



ARE CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS READY FOR THE EXIT EXAM?

A Response to the HumRRO Evaluation

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In 1999, the California Department of Education contracted with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), an independent evaluation firm based in Alexandria, Virginia, to perform annual evaluations of the quality and impact of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). HumRRO's Fall 2004 Report asserts that California's high schools have made a great deal of progress in preparing students for the CAHSEE. It recommends that California deny diplomas to students in the Class of 2006 who do not pass the High School Exit Exam.

Our review of HumRRO's report points to a number of problems with HumRRO's analysis and conclusions. In fact, HumRRO's data reveals that many California schools still are not adequately preparing students for success on the CAHSEE.

1) What HumRRO Claims: "Despite predictions by principals and teachers, the current CAHSEE requirement has been accompanied by a decrease rather than an increase in dropout and retention rates" (p.v, executive summary).

What HumRRO Data Show: HumRRO's analysis grossly understates the number of students who drop out of California schools according to a recent report by the Harvard Civil Rights Project. Further, the dropout figures HumRRO cites are for cohorts of students who faced no penalty for failing the Exit Exam. The fear of many educators is that once a penalty is imposed for failing the exam, students will become discouraged and drop out at higher rates. HumRRO's dropout figures do not address this concern. What HumRRO data do indicate is that more than two-thirds of English Language Learners, "Economically Disadvantaged" students, and Hispanic students, and nearly two-thirds of Black students, believe it will be "a lot" or "somewhat harder" to graduate if required to pass the ELA or math portion of the HSEE for graduation. More than 40% of White and Asian students also believe obtaining a diploma will be more difficult if they are required to pass either the ELA or math test for graduation. In addition, large number of principals (73%) and teachers (41%) believe that it will be harder for students to graduate if they are required to pass the HSEE for graduation.

2) What HumRRO Claims: "Initial results from the Class of 2006 suggests [sic] that it is quite likely that, given some effort on their part, nearly all students will be able to pass the CAHSEE (with the exception of some students receiving special education services, as addressed in a later recommendation)" (p.vii, executive summary).

What HumRRO Data Show: A large number of students in the Class of 2006 have not yet passed at least one of section of the exam, including more than 50% of California's English Learners, more than 39% of the state's African-American students, more than 40% of Hispanic students, and more than 40% of "Economically Disadvantaged" students. In addition, HumRRO data suggest that schools have not fully implemented many services to "promote learning for all students" (see p. 122, and comment #4 below).

3) What HumRRO Claims: Most students were receiving instruction in the material covered by the CAHSEE (p.iii, executive summary).

What HumRRO Data Show: More than 30% of Black, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, English Learners, and White students said that the math section of the Exit Exam tested them on topics that they were never taught.

4) What HumRRO Claims: "One of the most positive results of the CAHSEE requirement has been to help schools identify students who need additional help in acquiring essential skills and to implement programs to provide that help" (p.138).

What HumRRO Data Show: Only 34 principals responded to the survey that forms the basis of HumRRO's claim. In a state with over 1,000 high schools, such a small number of responses should not be relied upon to make definitive policy judgments. If we are going to look at the results of the principal survey, then we must consider the responses which paint a bleaker picture of school readiness. For example, only 50% of the 34 principals indicated their schools have fully implemented "individual student assistance," only 52% have fully implemented "teacher and school support services," and just 28% have fully implemented "student and parent support services." In addition, although students of color are experiencing the highest failure rates on the exam, just 53% of the 34 principals indicated that they have fully implemented "administrator and teacher access to in-service training for working with diverse student populations" (p.122). Significantly, HumRRO data show that large numbers of the principals surveyed said that fiscal constraints hindered their efforts to implement "services to promote learning for all students" (p.122).

5) What HumRRO Claims: "ELA passing rates for English learners who had been redesignated as fluent English proficient were actually higher than for other student groups, suggesting that the lower passing rates for English learners will disappear once they achieve English proficiency" (p.iii, executive summary).

What HumRRO Data Show: Of the 83,728 English Learners in the Class of 2006 that have taken the ELA portion of the exam, 62% have failed (see p. 25). This means that 51,911 English Learners are currently at risk of being denied a diploma. While HumRRO claims that pass rates will improve once students are redesignated as Fluent English Proficient, California Department of Education data show that just 8.3% of California's English Learners were redesignated as Fluent English Proficient in 2003-2004. If redesignation rates do not improve significantly in the next year, the majority of English Learners in California's high schools will not reach proficiency in time to pass the Exit Exam.



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