

Students prove worth of exit exams

IMPROVEMENTS OVER LAST YEAR'S NUMBERS SHOW THE TESTS ARE BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY

Consider it good news with asterisks.

The percentage of the coming year's seniors who have passed the California High School Exit Examination indicates that students understand its importance. In statewide results released Monday, 88 percent passed the math test, and 88 percent passed the English-language arts exam as juniors. In one year, the percentage falling short was cut in half; only three-quarters passed either the math or English

tests as sophomores.

The results appear to vindicate those who have argued to keep the exit exam meaningful — no pass, no diploma — and on schedule: Don't delay the planned implementation next June and don't create loopholes to push up the pass rate. (The exception should be an alternative test for special-ed students and the rare student who turns blank during standardized tests.)

Instead of making the test easier, pour money for extra instruction —



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High school exit-exam results broken down by school, plus latest STAR results for elementary and middle schools.

much more than the \$20 million that's budgeted now — into low-performing schools to help the remaining 12 percent make the grade.

As for the asterisks:

* The latest state results don't reveal a crucial piece of information: the actual number of students who have yet to pass both parts of the exam, which is necessary for a diploma. It could be as low as 12 percent — if the same kids who flunked math also flunked English — or as high as 24 percent, if each student failed only one. The state, at this point, tracks only the overall pass/fail rates on each test; it doesn't put the two tests together student by student. For a school like Overfelt

High, where the passage rates were 64 percent for English and 65 percent for math, perhaps half or so of incoming seniors have yet to pass one or the other of the tests. That's cause for alarm.

* High school juniors of all races, incomes and ethnicities made roughly proportionate gains over the past year in passing the exit exam, but big disparities among groups remain. While 96 percent of white juniors have passed the English-language arts exam, only 81 percent of Latinos have (see chart). Only half of students getting special-ed services passed the math; clearly, they need some accommodation.

The gaps are reflected throughout the valley, in comparing, say, Palo Alto High (99 percent passage in math) and Oak Grove in East San Jose (78 percent). But some schools defied the odds: At Downtown College Prep, a charter school serving low-income Latinos, 95 percent of juniors passed both tests.

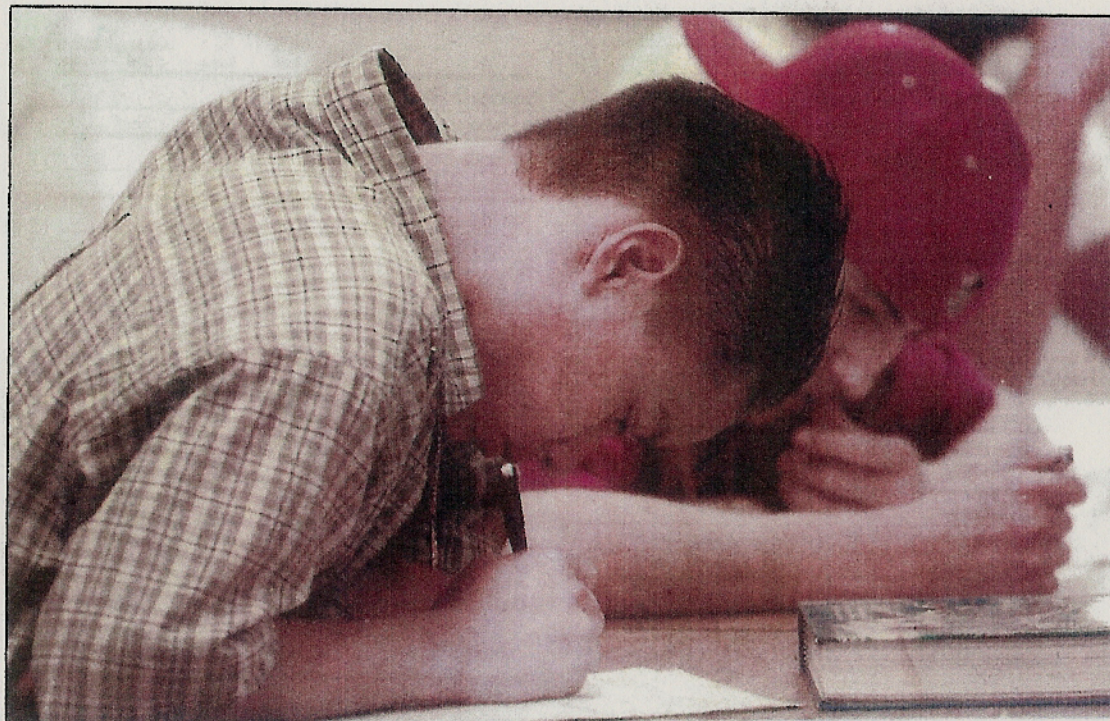
The exit exam requires eighth-grade ability in math, and 10th-grade writing, reading and spelling skills. High school juniors having trouble passing clearly are missing some basic skills. Many are probably struggling with all of their courses; the exit exam is only one obstacle they face.

But with a whole year to go, there's still time, for those who are motivated, at last to put the exit exam behind them.

HOW THE CLASS OF 2006 IS DOING

These are the passing-rate percentages for English-language arts students on the California High School Exit Exam, broken down by ethnicity and special needs. Percentage breakdowns in mathematics, the other testing category, were similar.

- 96 White
- 95 Filipino
- 92 Asian
- 82 African American
- 81 Hispanic/Latino
- 80 Economically disadvantaged
- 65 English-learner students
- 54 Special-education students



Students are concentrating on passing the state exit exam, judging from improvements in passage rates