

FAQ on Regents exit exams

The Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department are re-examining the use of Regents exams as a requirement for high school graduation, and are holding a series of regional public sessions to gather input from parents and other stakeholders before making any changes to the current policy.

The list of sessions is posted here: <http://www.nysed.gov/grad-measures/regional-meetings>

NY State Allies for Public Education and Class Size Matters have prepared the following fact sheet to inform parents in preparation for these sessions.

What is an exit exam?

Wikipedia defines exit exams this way: “An **exit examination** is a test that students in the United States of America must pass to receive a diploma and graduate from school.”¹

What is the situation in New York State?

Beginning in 1996, New York State began requiring high school students to pass five different Regents exams in order to graduate with a regular high school diploma.² The New York State Regents exams are among the most extensive set of exit exams of any state.³

What does the research say about exit exams?

There is an increasing consensus that the use of exit exams does not lead to higher achievement rates or to improved college or career readiness. Instead, there is growing research showing that the use of these exams is associated with higher dropout and incarceration rates, particularly among disadvantaged and underserved students.

A report from the organization New America, released in 2014, summarized some of these studies:

“...In short, typical students do not appear to be any better off after the exit exam policy, and those that were already vulnerable, including low-income and minority students, often became more so. In one of the broadest findings, a blue ribbon commission formed by the National Research Council, the Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exit_examination

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/24/nyregion/passing-of-regents-exams-to-be-required-for-diploma.html>

³ <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/curriculum-instruction/diplomarequirementsfinal011019.pdf>

found that high school exit exams nationwide had not increased student achievement, but rather decreased graduation rates by two percentage points, on average.”⁴

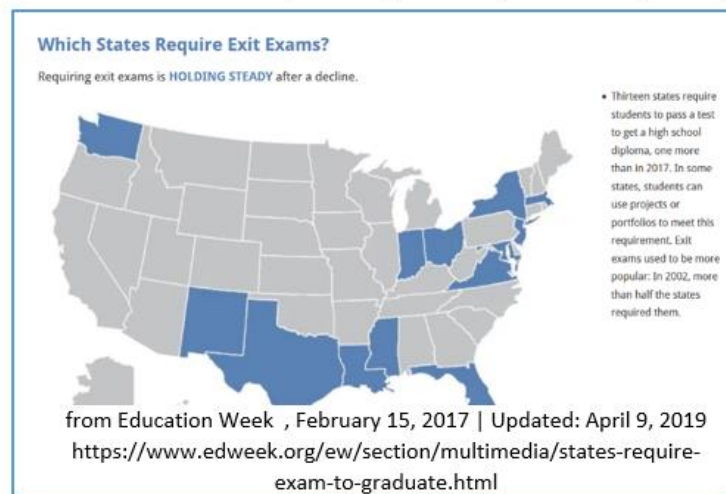
The report cites the following studies:

- “...a 2010 meta-analysis on the effects of high school exit exams... found that, in general the ‘evidence indicates that exit tests have produced few of the expected benefits for students overall and nearly all of the expected costs for disadvantaged and at-risk students.’”⁵
- Another study found that “...more rigorous exit tests...were associated with lower graduation rates...[and] that there was no relationship between exit exam policies and labor market outcomes.”⁶
- This analysis also found that “more difficult HSEEs [High School Exit Exams] increased the likelihood of incarceration, ... In fact, these kinds of exit exams were associated with a 12.5 percent increase in incarceration rates.”⁷

What has happened in the last twenty years regarding the use of exit exams by states?

Since 2002, there has been a sharp decline in the number of states with high school exit exams, from a high of thirty, down to eleven or twelve.

- In April 2019, *Education Week* wrote: “Thirteen states require students to pass a test to get a high school diploma...Exit exams used to be more popular: In 2002, more than half the states required them.”⁸ See the EdWeek map below:



- However, this list of thirteen states included the state of Washington, which recently approved an end to exit exams beginning with the Class of 2020.⁹

⁴ Anne Hyslop, “The Case Against Exit Exams,” *New America*, 2014. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED579082.pdf>

⁵ Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson, and Rebecca W. Cohen, “Assessing the Effects of High School Exit Examinations,” *Review of Educational Research*, (80): 476–526.

⁶ Olesya Baker and Kevin Lang, “The Effect of High School Exit Exams on Graduation, Employment, Wages and Incarceration,” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19182*, June 2013. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w19182.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Catherine Gewertz, “What Tests Does Each State Require?” *Education Week*, March 5, 2019.

⁹ “State Tests No Longer Required for Graduation,” *Washington Education Association*, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonea.org/essa/testing/state-required-testing/>

- In May 2019, FairTest reported that only 11 states still have high school graduation exit exams, down from a high of 27.¹⁰ States that recently ended exit exams include: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Washington.
- In addition, Alaska, Arizona, California, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, and Mississippi have adopted a process allowing students who did not pass their earlier exit exams to retroactively receive diplomas, according to FairTest.
- In August 2019, the Fordham Institute reported that “just 12 states will require students in the class of 2020 to pass exit exams, falling from a peak of 30 states requiring them for the class of 2003.”¹¹

Figure 1. Many states have recently dropped their exit exam requirements.



Note: Data are derived from the *Digest of Education Statistics* for the classes of 2001 to 2017 and from the anti-testing group FairTest for the class of 2020.¹⁸

Other reasons to oppose the use of high-stakes Regents exams

Many teachers report that the use of Regents exams considerably restricts their flexibility to teach what’s most important and what will engage their students, and that ensuring their students pass these exams hampers their ability to go into more depth in certain subjects.

In addition, the use of Regents exams may have a discriminatory impact on students who do poorly on standardized exams, even though they may have passed all of their coursework with

flying colors. Many teachers also criticize the design of certain Regents exams and the way in which they are scored.

Finally, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, created by the American Psychological Association, the American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education, include the following: “Any decision about a student’s continued education, such as retention, tracking, or graduation, should not be based on the results of a single test....”¹²

The National Research Council Board on Testing and Assessment agrees: “no single test score can be considered a definitive measure of a student’s knowledge,” and “an educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score.”¹³

NYSAPE and Class Size Matters urge New York heed the research and follow the lead of other states: do not make graduation contingent upon the passage of exit exams.

Parents and educators should make their voices heard on this critical subject as well, by attending the public sessions described above or by emailing NYSED at GradMeasures@nysed.gov .

For more information, please go to www.nysape.org and www.classsizematters.org

¹⁰ FairTest, “Updated: Graduation Test Update: States that Recently Eliminated or Scaled Back High School Exit Exams,” May 2019. <https://www.fairtest.org/graduation-test-update-states-recently-eliminated>

¹¹ Adam Tyner and Matthew Larsen, “End-of-Course Exams and Student Outcomes,” Fordham Institute, August 2019. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/20190827-end-course-exams-and-student-outcomes.pdf> The Fordham figure differs from FairTest by one, since they say that Indiana has retained English assessments. For more on the complicated requirements in Indiana see: <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/student-assistance/grad-reqs-2019-2022-cohorts-final.pdf>

¹² <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/brochures/testing>

¹³ Jay P. Heubert and Hauser, R. Eds. *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation*. National Academies Press, 1999. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/6336/high-stakes-testing-for-tracking-promotion-and-graduation>