

# High School Graduation Policies Affecting English Learners: The Exit Exam

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## Preface

The U.S. Department of Education funded an Enhanced Assessment Grant *Evaluating the Validity of English Language Proficiency Assessments* (EVEA; CFDA 84.368), involving five states, Idaho, Indiana, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Together with research partners and experts in validity and English Learners (ELs), the five states worked collaboratively to develop both a common interpretive argument for English language Proficiency Assessments (ELPAs) and state-specific validity plans over a 24-month period between 2009 and 2011. Over the course of the project several topics of interest were raised related to the use of the ELPA scores and policy issues concerning ELs. In a series of papers, EVEA staff have addressed issues of the home language survey, developing technical documentation for the ELPA, and analyzing the theoretical relationship between performance on the ELPA and English Language Arts exams.

In this paper, we turn to the issue of the effect of state policies regarding high school exit exams to the performance and ultimate graduation rates of ELs. Several states in the EVEA project are currently revising graduation requirements. Questions have been raised regarding the wisdom of allowing students to take graduation exams or complete cumulative projects in their native language. Likewise, should an EL be required to pass the ELPA in order to receive a diploma? Should alternative pathways to meeting graduation requirements that do not involve standardized testing be provided? There are civil rights issues related both to graduating a student without fully preparing them and for withholding a diploma because of a lack of opportunity to learn. Many of these issues will be addressed in a more detailed paper planned after the end of the project, but they are worth raising now. In particular consider the student who enters the United States as a 15-year-old or older without the ability to speak the English language. What are the issues in bringing that student up to grade level both in academic content and in English proficiency? Some of these questions will be addressed here, with a specific focus on the states in the EVEA project. Other questions will remain for a later paper, larger in focus, intended in 2012 outside of the EVEA project.

## Context of High School Policy

With the release of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2011, states rushed to revise their summative assessments and change their goal from “no child left behind” to “every child graduates college and career ready.” Consortia have been formed to create multi-state tests aligned to these new college and career ready content standards. However, there has yet to be one agreed upon definition of “college and career ready.” Some define it as completing specific high school courses, others by benchmarking performance against international standards; some define it as readiness to enter a technical program and attain a certificate in the expected amount of time, or readiness to enter a 2- or 4-year program without remediation, while others define it according to technical industry standards. Many organizations have worked for years to define these terms (e.g., Achieve, ACT, and College Board). Clearly, there is disagreement about whether “college and career” should be lumped together when talking about readiness. The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) convened a technical panel to map results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at twelfth grade to postsecondary outcomes. They decided to separate college readiness from career readiness using the following definitions (NAGB, 2009, p. 2-3):

*College Preparedness – For the NAEP context, preparedness for college means a student has at minimum the reading and mathematics knowledge and skills to qualify for entry into a credit-bearing course en route to a four-year undergraduate degree. This includes*

*many courses offered at two-year institutions, partly because two-year transfer degrees are often the full equivalent of a four-year institution's general education program. In addition... credit-bearing courses refer to the reading and mathematics knowledge and skills required in general education courses, which are typically "introductory" courses in core subject areas.*

*Workplace Training Preparedness – For the NAEP context, preparedness for workplace training requires that a student has the reading and mathematics knowledge and skills sufficient to qualify for placement into a job training program. Job training programs constitute a variety of pathways, including apprenticeship programs, community college technical certificates and job training programs, on-the-job training programs, and vocational institute or certification programs.*

Regardless of the definition, the intent is for students to graduate high school prepared for the postsecondary world, be it the workplace or additional school or training. Perhaps the most relevant definition comes from Conley (2010) who put the onus back on the schools saying "High schools should be considered successful in proportion to the degree to which they prepare their students to continue to learn beyond high school" (p. 9). While he does not specifically say "all" students, it can be implied, and it seems sensible to place the burden on high schools to prepare all, even ELs, to continue their learning after leaving high school. It is important to keep in mind, though, that how state policymakers define college and career readiness can impact the graduation policy at a state level, the decision to have a high school assessment exam, that assessment's framework, and the cut score for sufficient performance. Therefore, the real issue is how these definitions and goals affect students' ability to receive a high school diploma.

While more states are jumping on the bandwagon, the college and career ready movement began long before the release of the CCSS. The Center for Education Policy (CEP) has been tracking state high school graduation requirements involving an assessment since 2002. According to their 2011 report (CEP, 2011), 31 states now have some type of exit exam policy, either a comprehensive exam or an end-of-course exam issue, up from 23 states in 2009. Focusing specifically on ELs, CEP (2011) reports that 86% of ELs live in a state with a high school exit exam, demonstrating just how wide-spread this concern has become. Can ELs meet these assessment-based graduation requirements and earn a high school diploma?

Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) found that in 2009, ELs specifically had significantly more trouble passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) than their peers (HumRRO, 2010). In New York, which has performance on the Regents exams linked to graduation, only 23.6 percent of students who start 9th grade in New York City as ELs graduate four years later; the four-year dropout rate for ELs is 41.8 percent. In the case of New York, all but the English Regents exams are translated into the students' native language; however, the graduation issue remains. Thus there is reason to be concerned that high school exit exam policies may negatively impact EL graduation rates, and that traditional test accommodations may not sufficiently address the issue.

Regardless of graduation policy, there is evidence that ELs in high school are less prepared academically than their English-proficient peers. For example, in twelfth-grade NAEP, performance among ELs has remained relatively flat and significantly lower than the performance of non-EL students over the years (see Exhibit 1). There is no data available on how long the ELs have been in English language

development (ELD) programs, but given the high exclusion rates for ELs, it is likely they have been in the program for over a year and probably longer.

**Exhibit 1. NAEP Scores for Grade 12 ELs and Non-ELs**

	Average Scale Score		Percent Proficient or Above	
	EL	Non-EL	EL	Non-EL
<b>Reading</b>				
2002	245	288	5%	37%
2005	247	288	5%	37%
2009	240	290	2%	39%
<b>Math</b>				
2005	120	151	3%	24%
2009	117	154	4%	27%

SOURCE: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002, 2005 and 2009 Reading Assessments.

Regardless of work done at the national level to define college and career readiness or national statistics, the most relevant concern is how states determine diploma eligibility and what they require of students prior to graduation. These policies are highly related to the national college and career readiness movement, and it is important to examine how these policies include all students.

**Current Policy in the EVEA States**

Four of the five EVEA states currently require exit exams, either in the form of a comprehensive exam given at either 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade or a specified number of end-of-course exams. Montana, the sole EVEA state without an exit exam, requires specific course credits for graduation. Because this policy is not related to the concern of testing requirements increasing the barriers to diplomas for ELs, they will not be included in this discussion. Policies for all five states, though, are shown in Exhibit 2.

**Exhibit 2. Information on States with an Exit Exam: General and EL Policies**

	<b>Idaho</b>	<b>Indiana</b>	<b>Montana</b>	<b>Oregon</b>	<b>Washington</b>
<b>Comprehensive or EOC</b>	Comp first used in 2004; first year diplomas withheld was 2006	Comp to ECA in 2010; Diplomas first withheld for ECAs in 2012	Course credit only	Comp/ essential skills	Comp, maybe moving to EOC
<b>Subjects</b>	Reading, language usage, math; aligned to 10th grade content standards	Moving from ELA & Math to Algebra I & English 10	4 units of English/Language Arts 2 units of Math 2 units of Social Studies 2 units of Science 1 unit of Health Enhancement 1 unit of Arts 1 unit of Vocational or Technical Ed	Reading, writing, math	Reading class of 2013), writing (class of 2013), math (class of 2015, science (class of 2017); still discussions to add EOC assessments.
<b>Item types</b>	MC only	MC, short answer, gridding and graphing in algebra I essay in English 10	N/A	Reading and math are MC and machine-scored graphic responses. Writing has essay prompts.	MC, SA on three subjects, plus two writing prompts on writing
<b>Retake policy</b>	Students can take the test in spring of the grade 10 year. After 10th grade the re-test is currently offered 2 times each year, allowing a total of 4 additional opportunities.	Students may retake ECAs once per semester after the initial testing. The number of times they can retest depends on when the student took the class.	N/A	Test may be taken a maximum of three times per school year through the end of 12th grade.	Two retakes per year, starting in the summer after the first administration.

**Exhibit 2. (continued)**

	<b>Idaho</b>	<b>Indiana</b>	<b>Montana</b>	<b>Oregon</b>	<b>Washington</b>
<b>Alternate pathways</b>	If students haven't passed by the time they are seniors, they may appeal to their district for alternate pathways. Pathways must be aligned to same 10th grade content standards and result in regular diploma.	If they fail the exit exam BUT complete remediation opportunities, maintain a school attendance rate of at least 95%, maintain a C average or higher in courses required for graduation, and meet all other graduation requirements, they may graduate through two alternate pathways. 1. Complete a workforce readiness assessment and complete at least one career exploration internship/cooperative education/or workforce credential; OR 2. Obtain written recommendations from teachers in each subject where the exam was failed. The documentation must be supported by the principal's recommendation and a demonstration that the student has acquired sufficient knowledge in that subject area.	N/A	Other approved standardized tests (PSAT, ACT, PLAN, Work Keys, Compass, ASSET, SAT) or Work samples	Four alternate pathways: 1. Assessment collection of classroom-based work samples. 2. Compare student grades in specific courses to grades of other students who took same course and met standard. 3. Meet specified minimum score on ACT or SAT in math, reading, and writing. 4. Scoring a 3 or higher on select AP exams.
<b>ELL policy</b>	Any EL may also take an alternate route to graduation if they have an IEP or have been enrolled in an LEP program for 3 years or less without waiting until failing the ISAT four times.	No different than alternate pathway available to all.	N/A	Under administrative rule, ELs may be allowed to demonstrate proficiency in the Essential Skills in their respective language of origin, if they meet certain criteria. The rule also requires local school districts to adopt a policy whether to allow this provision or not.	No alternate pathways specifically for ELs.
<b>Remedial Assistance provided</b>	Nothing at the state level. Any and all assistance would be provided at the district or school level.	The state requires schools to provide remediation to students who have not passed the state assessments. The amount of funding that a school receives for remediation is related to the percentage of students scoring below state achievement standards.	N/A	There is no state-sponsored assistance for remediation.	State provides targeted remediation for students and professional development for teachers. State provides funding for remediation.

SOURCE: Much of the information came from Center for Education Policy (2011). *State High School Tests: Changes in State Policy and the Impact of the College and Career Readiness Movement*. Washington, DC: Author. It was supplemented from data found on the websites of the U.S. Department of Education, Education Week, and individual state websites

## **Characteristics of Exit Exams**

The four EVEA states all began with comprehensive assessments in reading/ELA and mathematics. One (Indiana) has already moved to end-of-course assessments, and a second (Washington) is also considering that move. Notably, current plans for the two general assessment consortia indicate that one will develop end-of-course assessments while the other will focus on comprehensive end-of-domain assessments. So, this distinction will be important to watch over time.

Idaho's exams are comprised solely of multiple-choice items while the other three states include some form of open-ended response in addition to the multiple-choice items. Indiana, Oregon, and Washington require students to respond to writing prompts, which could pose difficulties for ELs who have not had sufficient training or experience in presenting their thoughts or analyzing ideas in written English. Washington is the only state of the four planning to include a science exam as a graduation requirement. Importantly, all four states have extensive retake options although only two have a state-level policy requiring remediation efforts for students needing to retake the exams.

## **Alternate Pathways to Graduation**

All four states also have alternative pathways to graduation which differ from one another. Idaho relies on an appeals process without much guidance at the state level as to what constitutes reasonable criteria for granting an appeal. The student must apply to their district for an alternate pathway. That pathway must be aligned to the same 10<sup>th</sup>-grade content standards as the assessment. Most alternative pathways in Oregon rely on other assessments (such as ACT or SAT), which will most likely not be helpful to ELs. However, they are currently implementing an option for students to develop and submit a work sample aligned to the essential understandings required for graduation. Washington State has four alternate pathways. Two, like Oregon focuses on attaining minimum scores on other tests. The other two are likely to be more relevant to ELs. The first is a collection of classroom-based work samples aligned to the content standards and approved by teachers as demonstrating similar proficiency on that content. The second focuses on a statistical analysis, comparing the student's grades in specific courses to grades of other students who took same course and met the standard on the exit exam. They present this analysis as evidence of understanding the same material but being unable to demonstrate that understanding on a standardized test.

Indiana has the most complex alternate pathway, as students first must meet minimal requirements and then have options for demonstrating readiness to graduate. If students fail the exit exam BUT complete remediation opportunities, maintain a school attendance rate of at least 95%, maintain a C average or higher in courses required for graduation, and meet all other graduation requirements, THEN they may meet graduation requirements by following one of two alternate pathways. The first pathway involves completing a workforce readiness assessment and at least one career exploration internship/cooperative education/or workforce credential. While this option also contains an assessment in English, it will likely be more practically oriented and is combined with hands-on experience. The second option requires the student to obtain written recommendations from teachers in each subject where he/she failed the exit exam failed. These recommendations must be supported by the principal's recommendation and a demonstration (through grades, classroom tests, or projects) that the student has acquired sufficient knowledge in that subject area.

In two of the four EVEA states with an exit exam, no specific graduation policy for ELs exists; they have determined the alternate pathway as described should be sufficient for all students. However, in Idaho, any EL may take an alternate route to graduation if they have an IEP or have been enrolled in an LEP

program for three years or less without waiting until they have failed the ISAT four times. In Oregon, districts may allow ELs to demonstrate proficiency in the Essential Skills through completing a work sample *in their language of origin*, if they meet certain criteria. However, each local school district must adopt a policy of whether to allow this provision or not. The challenge Oregon district policymakers will face is how to score a student work sample written in a low-incidence language, such as Tagalog or Samoan.

Yet states with alternate pathways that do not rely solely on other assessments do provide strong supports for ELs who possess some English proficiency and sufficient academic knowledge to be considered ready for postsecondary success but who do not test well in English. More research will need to be done in states with alternate pathways to follow students (and particularly ELs) who use these pathways to graduation and determine if their long-term outcomes fulfill the obligation of the high school to meet the state's definition of college and career readiness.

It is interesting to note, however, that none of these states require proficiency on an ELPA to graduate. When defining college and career readiness it will be important to discuss the need for English fluency to succeed in college, careers, or technical training programs.

## **EL Population**

One of the issues that can interact with EL graduation policies is who those ELs are. For instance, students who have been in ELD programs for more than six years and are still considered ELs may not be receiving appropriate instruction in English language development. They have been called "long-term ELs" and represent the least well-served of the EL population, either because the programs themselves are not adequate or because they have special issues that need to be addressed before they can learn academic English at a proficient level. In the 2009 Quality Counts Report by Editorial Projects in Education (EPE), Gary Cook of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research is quoted as saying "Usually, five to seven years is the time it takes for students to be fully functional in an academic environment in English." (EPE, 2009). It may therefore be important to separate the issues of high school ELs who have been in the program for more than seven years from those who have been in it fewer than five. In the former case, state policymakers might need to be more focused on improving ELD instruction than on altering graduation policies to fit a unique need.

Contrast this concern to the latter situation in which a student enters the United States as a 16-year-old, as older students entering the country may face the additional challenge of not being academically prepared to learn with their same-age peers. While some proportion of older ELs will certainly be fully prepared and only need language support, others present a special challenge as they need to be remediated in academic content and taught the language well enough to learn new academic content in English before graduation. Depending on the grade in which the student is placed, schools may have limited time to reach these goals. State policies dictate the age at which a student must leave public education and it may be before students have had the needed five to seven years of English instruction.

A separate population issue affecting several ESEA states is the unique challenges of an EL population made up of Native Americans and migrant students. In Montana, only 3 percent of its population is comprised of ELs but within this 3 percent, 80 percent of the ELs are American Indian/Alaska Native. The most common language, spoken by 25 percent of LEP students, is Blackfoot, a tribal American Indian language. In Idaho, ELs make up less than 7 percent of the state's K-12 enrollment, with Spanish being the predominate primary language. However 3 percent of ELs are American Indian/Alaska Native, and 19 percent are considered migrant students. Washington also has large numbers of migrant students.

Taking each of these special populations in turn, let's focus first on the American Indian/Alaska Native population.

Native American ELs have unique cultural backgrounds and linguistic challenges. They receive funding through both Title III and Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to help ensure they receive full access to academic instruction. While, by definition, Native American ELs do have a tribal affiliation and may live in a tribal community, over 90% attend US public schools (Forte & Faulkner-Bond, 2010). There is a delicate balance between respecting their culture and native language while ensuring they learn sufficient academic English to succeed in school. Native Americans are not defined by their ability to speak English yet as many as one-third are identified as ELs. Typically, this designation is a result of Native American students speaking a tribal language or nonstandard English dialects at home. Some parents may be reluctant to identify their children as needing ELD instruction, but it is vital to full academic participation and competency. As with any EL population, Native Americans who are not fluent in English enter school without the language skills needed to succeed in an academic setting. If this challenge is not addressed fully, they may not be able to access the content of high school courses or demonstrate their knowledge on exit exams, even with language accommodations provided.

Migrant students in the United States are typically Spanish speakers and have similar issues as other non-English speakers, compounded by the challenge of often missing part of a school year and transferring schools often. Again, the challenge of schooling any EL is providing both English language instruction and academic content instruction simultaneously. Students who miss school or transfer are likely to have gaps in their education. While ELD programs tend to start where the student is in terms of ability, academic content is often taught in grades determined by age. Students may fall further behind each year, causing them to be ill-prepared for an exit exam in high school.

## **EL Graduation Rates**

As noted by Zehr (2010), some states are still not complying with federal requirements that they report separately graduation rates for all subgroups, including ELs. She reported that the 2007-08 data was missing graduation rates for ELs in nine states plus the District of Columbia. One of the states that had a large number of ELs did not plan to report those data until the 2011-2012 school year. Thus it is difficult to find comparable data across states. Through multiple sources, Exhibit 3 provides information on ESEA states' overall graduation rates, EL graduation rates, and, for comparison purposes, graduation rates for students with disabilities.

In each of the five states, the EL graduation rate was lower than the overall graduation rate; in four of the five states it was significantly lower. Most notably, in Monday, where 7 percent of the population was EL, only 53 percent of students graduation high school, compared to 80 percent overall. Indiana, which has a much higher proportion of ELs (as well as a growing population), 62 percent graduated using the adjusted cohort rate, compared to 82 percent of all students.

**Exhibit 3. ELL Graduation Rates Compared to All Students and Reflected in Allowances for Alternate Pathways.**

	Idaho	Indiana	Montana	Oregon	Washington
<b>ELL grad rate</b>	83%	62%	53%	51%	51%
<b>SWD grad rates</b>	unavailable	59%	74%	42%	56%
<b>Overall grad rate</b>	92%	82%	80%	66%	74%
<b>Effect on grad rates calculations</b>	Students taking alternate paths to graduation and not counted with students who passed the high school exit exam.	Unknown as ECA's only became operational in 2009-10 for the graduating class of 2012, but the intent is to count students earning a diploma through the alternate pathway in the graduation rate calculation.	N/A	State does not combine graduates who met requirements through alternate pathway with those who met through the traditional pathway.	Alternate pathways count in graduation rate calculation.

SOURCE: Data from Center for Education Policy (2011). *State High School Tests: Changes in State Policy and the Impact of the College and Career Readiness Movement*. Washington, DC: Author was supplemented with data found on the websites of the U.S. Department of Education, Education Week, and individual state websites.

NOTE: it was difficult to find many state graduates using the same formula. Some of these numbers reflect the adjusted cohort rates while others use the average freshman rate. Therefore, only make comparisons within state, not across states.

It is important to note that in two of the EVEA states, the reported graduation rates do not include those who met diploma requirements through an alternative pathway. While other methods of calculating graduation rates and other lengths of time are considered may pick up on these students, it is important to understand why the alternate pathway would not count equally to the high school exit pathway.

**Conclusion**

This paper was intended to introduce issues and challenges with awarding a student a diploma who may not be fully fluent in English. It is important to separate language skills from academic knowledge and to provide ELs every opportunity to demonstrate their academic language. Civil rights experts need to continue to weigh into the debate of whether we are harming an individual’s rights more by denying them a diploma based on their lack of English language proficiency or by allowing them to graduate without being fully fluent in English. Further understanding on the need for English proficiency to be “ready” for college or careers should inform this debate. As mentioned earlier, states need to fully report disaggregated assessment results and graduation rates so researchers may monitor trends over time. Furthermore, as states implement a P-20 longitudinal data system, researchers will be able to track the progress of ELs both within public education and for the first few years following graduation to examine how high school graduation policies affect their outcomes.

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