



# Executive Summary and Study Methods

Since 2002, the Center on Education Policy has collected and reported data on state policies that require students to pass a state assessment in order to receive a high school diploma. The state policies associated with these assessments, also known as high school exit exams, have undergone a number of changes over the past ten years. For example, states have changed the graduation requirements attached to these assessments, the types of assessments they use, the subjects tested by these assessments, and the purposes that the assessments are intended to serve.

However, exit exams are not the only assessments that states mandate for all high school students. In some states, a different assessment is administered in high school to meet federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) than the assessment administered as a graduation requirement. Additionally, some states require students to take college entrance exams, such as the SAT or ACT, and some states (sometimes the same states) require high school students to take exams that assess a student's readiness for college and career, such as the PSAT or ACT's PLAN or EXPLORE assessments. For CEP's 2011 study on state high school assessments, we surveyed all 50 states on policies pertaining to all high school assessments, including high school exit exams, college entrance exams, and college and career readiness (CCR) assessments.

Part 1 of this report provides an overview of state high school exit exam policies and discusses recent changes in these policies. Part 2 describes what we learned from our state survey regarding college entrance exams and college and career readiness assessments. We address the current national and state focus on college and career readiness and the extent to which this focus has affected state high school assessment policies. Part 2 also addresses state-led efforts in improving college and career readiness, such as the Common Core State Standards movement and the two state consortia developing assessments aligned to these standards, and how these efforts may impact state high school assessment policies. The bulleted points that follow summarize CEP's key findings from this year's study.



## Key Findings

### Changes in State High School Exit Exam Policies

- ▶ **Twenty-five states have current or planned policies that require students to pass an exit exam in order to receive a high school diploma.** An additional five states require students to take an exit exam, but not necessarily pass it, in order to receive a high school diploma. Another state has planned exit exam policies, but has not decided whether or not students will have to pass the exams in order to graduate.
- ▶ **Three states requiring high school exit exams (Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee) have changed their policies so that students no longer have to pass an exam in order to receive a diploma.** Instead, a student's score on an exit exam now counts as a percentage of the student's final grade in a course required for graduation.
- ▶ **More states administer or plan to administer end-of-course exams than comprehensive exams, as 19 states had current or planned policies to administer end-of-course exams in the 2010-11 school year.**
- ▶ **Eighty-four percent of students of color, 78% of low-income students, and 76% of all public school students nationwide were enrolled in the 30 states with state high school exit exam policies in 2010-11.**
- ▶ **Due to policy changes in some states, fewer students were required to pass high school exit exams in order to receive a high school diploma in the 2010-11 school year than in the 2009-10 school year (65% of all public school students nationwide in 2010-11 compared to 74% in 2009-10).**

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### State High School Assessment Policies and College and Career Readiness

- ▶ **Twenty-seven of the 31 states with current or planned exit exams are participating in one or both of the state consortia to develop common assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards intended to measure college and career readiness.** Of these 27, at least 16 plan to replace their current exams with consortia assessments and at least 16 of the 27 states expect the consortia assessments to be more rigorous than their current assessments.
- ▶ **High school exit exams are currently used by potential employers or postsecondary education institutions in only one state (Georgia), despite many states citing assessment of college readiness (8 states) and career readiness (10 states) as a purpose of those assessments.**
- ▶ **Eleven states require or plan to require students to take a college entrance exam (the ACT or SAT) in high school; however, none of these states require their students to meet a specific passing standard on the exam.** Many of these policies are new, with 5 of these states implementing them in the 2009-10 school year or later.
- ▶ **Sixteen states administer, or at least offer to all students, assessments that are intended to assess students' readiness for college and/or a career.** Nine of the 16 states administer one of (or a combination of) assessments developed by ACT. Five of the 16 states administer the PSAT for this purpose, and an additional two of the 16 administer state-developed assessments for this purpose.