

Exit tests tough on 9th-graders

Barely a third are able to pass both sections of new state exam

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More than half of California ninth-graders who took a required new graduation exam failed the math portion, while more than a third failed the language arts part, the state revealed yesterday.

Although students will have more chances to take the so-called

exit exam before graduation, the fact that just 34 percent of ninth-graders passed both parts means that school districts must find some way to improve or face the possibility that thousands of young people will not graduate in 2004, the first year the test will be required for a diploma.

"We must remember that this test is the toughest of its kind in the nation and that many of these freshmen had not yet taken the

courses covered by the exam, such as algebra," said state schools chief Delaine Eastin.

Eastin says she is heartened that a new state law requires students to take algebra during high school. Algebra questions are on the exam. Still, Eastin believes the test should be delayed at least two years to allow more preparation.

That could happen if Gov.

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Gray Davis signs Assembly Bill 1609 by Montebello Democrat Thomas Calderon, which Davis supports. It is intended not so much to get students up to speed but to keep the test process legal.

When state lawmakers refused to delay the test last March, more than 365,000 ninth-graders — 78 percent — took the hastily adopted exam voluntarily. Those who didn't, and those who failed either portion, must take it next year.

The widespread failures reported yesterday — far heavier in such low-income urban districts as Oakland and West Contra Costa — raise the possibility of a lawsuit if a student denied a diploma believes the decision is unfair.

The Calderon bill would require an independent study of the exam next year to see whether it measures what the state wants students to know. If not, the Board of Education could delay that graduation requirement until it has greater confidence in the test.

In addition, the bill would prohibit ninth-graders from taking the test. To be on sturdy legal ground, the state needs to have a valid baseline score against which to compare all future results. That means one group of students — the state prefers 10th-graders — needs to take the test all at one time. This year, since not all ninth-graders took the test, no such baseline exists.

"This is something we could be sued on," said Valerie Martinez, Calderon's spokeswoman.

About 22 states require students to pass an exit exam to earn a diploma. Last year, a Texas judge upheld that state's exit exam, ruling against students who tried to throw it out.

In California, a small but growing anti-testing movement is exploring the fairness of the test based on whether students who fail have the same academic op-

Exit exam

Following are sample exit exam questions in language arts and math

■ LANGUAGE ARTS

'The Courage
That My Mother Had'

—By Edna St. Vincent Millay

The courage that my mother had
Went with her, and is with her still:
Rock from New England quarries;
Now granite in a granite hill.

The golden brooch my mother wore
She left behind for me to wear;
I have no thing I treasure more:
Yet it is something I could spare.

Oh, if instead she'd left to me
The thing she took to the grave! —
That courage like a rock, which she
Has no more need of, and I have.

Q. Which pair of nouns BEST describe the mood of this poem?

- A admiration and longing
- B distrust and jealousy
- C awe and amazement
- D anger and resentment

A ANSWER

■ MATH

Q. Simplify $(6a^4bc)(7ab^2c)$

- A $13a^4b^3c$
- B $13a^5b^4c^2$
- C $42a^4b^3c$
- D $42a^5b^4c^2$

D ANSWER

Source: California Department of Education

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portunities as those who pass, such as access to qualified teachers and modern textbooks.

Meanwhile, test-preparation companies are sniffing around California with interest, well aware that districts will have to invest heavily in helping students pass the test. No sooner did yesterday's results arrive on the Internet

than a company called Kaplan began contacting the press.

Kaplan sells materials to teach kids test-taking strategies, charging \$9 to \$16 per pupil for each subject.

In a district like West Contra Costa, where 67 percent of ninth-graders failed the math portion and 47 percent failed the language arts, kids could use a few new strategies.

But with 9,000 high school students, the district would have to come up with at least \$162,000 for the materials for both subjects — not counting the price of teacher training.

"Our goal is that every kid pass the exit exam," said Vince Kilmartin, an associate superintendent.

But his district just won a three-year grant of \$580,000 per year from the Stupski Foundation to increase achievement. Even better, he said, the grant is accompanied by a set of strategies that district officials are certain will work.

"This will be the biggest focused effort on achievement that we've had in this district," Kilmartin said. "We're apprehensive — but very optimistic."

In Oakland, Superintendent Dennis Chaconas has promised "dramatic change" once pro-

Exit exam results

More than 365,000 ninth-graders took the exit exam last spring. It will be required for graduation for the first time in 2004. Here are the passing rates for students statewide and in selected Bay Area districts. Results for all California districts and schools are available at <http://cahsee.cde.ca.gov>

	Statewide	Oakland	West Contra Costa	San Francisco	San Jose	Novato
Language arts	Pass/Fail 64%/36%	39%/61%	53%/47%	64%/36%	70%/30%	86%/14%
Economically disadvantaged:	45/55	37/63	43/57	52/48	50/50	NA/NA
Non-economically disadvantaged:	74/26	41/59	57/43	70/30	79/21	NA/NA
Math	44/56	25/75	33/67	58/42	52/48	77/23
Economically disadvantaged:	26/74	24/76	18/82	52/48	30/70	NA/NA
Non-economically disadvantaged:	54/46	26/74	39/61	61/39	63/37	NA/NA

Source: California Department of Education

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grams started for freshmen last year begin to take hold.

Yesterday's test results suggest that has not yet happened. Three-quarters of the district's ninth-graders failed the math, and 61 percent failed the language arts.

"The scores line up with how our ninth-graders perform ... in class," said Chaconas.

Nearly 70 percent of high school freshmen in Oakland have D's and F's in courses needed for college.

"It's disappointing, but I don't expect these scores to remain the same two, three and four years from now," he said.

In San Francisco, the exit exam represents a second chance. The district had raised graduation requirements a few years ago, only to rescind them after failing to prepare students to meet the higher hurdle.

Now, the district faces the challenge of helping the 3,268 freshmen who failed one or both portions of the exit exam to pass it before graduation. In math, 42 percent of ninth-graders failed the test, while 36 percent failed the language arts portion.

Ritu Khanna, the district's executive director of research, planning and accountability, says this

time will be different.

"Before, the district was behind the change. The plan could come and go," Khanna said. "But now, this is state-run. This time we have to do it."

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On the Internet

To view complete results, go to <http://cahsee.cde.ca.gov>. Sample questions from the spring test are at www.cde.ca.gov/state/tests/cahsee/Resources.html