



CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

1430 N STREET
SACRAMENTO, CA
95814-5901

JACK O'CONNELL

State Superintendent of
Public Instruction

PHONE: (916) 319-0800

January 6, 2006

Dear State Board of Education President and Members and All Interested Parties:

CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAMINATION

California's high school exit exam is one of the cornerstones of California's accountability system. Before our state implemented standards-based accountability our schools had widely disparate standards for what children were learning and what constituted graduation requirements. Some schools pushed each and every student to succeed while others, wallowing in the status quo of low standards, handed out diplomas to any student who simply put in seat time. I was heartbroken by stories of high school graduates who could not read or write or understand basic computing. Too many of those students were poor, Latino or African American, or students with disabilities.

I, and other policy leaders, set out to fix that inequity. We set high academic standards for what every student should learn. We now hold every school in California accountable for improving student achievement and we shine a spotlight on and intervene at those schools that are not moving in the right direction. I wrote the law creating the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) in 1999 because I wanted to ensure that no child could fall between the cracks and be sent into the world, diploma in hand, lacking the skills and knowledge necessary for meaningful work or college. I did so with the belief that it would challenge the system and raise expectations and results for all California's children. Six years later, it is clear, based on research and data, that the exam is working as intended and that it has focused our schools on teaching California's world-class academic standards. Students across the state are meeting higher expectations as a result of the exam.

Since its inception, the CAHSEE has been thoroughly reviewed and constantly updated. The California Department of Education (CDE) and the State Board of Education have received and studied yearly independent reports conducted by the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). We have reviewed the literature on similar exams and have monitored other states' activities in this realm. We have conducted outreach and training on the CAHSEE and its content, have created study tools and guidance for districts, parents and students, and have sent a clear policy message about the importance of this exam as a graduation requirement.

Several months ago, HumRRO released its sixth annual independent evaluation of the CAHSEE. The report confirmed that the test is a valid and reliable indicator of student knowledge in mathematics and English-language arts and that the test brings needed consistency across all of our varied districts.

I strongly believed, and continue to believe, that the report's lead recommendation to keep the CAHSEE requirement in place for the class of 2006, and beyond, was an appropriate and important recommendation. HumRRO also recommended the consideration of alternatives and/or options for those students who may be unable to satisfy the CAHSEE requirement by June 2006.

As a result, I directed my staff to examine HumRRO's recommendations and stated that if I were convinced changes would be in the best interest of all California students, I would make those recommendations. Our process was guided, however, by the core principle that awarding a student a diploma without the knowledge and skills to back it up does that student a great disservice. For any alternative to be acceptable, it would have to guarantee the student's knowledge of the standards CAHSEE assesses. I want every student in California to get a high school diploma, but more importantly, I want every student in California to complete high school with the necessary skills to truly compete in today's information-driven global economy.

In the intervening months, my staff examined exit exam models throughout the country and considered a multitude of possible alternatives and options. We considered alternatives, defined as any additional way of showing a mastery of the standards other than by the exit exam. We also considered options, defined as any course available to students after they have satisfied their local graduation requirements but have been unable to pass the exit exam.

Regarding alternatives to passing the CAHSEE for purposes of receiving a diploma, the following points contain some of the ideas brought forward and also my concerns about implementation of these alternatives. (In addition, attached to this letter is a more comprehensive look at all the alternatives we considered.) When considering these alternatives, we used four principles to guide our discussion:

1. Is it in the best interest of California's students?
2. Does it meet an equivalent standard?
3. Will it ensure the California high school diploma is a meaningful document?
4. Is it practical to implement in California?

- **Passage of an existing exam as an alternative (e.g., SAT, Advanced Placement (AP)).** While this alternative eliminates the need to develop a new exam, I believe the use of other exams would be inappropriate because tests like AP and the SAT are not aligned to our state content standards and, therefore, we would not be able to directly equate the results.
- **State-developed alternative test (e.g., performance test, state rubric).** While this alternative would facilitate consistency across the state, addressing an important concern of mine, it would be very costly to develop. In addition, this alternative could not be implemented for the class of 2006 as any reasonable implementation would be two to three years out. Finally, even though it would be a state-developed alternative, it would still be difficult to guarantee equivalence given the need for local scoring.
- **Collection of evidence (e.g., portfolio, senior project).** While this alternative would allow multiple measures to determine mastery of CAHSEE-based standards, it would undercut the original intention of CAHSEE, which was standardizing the meaning of a high school diploma. This alternative would result in hundreds of different definitions of the skills required to earn a diploma, and could not guarantee a student's knowledge of the standards CAHSEE assesses.
- **Locally-developed assessments.** While this alternative would allow for more local control, it provides no guarantee of consistency across districts, nor any guarantee of quality or adherence to testing standards.

It should be noted that with respect to students with disabilities, the CDE had agreed to a settlement in the case of *Chapman, et al v. the California Department of Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the State Board of Education*. The lawsuit sought to delay the consequences of the CAHSEE for students with disabilities. I agreed to this settlement because we know that our standards-based education reforms take time to implement, particularly for students with disabilities. This settlement would provide a path for certain students with disabilities in the class of 2006 to receive a diploma, while giving our schools more time to provide them with the skills necessary to pass the CAHSEE. I will continue to fight to make this settlement law and firmly believe it will be in place for the class of 2006.

After reviewing the research and considering options for non-special education students, I have concluded that there is no practical alternative available that would ensure all students awarded a high school diploma have mastered the subject areas tested by the CAHSEE. I am convinced that the only way to make sure all our graduates have the critical skills they need in adulthood is through requiring passage of the CAHSEE.

To be clear, this does not mean, as some have said, that those students who have been unable to pass the exam will be denied a diploma indefinitely. It simply means that their basic education is not complete and they must continue on through our kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) system, adult education, or community colleges to obtain the necessary skills to warrant receipt of a diploma.

We face a new economy driven by global innovation that will demand higher level skills and knowledge to meaningfully enter the work force. It is imperative that all of California's children reach at least the minimum bar set by our exit exam. Therefore, our educational system must ensure all students who have satisfied local graduation requirements, but have been unable to pass the exit exam, is given the opportunity to continue their education in order to obtain the necessary skills they will need to succeed.

As a result, I am committed to breaking down any possible barriers in order to guarantee that every child who wants to continue his or her education will find a place to do so in California's educational system. (Attached is a comprehensive look at all the options available to students.)

I am working with members of the Legislature and will submit legislation shortly to help break down these barriers. We will do this by:

- Lifting enrollment caps and providing funding for adult education programs to allow students who have not passed the CAHSEE by end of their senior year to enroll in adult education programs.
- Ensuring access to summer school so that any student who completes four years of high school and has not passed the CAHSEE can take a summer course of CAHSEE remediation/intensive instruction. I will also seek to eliminate enrollment caps on summer and remedial programs for students in elementary and middle school grades so more students can enter high school better prepared to succeed academically.
- Providing sufficient funding to offer independent study to students who complete their senior year of high school without passing the CAHSEE and allowing these students to enroll the subsequent year in high school in order to take independent study courses designed to help them pass the CAHSEE and meet graduation requirements.
- Funding a special 2006 summer administration of the CAHSEE – estimated cost is \$2.5 million.

January 6, 2006
Page 5

- Assuring eligibility for Cal Grants to students who meet all other high school graduation requirements and GPA requirements, but have not passed the CAHSEE. We must not foreclose opportunities for these students to continue their education in post-secondary institutions.

This has been a particularly difficult decision and I understand the concern and disappointment of those who will not graduate with their classes this June. Yet I firmly believe that today's economy demands higher level skills and it is in the best interest of both our students and society to ensure we equip all our children with the knowledge and skills they will need before they enter the work force.

I urge district administrators to make good use of the \$20 million (\$600 per eligible student) authorized in the Budget Act for 2005-06 for the purpose of providing intensive instruction and services for eligible students in the class of 2006 who have failed either part of the CAHSEE. These funds should be used to diagnose student challenges in English and/or math and actively remediate them to help those seniors successfully meet the CAHSEE requirement.

We all must acknowledge that there are a significant number of high school seniors in the class of 2006 who are still striving to pass the CAHSEE. We also must acknowledge that at the end of this school year we will be in the difficult position of seeing some of those seniors not graduating with their peers.

But I want each of those students to hear one thing loud and clear: we believe in you and we will not leave you behind. We want you to be able to participate fully in the competitive global economy of the 21st century. You can only do that if you are equipped with the knowledge and skills that will help you succeed. I urge students who are still challenged by the CAHSEE to take advantage of remediation courses and make your senior year count so you can master the English-language arts and mathematics skills that are critical to your future. I promise if you take advantage of these opportunities and are still not able to master these skills by the end of the school year, we will not turn our backs on you. There will be a place for you in the California public school system until you are able to master those skills needed to compete in the demanding future that awaits you.

Sincerely,

JACK O'CONNELL

JO:rm
Attachments

**California Department of Education
California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)
Options for Students not Passing the Exam**

The following possibilities currently exist for a California student to continue to pursue a high school diploma or equivalent without having passed the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) by the end of their regular senior year:

1. Provide instruction through the Remedial Supplemental Instruction Program.

Students in grades seven through twelve, who do not demonstrate sufficient progress towards passing the CAHSEE, are eligible to receive intensive instruction and services designed to pass the CAHSEE. These services may be received during their high school years and during the year following their grade twelve year for those students who have failed to pass one or both parts of the CAHSEE (*Education Code [EC] Section 37252[c] and [h]*). Students may receive supplemental instruction services for at least one year following completion of grade twelve. Local educational agencies would receive the Remedial program's hourly rate of funding (about \$3.68 per hour).

In addition, *EC Section 37254*, provides funds, if appropriated, to be used to provide intensive instruction and services designed to help eligible pupils to pass the CAHSEE.

2. Enrollment for an additional year(s) in a public comprehensive high school or alternative education program until the CAHSEE is passed and a diploma is awarded, per local Governing Board policy.

If a student does not have a high school diploma, he or she can at any age approach the kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) district of residency to obtain an education leading to a high school diploma. The K-12 school district of residency has the option to place a student age eighteen or older in an appropriate program. This may include placement at a comprehensive high school if the student has been continuously enrolled in a K-12 school, or at an alternative education program within the school district. Districts may restrict this possibility due to enrollment pressure, facility availability or other factors.

Students under the age of eighteen years are compelled to attend school pursuant to *EC Section 48200*, and the district of residency is required to serve the student in an appropriate program.

A senior year student who is deficient in graduation requirement credits may also be reclassified as a junior to enable the student to attend the school for one or more additional years, thereby providing additional instructional time and attempts to pass the CAHSEE and be awarded a diploma.

3. Maintain continuous enrollment in a public school independent study program until the CAHSEE is passed and a diploma is awarded, per local Governing Board policy.

Districts are allowed to provide instruction using the independent study method for students nineteen years and older, who have been continuously enrolled in a K-12 school since their eighteenth birthday. Pursuant to *EC* sections 46300.1 and 46300.4, apportionment may be claimed for students continuously enrolled and taking appropriate course work relevant to receiving a diploma.

There is a cap of 10 percent on the number of continuation high school students at a site that can be served through independent study, with an exemption for students who are pregnant or are primary parents (*EC* Section 51745[b]).

4. Maintain continuous enrollment in a public charter school until the CAHSEE is passed and a diploma is awarded, through age twenty-two.

Students must be continuously enrolled to attend public charter schools from age nineteen through twenty-two (*EC* Section 47612 and *California Code of Regulations*, Title 5, Section 11960). In addition, students (essentially without age limit) may attend a charter school if it provides instruction exclusively in partnership with any of the following: (1) the federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998; (2) federally affiliated Youth Build programs; (3) federal job corps training or instruction provided pursuant to a Memorandum Of Understanding with the federal provider; or (4) the California Conservation Corps or local conservation corps certified by the California Conservation Corps (*EC* Section 47612.1).

5. Enroll in a California adult school secondary education program to obtain a diploma by satisfying the district's graduation requirements and passing the CAHSEE.

Any adult aged eighteen years or older may attend an adult school in California. Capacity to serve adults is limited by the school district's state established funding cap. The CAHSEE is required for graduation from all California Adult Schools operated by K-12 school districts.

6. Obtain a diploma from a community college that awards high school diplomas through their non-credit adult education programs that do not require passage of the CAHSEE.

Some California Community Colleges run non-credit adult education programs and grant high school diplomas similar to the K-12 school system adult education programs. Students enrolled in Community College non-credit programs are not subject to the CAHSEE requirement. Each college makes a local determination regarding whether or not to offer non-credit programs, and some community

colleges currently require passage of the CAHSEE if they have a partnership with a K-12 or high school district.

7. Obtain a diploma through a county court or community school program.

County Offices of Education operate County Court and Community Schools for adjudicated youth, wards of the court, and expelled youth (*EC* sections 1980 – 1986). A County Office of Education may decide to continue the enrollment of a student over eighteen years, as long as the student is classified in grades one through twelve. Continuing education may involve a court order and probation department concurrence. Passage of the CAHSEE is required to earn a diploma.

8. Pass the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE), for students ages sixteen or over, to obtain a diploma equivalent.

California *EC* Section 48412 allows students who take and pass the CHSPE to receive from the State Board of Education a certificate of proficiency, which is the legal equivalent of a high school diploma. Information is available on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tq/sp/>.

9. Pass the General Educational Development (GED) test, a national program for adults ages eighteen and older, to obtain a diploma equivalent.

The GED is a national test for individuals over eighteen or who are within 60 days of their eighteenth birthday (regardless of school enrollment status). Individuals can take the GED to demonstrate knowledge equivalent to a high school diploma. Students age seventeen years and out of high school for a minimum of 60 days are also eligible to take the test. The test is offered on a fee basis at testing centers throughout the state. Information is available on the CDE Web site at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tq/gd/gedfaq.asp>.