

## Why Rush to Implement the High School Exit Exam (HSEE)?

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Senate Bill 2X, the High School Exit Exam (HSEE) authored by Senator Jack O'Connell, was signed into law in 1999. This special session bill requires all students, who anticipate high school graduation in 2004 and thereafter, to successfully pass the HSEE. The test is aligned with the state content standards, which were recently adopted by the State Board of Education. The Palo Alto-based American Institute for Research (AIR) designed the test (Martineau, 2000). Students are tested in Mathematics and Language Arts. The first field test was given in May, 2000. The goal of instituting the exam is to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college or the work place. Prior to Senator O'Connell's bill, according to a California Senate Education consultant, the HSEE's actual evolution in California commenced with a series of "issue papers." The papers were generated by an adjunct of the California Business Roundtable-California Business for Excellence in Education (CBEE). California businesses desire a trained and educated workforce. According to Assemblyman Bill Leonard (2000), "California business representatives want a tough but fair test to ensure that high school students have basic skills. Opponents want a watered down test that will not hurt student's self esteem and can be passed easily by most high school students." The opponents that Assemblyman Bill Leonard is referring to are educational groups. The educational groups, contrary to the Assemblyman's statement, want students to have basic skills and work diligently to achieve this goal. They have voiced their concern and their opposition to the inclusion of Algebra for the graduating class of 2004 and thereafter. The diversity of students in California, from language to academic ability, requires that fairness be a significant factor in the implementation of the required HSEE (Sacramento Bee, 2000). The HSEE should not be an avenue to measure political success or the educational failure.

Under the legislative terms of SB2X, an independent evaluation was to be conducted on the results of the first administration of the HSEE. The Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) was awarded the contract by the California Department of Education (CDE)(Wise, et al.2000). In June of 2000, they presented their initial findings. The overarching recommendation was that consideration be given to delay the implementation of the HSEE. In the supplemental report presented in August, 2000, they still contend that the legislature should postpone implementation for one to two years. Moreover, schools need additional time to teach to the state content standards, especially in Mathematics, prior to the students taking the exam that will determine whether they receive a high school diploma (Kollars, 2000).

In spite of the recommendations of the HumRRO, California was continuing to follow the timeline originally presented. Students in the 9th grade in 2000-2001 may volunteer to take this exam. According to the HumRRO, it was difficult to find schools to volunteer for the field test. Currently school districts are testing their students with proficiency tests for promotion /retention, as well as the STAR testing. In a letter to all District and County Superintendents, State Superintendent Delaine Eastin provided the dates for the first administration of the HSEE. Language Arts has been scheduled for March 7, 2001, and March 13, 2001, for the Mathematics. She states "All schools must provide eligible students with the opportunity to take the HSEE on the designated dates in March." For the 9th graders this year who pass, the exit exam was not supposed to be an issue. If they passed, they were not required to test again. However, there is discussion on changing this policy. For those who do not pass, districts must meet the mandates of SB2X. They must provide supplemental instruction to these students, including, but not limited to summer school. The supplemental instruction is to begin in this academic year.

Many concerns exist for District Administrators with HSEE. Several districts have established a HSEE Committee that meets regularly to research and examine the issues. According to Government Code section 11380.1, Title 5 California Code of Regulations, Division 1, Chapter 2, 1208, there must be an employee in the district to serve as the HSEE district coordinator. In addition, there must be a site coordinator. There are several requirements and responsibilities for each position. The State has given each school district the autonomy to provide each student with the opportunity to prepare academically to pass the HSEE. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each district to develop their own policy to deal with the students who do not pass the HSEE.

The major question that arises for all schools districts is what are we going to do with those twelfth grade students, in 2004, who meet all graduation course requirements, but who fail to pass the HSEE? Districts in Northern California have initiated dialogue with local community colleges to plan for students that fail the HSEE. Community colleges may provide

vocational education and/or adult education alternatives for those students who are unsuccessful on the test. Another option that is being pursued for students that fail the test is to develop a partnership with the Adult Education programs and develop avenues of success. However, even adults who are returning to school for a High School Diploma must pass the HSEE. The final option that districts are exploring is the creation of a High School Certificate of Completion that would be granted in lieu of a high school diploma.

The passing of the HSEE as a requirement for a high school diploma should be postponed. The Sacramento Bee Editorial suggests fairness should be the overarching factor in the HSEE's development (2000). It appears that fairness is not a concern of Governor Davis; rather implementing the test is of greater importance. The recommendations of the HumRRO have been scrutinized. Their recommendation needs to be seriously considered. They recommend delaying the implementation of the HSEE in order "to avoid negative consequences for students who are not prepared and to reduce the possibility of flaws that might lead to termination of the program before it can achieve its goals." It is time to heed the evaluation that was authorized by the legislature, as they are the people who mandated the evaluation.

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