

## Suspend California's high school exit exam, Democrats propose

By Dana Hull

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Amid yet another round of budget negotiations, Democrats made a surprising and controversial proposal this week: Suspend the state's high school exit exam.

The move was largely inspired by philosophical worries: Democrats on the influential budget conference committee say they cannot in good conscience mandate the exam for students while at the same time propose to slash education funding by millions of dollars more.

"When the state is making cuts that could lead to a shorter school year, fewer teachers and larger class sizes, it doesn't seem realistic to expect the same results as before the cuts," said Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, in a statement.

Educators and business leaders blasted the proposal, saying the two-part multiple-choice test of basic math and reading skills is a cornerstone of the state's "accountability" system. Though it's unclear whether the test will survive the budget negotiations, the fact that Democrats, traditionally strong allies of public education, put it forward has test advocates worried the exit exam is vulnerable.

### **Diploma requirement**

Since 2006, high school students have been required to pass the test in order to get their diplomas. But an estimated 40,000 students, more than half of whom are special education students, don't pass the test annually.

Under the Democrats' proposal, students would still have to take the test once — to comply with federal "No Child Left Behind" regulations — but it would cease being a graduation requirement until at least 2012-2013.

"People in the field say the exit exam is the greatest high school reform effort we have made in a generation," said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, who, as a legislator, wrote the bill creating the exam. "The exit exam has helped us reduce the dropout rate and close the achievement gap, because it helps us to identify those students who need more help. To lower our standards now — it's just crazy. It's ludicrous."

Camille Anderson, spokeswoman for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said the governor will veto any proposal to eliminate the exam. Also opposed are business leaders, who say the exit exam is key to ensuring that students leave high school prepared for the workforce.

"It's concerning because of the message it sends to students," said Kirk Clark, executive director of California Business for Education Excellence. "It's: 'Sorry, we've stopped caring about your success because of the budget.' "

Budget negotiators say suspending the exam will save the state about \$6 million to \$8 million a year; the savings would come because high schools currently administer the test several times a year, and each exam has to be scored. The state faces a staggering \$24.3 billion deficit.

Students take their first crack at the exit exam in 10th grade and can take it again as juniors and seniors if they don't pass it the first time around.

In Santa Clara County, 84 percent of the Class of 2010 passed the English Language Arts portion of the exam as 10th-graders, while 85 percent passed the math portion; students must pass both parts to graduate. The passage rate gradually rises over time as students take it again in later grades. Students who don't pass by graduation day can take it again in the summer after their senior year.

Some districts issue "certificates of completion" in lieu of diplomas to students who have met all other graduation requirements.

### **Student 'momentum'**

Vito Chiala, principal at Overfelt High School in San Jose's East Side Union High School District, says suspending the exit exam now would be a terrible idea.

"It took a long time to get this into the system, and all high school students know that the exit exam is something you have to pass," said Chiala. "It's one of the tests that students take seriously, and they are motivated to pass it. We'd lose a lot of momentum if it was suspended."

Public support for the exit exam is also high. An April survey by the Public Policy Institute of California found 69 percent of all Californians, and 80 percent of Latinos, think students should pass the exit exam to graduate.

But the exam has been controversial from the start. Youth activists with Californians for Justice have argued the exam penalizes students from poor school districts who are not prepared to pass it, and parents of special education students have also filed numerous legal challenges.

And passage rates vary widely based on race and income. For the Class of 2008, the last year for which complete results are available, 90.2 percent of all students in California had passed both portions of the exam by 12th grade. But only 80.1 percent of African-American students had passed the exam; the figure was 72.8 percent for English-language learners and just 53.8 percent for special education students.

Staffers for Bass said she is also concerned about a recent study by Stanford University professor Sean Reardon that found a disproportionate number of female and nonwhite students are failing the exit exam.

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