alternative measures for students with disabilities; 18 states have them for general education students; and 3 states have alternative measures specifically for English language learners. These alternative paths may play a major role for students with disabilities and English language learners in some states, even though, with few exceptions, alternative measures may affect a very small percentage of students overall.

More States Adopting End-of-Course Exams

- **States continue to move toward end-of-course exams.** In 2002, only 2 states used end-of-course exams. During school year 2007-08, 4 states had policies requiring end-of-course exams. By 2015, 11 states will rely on end-of-course exams and 3 more will implement a dual testing system that includes end-of-course exams. A total of 14 states expect to use end-of-course exams by 2015, an increase of 12 since 2002.
- **State education officials report many reasons for adopting end-of-course exams.** Almost all states that have adopted or are moving toward adopting end-of-course exams report that they are doing so to improve overall accountability, increase academic rigor, and improve alignment between state standards and curriculum.
- **A few are beginning to consider how to use the assessments to measure college and work readiness.** While all state education officials interviewed reported using end-of-course exams as a tool for ensuring greater accountability, only a few are beginning to consider how to use the assessment as a measure of college and work readiness.
- **Stakeholders highlighted many different ways that data from end-of-course exams can be used.** Some interviewees reported that end-of-course exam data, when compared to other test data available, allows for better assessment of content mastery. District administrators spoke about the opportunity of using end-of-course exam data to inform classroom instruction as well as identify areas of professional development for teachers.
- **End-of-course exams are supported by stakeholders.** End-of-course exams have been generally supported by legislators, the business community, parents, and teachers, according to interviewees.¹ Most questions and concerns about end-of-course exams have centered on the implementation timeline for the exams and the impact that the exams would have on graduation requirements.
- **States face logistical challenges associated with implementing end-of-course exams.** Logistical challenges include managing tight timelines required to develop multiple exams or figuring out how to get exam results back to school districts quickly. Other challenges reported include developing remediation for students who do not pass the exams and addressing concerns about the length and frequency of testing.

¹ Interviewees included state education officials, district administrators, and national testing experts.

- **Study participants recommend that states phase in their planned end-of-course exams over time.** Interviewees also cited the importance of consulting with teachers and other education stakeholders in states that have decided to adopt end-of-course exams. In addition, many interviewees stressed the importance of reviewing state academic standards to ensure that they are rigorous and well-defined before implementing end-of-course exams.

Recommendations

- **Considering the vast number of students affected by state-mandated high school exit exams, more funding should be allocated to research aimed at better understanding the impact of these exams.** Much more work needs to be done to understand the effect of these exams on dropout rates, their impact on curriculum and instruction, and their impact on students from low-income families and children of color.
- **State governments should move immediately to collect and release data on final passage rates on these tests and the rate of students using alternative paths to graduation.** In the information supplied for this report, states frequently submit initial passage rates but not the final or cumulative rates—that is, the percentage of students who achieve passing scores by the end of grade 12, often after retesting multiple times. Also, only about half of the states that offer alternative paths to graduation provided information on the percentage of students who complete high school using these alternative paths. This information is vital to understanding the true impact of these exams.
- **As they put in place end-of-course exams, states should directly and openly address the need for greater rigor in the content of their exams and for greater coordination of high school requirements with college preparedness and work readiness demands.** Many state officials reported that they are moving toward end-of-course exams as a way to better align what is tested with what is taught and to improve the academic rigor of the curriculum. A few also expressed hope that these new exams would help to prepare students better for college or work. But simply changing the type of exam is unlikely to achieve all of these goals unless accompanied by steps to address the issues of rigor and coordination with college and work.

Study Methods

The Center on Education Policy used the following methods to identify issues and collect information for this year's study. In particular we:

- Conducted a detailed survey of states with current or planned high school exit exams
- Conducted phone interviews of state and district officials and experts regarding the move toward end-of-course exams
- Reviewed our own work on exit exams conducted over the past six years
- Reviewed major research conducted by others on exit exams
- Kept abreast of important events related to exit exams

State Survey Methods

As our primary research tool for this year's study, the Center on Education Policy designed and conducted a survey of state department of education officials, who were usually officials from the state's assessment division.

In January 2007, we contacted the chief state school officers of 26 states to request their state's participation in CEP's annual survey of states that have current or planned high school exit exam policies. We asked the chiefs to designate a person to work with us in developing the state profiles for this report. CEP staff partially filled in the survey, based on information we had collected and reported in 2007 and information gathered through our careful review of developments in state policies. In March 2008, we contacted these designated officials and asked them to verify, update, and add information to the survey forms for their state. All 26 states that met our criteria (see below) for having a state-mandated exit exam responded to our survey.

We used the states' survey responses to develop the state profiles included on the CD accompanying this report and posted on CEP's Web site (www.cep-dc.org). After developing the profiles, we sent a draft back to each state for review to ensure that we had accurately portrayed their testing systems. We also used state survey responses to tally the state exam characteristics, policies, and new developments that appear throughout the report.

Some states did not answer all of the survey questions, often simply because the data were not available or their policies were in flux. These policies may be in flux for several reasons. For example, state legislatures are under continuing and significant political pressure to moderate or ameliorate the effects of these exams. We also had several follow-up e-mails and phone calls with officials from each of the states to include the most accurate and up-to-date information we could in this report, but undoubtedly some statistics or policies will have changed soon after publication because events in this field move quickly.

Methods for Phone Interviews for States Moving to End-of-Course Exams

CEP used a variety of methods to identify issues and collect information for Chapter 2, which explores the rationale behind the move toward end-of-course exams. In short, we:

- Conducted a review of current literature on end-of-course exams
- Analyzed CEP's local-level work on end-of-course exams conducted over the past six years in Maryland, Virginia, Texas, Mississippi, and Arizona
- Conducted in-depth interviews concerning end-of-course exams with stakeholders at the local, state, and national level, including 10 state education officials representing 6 states, 7 district administrators representing 5 states, and 2 national education experts.² Most of those interviewed have extensive experience in areas of assessment.

Many states offer some kind of end-of-course exam as part of their accountability and assessment system, and in several states, end-of-course exams are a requirement for graduating from high school. In some states, students have to obtain a passing score on these exams in order to graduate, while in others, students' scores are part of a graduation formula. For our interviews, we focused only on states that have or intend to implement mandatory end-of-course exams that students must pass in order to earn a high school diploma. We also focused on states that have moved from minimum-competency or comprehensive exams to end-of-course exams.

² Noticeably absent from those interviewed are teachers. While we recognize that in order to better understand the move toward end-of-course exams, gathering the perspectives of teachers is essential; we were unable to do so given the time frame and structure of the study. Therefore, the findings of this study should be considered with this limitation in mind.

Six states participated in this study. These include two states that have completely shifted to end-of-course exams (Mississippi and Tennessee), two that plan to implement dual testing systems (Massachusetts and South Carolina), and two that are in the process of replacing their current testing systems with end-of-course exams (New Jersey and Texas). During the interviews with state education officials, we asked them to identify district administrators with whom we could talk about end-of-course exams. Seven district administrators agreed to participate. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analyzed for themes, and coded.

Other Data Sources

CEP staff and consultants also conducted reviews of relevant studies that were either published or publicized during the past year. In addition, we tracked media coverage related to exit exams and searched state department of education Web sites for exit exam developments and information.

Criteria for Including States in Our Survey

This study focuses on mandatory exit exams. Included in the study are states that meet the following criteria:

- States that require students to pass, not just take, state exit exams to receive a high school diploma, even if the students have completed the necessary coursework with satisfactory grades
- States in which the exit exams are a state mandate rather than a local option—in other words, states that require students in all school districts to pass exit exams, rather than allowing districts to decide for themselves whether to make the exams a condition of graduation

We also include states that are phasing in mandatory high school exit exams that meet these two criteria. By phasing in, we mean that the state has a legislative or state board directive to have a test in place between 2008 and 2012; has already begun developing the tests; and is piloting the tests, although diplomas are not yet being withheld.

A note about terminology: This report often refers to an exit exam in the singular, but actually a state exit exam typically refers to an exam system consisting of multiple tests in different subjects, such as English language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies.

Table 1 summarizes the major characteristics of exit exams in these 26 states.

Table 1 Major Characteristics of State Exit Exams

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Alabama	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 3 rd Edition	2001	Reading, language, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	11 th	10 th	Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) 1 st and 2 nd Editions
Alaska	Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE)	2004	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	8 th -10 th	10 th	None

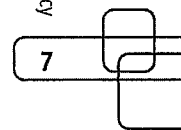
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State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Arizona	Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS)	2006	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	10 th	10 th	None
Arkansas	Arkansas Comprehensive Assessment Program	2010	Literacy, algebra I and II, geometry, and biology	End-of-course	Literacy (11 th), math and biology (varies)	Varies	None
California	California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)	2006	ELA, math	Comprehensive	ELA (through 10 th), math (6 th - 7 th and algebra I)	10 th	None
Florida	Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)	2003	Reading and math	Comprehensive	10 th	10 th	High School Competency Test (HSCT)
Georgia	Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHS GT)	1994	ELA, writing, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	9 th - 11 th	11 th	Basic Skills Test
Idaho	Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)	2006	Reading, language usage, math, and science	Comprehensive	10 th	10 th	None
Indiana	End-of-Course Assessments (ECAs) ^a	2000	ELA, mathematics	Comprehensive	9 th , including pre-algebra and algebra I	10 th	Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE)
Louisiana	Graduation Exit Examination (GEE)	2003	ELA, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	9 th -12 th	10 th	Graduation Exit Exam
Maryland	Maryland High School Assessment (HSA)	2009	English 2, algebra/data analysis, biology, government	End-of-course	10 th	Varies	Maryland Functional Tests
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)	2003	ELA, math, science (2010), U.S. history (2012)	Comprehensive plus end-of-course exams in science (2010) and U.S. history (2012)	10 th /high school standards	10 th ; science and U.S. history will vary	None

continues ➤

State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Minnesota	Graduation Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD)	2010	Reading, writing, math	Comprehensive	High School Standards	Writing in 9 th ; reading in 10 th ; math in 11 th	Basic Skills Test (BST)
Mississippi	Mississippi Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)	2006	English II (with writing component), algebra I, Biology I, U.S. history from 1877	End-of-course	Aligned to course content	Varies	Functional Literacy Examination (FLE)
Nevada	High School Proficiency Examination (HSPE)	2003	Reading, writing, math, science (2008)	Comprehensive	9 th -12 th	10 th , writing in 11 th	High School Proficiency Examination (earlier version based on 1994 curriculum)
New Jersey	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)	2003	Language arts literacy, math; end-of-course exam in biology (2010)	Comprehensive plus one end-of-course in biology (2010)	11 th	11 th , biology will vary	High School Proficiency Test-11
New Mexico	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE) ^a	1990	Reading, language arts, written composition, math, science, social studies	Minimum competency	8 th	10 th	New Mexico High School Competency Examination (NMHSCE)
New York	Regents Examinations	2000	ELA, math, science, global history and geography, U.S. history and government	End-of-course	9 th -12 th	Varies	Regents Competency Tests
North Carolina	North Carolina Competency Tests and Tests of Computer Skills ^a	1982 (math/reading) 2001 (computer skills) 2010 (end-of-course exams)	Reading comprehension, math, computer skills; starting 2010, end-of-course exams in algebra I, English I, U.S. history, civics and economics, biology	Comprehensive In 2010, five end-of-course exams	8 th ; end-of-course exams (course-specific)	8 th ; end-of-course exams will vary	North Carolina Competency Tests and Tests of Computer Skills

continues ➤



State	Current Exam	Year Diplomas First Withheld Based on Current Exam	Subjects Tested	Type of Test	Grade Level of Alignment	Grade Test First Administered	Prior Exit Exam or Exit Exam Being Phased Out
Ohio	Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT)	2007	Reading, writing, math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	10 th	10 th	9 th -Grade Proficiency Tests
Oklahoma	Oklahoma End-of-Instruction (EOI) Exams	2012	English II, English III, algebra I, algebra II, geometry, biology I, U.S. history	End-of-course	High school standards	Varies	None
South Carolina	High School Assessment Program (HSAP)	2006	ELA, math, science (2010)	Comprehensive plus end-of-course exams in science (2010)	Through 10 th	10 th ; end-of-course exam will vary	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP)
Tennessee	Gateway Examinations	2005	English I, II, and III, Algebra I and II, geometry, biology I, chemistry, U.S. history, physics (2013)	End-of-course	10 th	Varies	Tennessee Competency Test
Texas	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) ¹	2005	ELA (reading/writing), math, science, social studies	Comprehensive	Aligned to course content	11 th	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
Virginia	Standards of Learning (SOL)	2004	English (reading/writing), algebra I, algebra II, geometry, biology, earth science, chemistry, world history to 1500, world history from 1500 to present, Virginia and U.S. history, world geography	End-of-course	Aligned to course content	Varies	Literacy Passport Test
Washington	Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)	2008	Reading, writing, math (2013), science (2013)	Comprehensive plus end-of-course exams	10 th	10 th	None

Table reads: Alabama currently administers the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE), 3rd Edition, for which consequences began for the class of 2001. The exam assesses reading, language, math, science, and social studies, and is considered by the state to be a comprehensive, standards-based exam aligned to 11th grade standards. The current test replaced the Alabama High School Graduation Exam, 1st and 2nd Editions.

¹ Indiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Texas will transition to new exams. See state profiles, found in the accompanying CD or online, for detailed information.

Note: This year's report uses the term "comprehensive" to refer to exit exams aligned to state standards in several subject areas and generally targeted to the 9th- or 10th-grade level. Previous CEP reports referred to these as "standards-based" exams.

Note: ELA = English language arts.

Source: Center on Education Policy, exit exam survey of state departments of education, May 2008.