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## Standardized high school exit exams put states to the test

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

If a student spends 13 years in school and doesn't learn basic math, English, history and science, should she get a high school diploma? Should she sue?

States are facing these questions as they grapple with what seems a simple requirement: asking graduating seniors to pass exit exams in core subjects.

Twenty-two states have some type of exit exams; four are phasing them in.

Observers are divided on whether the tests improve education as a coalition of business leaders, governors and advocates for low-income children asks states to hold firm.

But the tests are proving controversial. Maryland has delayed exams by two years. The state Board of Education meets today and Wednesday to decide whether to move the date again.

If nothing else, advocates say, exit exams have contributed to higher expectations. In 2005, a record 68% of high school graduates in the USA took at least four years of English and three each of math, science and social studies — a big improvement over 40% in 1990.

A federal transcript study released earlier this year found that 51% of students were doing college-preparatory work, up from 31% in 1990.

"The truth is we were letting kids out in droves without the basic skills necessary," says Russlyn Ali of the Education Trust West, an advocacy group in Oakland.

The same federal study showed that the average high school senior still doesn't read very well, and skills may have worsened since 1992.

When they work, exit exams lay bare the need to improve school for underserved students, says Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C. "It becomes startlingly clear that there's unequal education."

To be sure, the tests have an outsized effect: This year, 65% of all students and 76% of minority students must pass one or more to earn a diploma, according to a study by the center.

The Maryland State Teachers Association, the state's largest teachers' union, has gone on record opposing the exams as the gatekeeper to graduation.

"You're putting all your eggs into the basket of one or two standardized tests," says spokesman Daniel Kaufman.

Advocates for low-income and minority students are using the scores to force improvements. Last year, Arizona students who didn't pass the exam sued, saying the state didn't give them enough help. In another lawsuit, a court ordered more funding for English language learners.

In California, a 2006 lawsuit entitles students who don't pass the exit exam to get two years of free tutoring.

It's unclear how much the tests will improve schools. One analysis of Maryland's algebra test, for instance, found 65% of items were pre-algebra problems, which most students learn in middle school.

"How do we not hold kids to that standard and work like hell to get kids up to it?" says Mike Cohen of Achieve, a group

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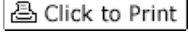
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