



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of June 25-29, 2012

More, Better and Earlier Help Needed to Raise Exit Exam Results

by UCLA IDEA

On Wednesday, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson shared some good news—California's high school graduation rate increased while dropout rates fell. The Class of 2011 graduation rate was 76.3 percent, up 1.5 percent from 2010. And the dropout rate decreased by 2.2 percent to 14.4 percent. The rise in graduation rates was highest amongst Latinos, African Americans, English learners and students from low-income families. Nevertheless, the graduation rates for these groups continue to lag behind those for white, Asian and middle-class students.

These numbers are more trustworthy than in the past because for the second year the state has tracked individual students rather than simply reporting on the size of the graduating class as a proportion of the number of students enrolled as 9th graders four years before.

Commenting on the significance of the data for all Californians, Torlakson said, "Every graduate represents a success story in one of the most effective job and anti-poverty programs ever conceived, our public schools."

In related news this week, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) reported that one in 16 students fails to pass the state's high school exit exam (CAHSEE) before finishing 12th grade. These students comprise about a quarter of the students who will not graduate on time or at all.

CAHSEE tests both math and English language arts, and students only need to retake the portions of the test they failed to pass. The PPIC report, *Passing the California High School Exit Exam: Have Recent Policies Improved Student Performance?* noted that assistance programs—like, tutoring and test prep classes—helped only a small percentage of students pass on their subsequent tries after not passing as 10th graders. Between 1.5 percent and 3 percent of students who failed the first time were able to pass both the English and math sections by 12th grade.

The report points to a key problem underlying the low success rates of current interventions: the targeted assistance is too little and too late. Interventions are designed to get students to pass the CAHSEE only after they fail the test as 10th graders; and the special help may focus too narrowly on raising scores while taking time away from other school activities and courses. Some highly motivated students may respond well to these approaches, but teens who are already discouraged by school failure may see the intervention programs as tedious impositions, even punishments, that offer few meaningful skills and (as data bears out) do not greatly improve their chances for passing and graduating.

PPIC's study suggests that students who are at risk of not passing the CAHSEE can be identified well before they enter high school, thereby pointing to the importance of targeted intervention and

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Page 2

comprehensive instructional changes at the middle and elementary grades. PPIC has developed a predictive model that uses grade-point averages, attendance, discipline and English language proficiency, among other factors to identify students likely to struggle with the CAHSEE. Data over the last few years suggests that a student who is classified as an English language learner in 2nd grade is significantly less likely to pass the CAHSEE in 10th grade. But history does not need to predict the future: Schools and districts can and should provide additional support that will enable students to be successful when they reach high school.

Students need more direct time with teachers; they need to ask questions and clarify complicated subjects; and they need school to be engaging and meaningful. Such opportunities are shrinking, not expanding. Almost by definition, a student who needs remediation in high school also needed extra help and attention in middle and elementary school. Interventions and extra help have limited benefits if they show up only after a student fails a high-stakes, life-determining exam.

It's a relief to California communities and policymakers to see any school data that show small gains rather than a continuing slide in performance. But kids need more, better, and earlier learning opportunities for truly significant change.

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