

Holding Students to Account

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The American high school is troubled. Not only do US high school students' performances trail those of students in most other industrialized nations, but there are few signs of improvement within the United States. While pupils in fourth grade have made striking gains over the past couple of decades, the gains attenuate by eighth grade and disappear altogether in high school. Even the most talented high school students don't always do well. Only 7 percent of US students score at or above the advanced level in mathematics, as compared to twice that percentage on the part of Canadians, Germans, Finns, Dutch, Belgians, and Japanese. Students in high-flying places such as Korea, Switzerland, and Singapore do even better.¹ Many students graduate from high school without the requisite skills needed to perform successfully in a modern, industrialized society. Approximately 1.7 million college students must take remedial courses, a clear indication that high school graduates have not acquired a minimum set of cognitive skills.

The causes are multiple, and no one fix will address them all. But flaws in the country's student accountability system are a

likely contributing factor. Unlike most countries that have high-performing students, the United States lacks, as do most states within the United States, a set of exit exams, that is, subject-specific examinations students are expected to take as their careers in secondary schools are concluding. Other accountability mechanisms are weak as well. For example, the SAT, the test upon which selective colleges and universities rely heavily in their admission decisions, is disconnected from the high school curriculum. The governing board for the SAT frankly states that takers need no more than minimal preparation, adding to the sense that little needs to be done in high school to prepare for the future. The federally funded Pell grants, amounting to \$36 billion annually, are provided to college students according to a formula based solely on student and family income, with no attention paid to the applicant's high school performance (beyond the acquisition of a high school diploma or its equivalent). Eligibility for participation in the federally guaranteed student loan program is also based on need, not merit.

Traditionally, teachers themselves were expected to hold students accountable. They graded students' tests and papers, and in elementary school they recommended pupils for promotion to the next grade level if their performance so warranted. High school students were graded strictly. Those who failed to achieve at the minimum acceptable level were asked to take the course a second time. Those who did well were given well-considered letters of recommendation for admission to colleges deemed appropriate. Those who did poorly adjusted to the situation by taking less demanding vocational courses or by withdrawing from high school altogether.

Teacher judgments were certainly affected by the social, cultural, and even political prejudices of the day. The English grammar school was notorious for its snobbery. Margaret Thatcher's biographer, Charles Moore, wrote that Dorothy Gillies, the headmistress of Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School, thought Thatcher "needed taking down a peg." No matter how talented the future

prime minister may have been, she was, after all, only the daughter of a grocer. When Thatcher insisted on applying to Oxford at age seventeen, Miss Gillies declared: "I'm afraid you can't. You haven't got Latin." She refused to provide instruction in the subject. So Margaret took the subject from a Latin master at a boys' school and submitted a successful application to Oxford nonetheless. "Margaret never forgot what she considered to have been [the headmistress'] obstruction," her biographer continues. When Miss Gillies used a Latin phrase to welcome her to the podium as the main speaker at a major school event many years later, Thatcher corrected the Latin phrasing that had been used.² There is no evidence that Thatcher's self-esteem suffered unduly during her grammar school years. But she and her fellow students knew that much, if not quite everything, depended on the opinions of their grammar school teachers and principals.

Admittedly, the route to higher education has never been as tightly controlled in the United States as in England. But American variants of the Thatcher story are hardly unknown. Accordingly, progressive reformers dismantled many of the traditional accountability pillars in order to minimize the potential for social discrimination. Progressives also proposed that students be routinely promoted from one grade to the next regardless of their academic performance. It was widely thought that children's self-esteem would suffer if they did not keep pace with their peers. More recently, progressive reformers have asked high schools to minimize their dropout rates, as a high school diploma is regarded as critical to future success. Unfortunately, such pressures may encourage teachers to treat shoddy work as acceptable or, in the extreme but not unusual instance, ignore the fact that the student has done no work at all beyond regular occupation of a seat in the back of the room. Also in response to social pressure, high school grades have been inflated. Higher grades are given to maintain popularity with students and to give them a better chance of acceptance by a college or university. Even when students disturb

the functioning of the school their rights can take precedence. The Supreme Court has given students a property right to an education that prevents suspension from school for ten days or more unless certain procedures—multiple witnesses, opportunities for cross-examination—are followed. Lower courts have ruled that student possessions may not be searched unless a legal justification is provided. Step by step, the authority of teachers and principals has become more ambiguous, undermining their capacity to hold students accountable.

Since traditional authority structures have broken down, new external accountability systems are needed today more than ever. In some states, elementary school students are being asked to perform at a minimum level in reading and math before being promoted to the next grade level. In other places, the transition from middle school to high school is determined by academic performance or by an external examination. In this paper, we focus on the exit exam, because it promises to be the antidote for the most dysfunctional institutional component of the American educational system: the high school. It is here where school authority is particularly problematic and student performance is especially mediocre, as indicated by student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We also focus on the exit exam because the introduction of online learning systems into secondary education cannot be achieved without the establishment of an independently audited, subject-specific set of examinations that will hold these new educational vehicles accountable. When students and teachers are not in direct contact with one another, it is all the more important that a third party assesses whether learning has taken place. Indeed, the introduction of digital learning into secondary education, coupled with the establishment of the Common Core State Standards, provides a new opportunity to put into place a comprehensive, nationwide system of exit examinations that can provide guidance to employers as well as institutions of higher education.

When we recommend exit exams in this paper we mean by that phrase a system of independently audited, subject-specific, external examinations. Although the phrase is also used to identify minimum competency examinations that high school sophomores are expected to pass, our discussion of those policies should not be taken as an endorsement of them.

Exit Examinations and Student Motivation

In the absence of well-designed exit examinations, high school students and their teachers frequently find themselves at loggerheads. As long ago as 1965, University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman observed that high schools are “like jails, the military and factories; they are run by an ‘administrative corps’ that makes demands upon a larger group (students, prisoners, soldiers, workers).” In response, the larger group develops a set of norms that govern the choices individuals make: “The same process which occurs among prisoners in a jail and among workers in a factory are there, and the students develop a collective response to these demands,” Coleman said. In all cases, the group pressure seeks to hold down effort to a level which can be maintained by all. “The students’ name for the rate-buster is the ‘curve-raiser’ . . . and their methods of enforcing the work-restricting norms are similar to those of workers—ridicule, kidding, exclusion from the group.”³

Cornell University economist John Bishop refers to such kidding and group exclusion as “nerd harassment,” a particularly odious form of bullying because it discourages all students from full engagement with their studies.⁴ For that reason Bishop advocates exit exams that relieve teachers of the responsibility for setting standards of performance and helps them identify objectives and motivate students toward clear goals. The teacher then becomes the coach who helps the student leap an external hurdle rather than the authority figure who stands in the way of achievement. Peer group relationships within a school become less

competitive when students can help one another reach a common objective.

Without exit exams, students lack clear guidelines as to the material they are expected to learn or the level of proficiency they need to display. If the measure of performance is set by each individual teacher, students have an incentive to shop for “gut courses” offered by teachers who have low expectations and to bargain with each teacher for an acceptable grade.

Unless students are motivated to learn, education reform efforts are at risk. As Theodore Sizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, put it: “The student is the crucial actor. Whether we adults like it or not, he or she decides what has been purveyed.” Unfortunately, he continued, “the American high school student, as *student*, is all too often docile, compliant, and without initiative.”⁵ Others have observed that American high schools have become shopping malls where students take courses as they please and students strike an implicit bargain with teachers: We won’t expect much of you, if you don’t expect much of us. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen describe this situation in *The Shopping Mall High School*:

[Students] chose courses that were easy, met at convenient times, and enrolled their friends. They did homework, as long as it was not too much. . . . They never complained when little was expected of them. ‘Why should we? We just want to get out.’ They thought their teachers probably felt the same way. They were as much ‘goof-offs’ as the students. Avoidance treaties were mutually advantageous—they had found the like.⁶

Exit exams provide an opportunity to change the culture of the American high school. If students are expected to meet these standards, and if teachers are evaluated according to how well they bring students up to these standards, a new implicit bargain might emerge. Ideally, one might hear students say something like the fol-

lowing: “If you coach us in ways that will help us meet the standards that have been set, then we will focus our talent and energies on the task at hand.” Cynics may find this to be a romantic notion. But as Al Shanker, the former head of the American Federation of Teachers, once pointed out, students must be held to a standard if teachers are to be evaluated on the basis of student performance. “Imagine we should shut down a hospital and fire its staff because not all of its patients became healthy,” he argued, “but never demand that the patients also look out for themselves by eating properly, exercising, and laying off cigarettes.”

Current Accountability Practice

There is no national exit exam policy in the United States set either by the federal government or by a consortium of state governments. US policy stands in contrast to the practice in many other countries. In England, for example, students at age 16 are expected to take “ordinary” or “O” level exams in several subjects. If they remain in secondary school beyond that age, they take “advanced” or “A” level exams. Similar policies are in place in France, Germany, Australia, and many other countries. Practice in Canada varies by province. In Alberta, student performance on an external examination determines 50 percent of the grade in relevant courses taken by graduating seniors. In many Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Singapore), performance on exit exams is the key to access to the university system. In all these instances, student performance is evaluated at multiple levels of accomplishment rather than on a simple, dichotomous pass/fail basis.

In 2011, twenty-four states asked students to pass a test in order to graduate from high school.⁷ The movement began in Texas, when Ross Perot inaugurated a “pass to play” campaign that banned participation in sports and other extracurricular activities by those who did not earn a “C” in the classroom. Perhaps because of these origins, Southern and border states constitute thirteen of

the twenty-three states that require exit exams. However, exams in most states do not require knowledge of specific subject matter taught in high school courses; instead, they are general math and reading exams for which no specific subject-matter knowledge is expected. Further, exam-passing thresholds are set at such low levels that the test constitutes a challenge only for the lowest-performing students.⁸

The state of New York does have subject-specific exit exams, which are known as Regents exams, named after the state board responsible for education policy. These exams were put in place during the Civil War when New York wanted to make sure that state-funded private schools were not admitting students willy-nilly so as to get state aid while helping young men avoid the draft. Today, to earn a Regents diploma, students must score sixty-five out of one hundred points on exams in English, global history and geography, US history and geography, a math subject, and a science subject. Bishop estimates that the exams have a positive impact on student performance in New York State,⁹ but further studies are needed to identify their impact precisely.

Some have argued that Advanced Placement (AP) exams serve as the functional equivalent of a comprehensive system of subject-specific, externally validated exit exams. It is true that many (but certainly not all) high schools offer some AP courses that prepare students for one or more of the thirty-four end-of-course examinations available from Education Testing Service (ETS), a nationally respected, private testing agency. In recent years, about a third of all students who graduate from high school have enrolled in such a course. According to ETS, the number of students “passing” an AP exam in at least one subject (scoring at least a three on a five-point scale) increased from a little over three hundred thousand in 2002 to nearly five hundred and seventy-five thousand in 2012. But that number is still less than 20 percent of high school graduates and only about 15 percent of all those in the age cohort (as only about 75 percent of high school students graduate within four

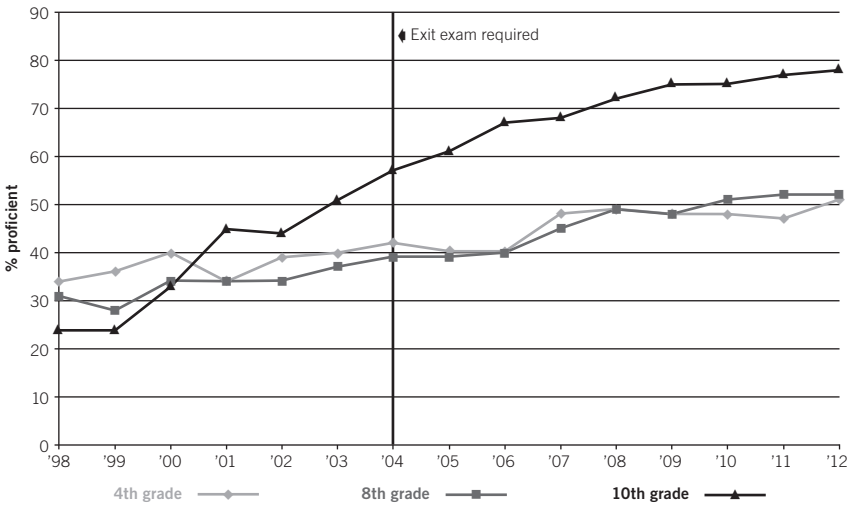
years). However, these numbers do not tell us the percentage of students who pass several examinations at level four or level five, which colleges typically use to decide whether student performance is high enough to allow advanced placement. Our best estimate, based on the number of passed tests and the average number of tests taken by any one student, is that only 7 percent to 8 percent of the age cohort in 2012 passed at a level necessary to secure an advanced placement in most institutions of higher education.¹⁰ In other words, over 90 percent of those in recent age cohorts are not performing at a reasonably high level on any externally administered, subject-specific examination, a possible explanation for the much lower percentage of US students than students in many other advanced industrial societies who are performing at the “advanced” level on international tests.

Effects on Student Performance

Although studies of the impact of exit exams on student performance in other countries are scarce, one careful study suggests that student performance is higher in countries that require such examinations.¹¹ Much of the research on exit exams within the United States focuses on the consequences for those who fail to pass exit exams, with little attention given to the possible boost in achievement among the graduating cohort as a whole. Yet a few estimates of the impact of merit-based scholarship programs on student achievement have been undertaken. A quasi-experimental study of the impact of a merit-based college scholarship program found positive effects on high school student performance in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for example.¹²

The impact of the exit exam policy in Massachusetts is worth noting, especially since the proficiency threshold for passing the state test is one of the highest in the United States. When the state in 2003 required students to pass the proficiency bar on the high school examination offered to tenth graders, critics claimed many

FIGURE 1. Year Test Required for Graduation and Student Math Test Performance in Massachusetts, 1998–2012



Note: To graduate from high school, a student must score at or above the proficiency level in tenth grade.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/2012/results/summary.pdf>

students would fail. But when students were faced with the exam, the passing rate, even for first-time test-takers, shifted dramatically upward. Those who failed were given opportunities to take the test as many as five additional times. The number of students who never passed the exam was so small that the test quickly became an accepted practice. Significantly, student test performance climbed at other grade levels as well (fig. 1). The state’s performance on NAEP also shifted upward so that it became the top-performing state in the country. Its performance on international tests ranks with the world’s leaders. How much the introduction of a high school graduation examination requirement has contributed to recent gains in student performance in Massachusetts isn’t known.¹³ But the former secretary of education for the state of Massachusetts, David

Driscoll, during whose tenure the policy was introduced, attributes much of the state's success to the introduction of the exam requirement (even though he implemented numerous other policy changes as well).

These examples cannot be taken as anything other than suggestive evidence that exit exams have the desired consequences which Bishop and others anticipate. Much more scholarly work needs to be done to ascertain the long-term effects of exit examinations and merit-based college scholarships on student achievement and longer-term outcomes. Undoubtedly, much depends on the design of the policy.

Politics of Assessment

In principle, the American public is ready to support implementation of a more rigorous system of student accountability. According to the 2012 *Education Next* poll, 72 percent of Americans think that students should pass an exam before receiving a high school diploma, with only 12 percent opposed, the rest being indifferent. Also, 63 percent of the general public supports national standards, with another 30 percent indifferent, and only 7 percent standing in opposition. Levels of support for these policies are no less high among parents and teachers.

State political leaders may nonetheless be wary of setting more than minimal performance levels on exit exams. If too many students fail the exams, even after multiple attempts, state officers will be asked to lower the standards or explain low levels of student performance. Such pressures shaped the implementation of the federal law, *No Child Left Behind*.¹⁴ Many states set low proficiency levels, thereby giving the appearance that more students were proficient in math and reading than was actually the case. Only five states—Massachusetts, Missouri, Washington, Hawaii, and New Mexico—set their state proficiency bar at the world-class level set by NAEP.¹⁵ The low proficiency threshold set in California, for

example, obscures the fact that it is among the ten states that have the lowest levels of student achievement.¹⁶

Not only have most states set a low proficiency bar, but pressures to ignore NCLB strictures intensified as the 2014 deadline drew nigh when the law expected all students to be proficient. As the deadline approached, increasing numbers of schools were found to have failed to meet expectations. Embarrassed by these developments, school districts attacked the NCLB standards, and the US Department of Education began providing state waivers that allowed many states to exempt themselves from NCLB requirements. One can expect similar political pressures to develop if exit exams are put into place.

Such political pressures might be addressed by establishing alternative examinations or by setting multiple cut points on one examination. Those students who wish to show high levels of competence (necessary for advanced placement in college or to boost their chances of winning admission to a selective college) could take the advanced version of the end-of-the-year examination, while other students could be given the opportunity to take the “ordinary” examination. In Great Britain, a similar arrangement expects all high school students to pass several “ordinary” examinations at age 16; those who want to demonstrate higher levels of competence are also examined later on at the “A” level in the subjects of their choice. Both exams have multiple cut points allowing for more precise evaluations of student performance than simple pass/fail. Similarly, the Regents examination in New York State can now be taken at either the “ordinary” or the “advanced” level.

New Opportunities Created by Online Learning

The need—and the likely demand—for external exams will accelerate as secondary schools enter the digital era and many more students take courses online. As in nineteenth-century New York when Regents exams were established, many competing providers

are offering courses for credit in an environment where the temptation is to lower standards. Credit recovery courses—that is, courses repeated because the student withdrew from or failed the original course—are the fastest-growing segment of the online market today. In this segment, particularly, the downward pressure on course quality is intense. Uniform standards and proctored tests would allow for a public audit of these new instructional platforms and ensure that students take them seriously.

Separate from the spread of online learning courses is the current drive toward setting common standards and a common curriculum in core subjects across all the states. By these measures, advocates hope to boost student learning. But that can only happen if students are held accountable to a high proficiency level on the core curriculum, something that is best guaranteed by a system of external, proctored exit exams.

If students taking online courses are subject to external exams, the case for putting such exams into place more generally is greatly strengthened, especially given the current drive toward common standards. Yet the policy will not be adopted wholesale apart from a concerted political and policy effort. The political will cannot come, in the first instance, from elected officials or those campaigning for office. The groundwork for political action must be laid by serious study, high-quality research, informed commentary, and sustained articulation of concrete objectives. Unfortunately, research on the subject remains scattered. No major foundation has identified the policy as a matter of primary, or even secondary, importance. Only one small advocacy group, Washington, DC-based Achieve Inc., has consistently made the case for exit exams. As compared to the strenuous efforts that have been made on behalf of school accountability, merit pay, school vouchers, and charter schools, the case for exit exams has yet to be forcefully made by academic researchers, think-tank specialists, and policy advocates. Yet the public seems open to the idea, the potential benefits from its enactment seem large, and organized opposition to

the policy has yet to be mobilized. With digital learning spreading into secondary education, the timing for action is particularly propitious.

Exam policies are set by states, not the federal government. But the federal government could accelerate the process by requiring that students seeking a Pell grant or a federally subsidized student loan pass an AP examination (or a comparable exit exam) in one or more courses.

Research Agenda

Given the state of the American high school, the most urgent topic begging for research attention is the high school exit exam. Currently, we do not have an objective compilation or system of classification of exit examination practices around the world or within the United States. In some countries the student elects to be examined in two or more specific subjects at either the ordinary or the advanced level, while in other places the test provides only a measure of mathematical and literacy proficiency. In some places, the test provides a rich set of information to those given access to the student's performance, while other exams are simply graded pass/fail. Exit exam systems vary in many other ways as well. A descriptive compilation and classification of the exit exam systems found throughout the industrialized world would be a valuable contribution useful to practitioners and researchers alike.

Experimental and quasi-experimental studies that estimate the impact of a wide variety of exit examination systems would enhance our understanding of the conditions under which they have the most positive effects. When examination systems are introduced, modified, or terminated, the change in policy often provides an opportunity to identify the specific impacts on students if outcome data are available both before and after the policy change is introduced. Once exit exams are placed on the policy agenda, the scholarly community can be expected to find ingenious

methods for estimating policy impacts. What is needed now is a sense of urgency.

Notes

1. Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, and Ludger Woessmann, *Endangering Prosperity: A Global View of the American School* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).
2. Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: From Grantham to the Falklands* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 37–39.
3. The quotations come from James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teen-ager and Its Impact on Education* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).
4. John H. Bishop, “Nerd Harassment, Incentives, School Priorities, and Learning,” in *Earning and Learning: How Schools Matter*, ed. Susan Mayer and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 232–233.
5. Theodore Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 54.
6. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 19.
7. *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2011, National Center for Education Statistics, table 177.
8. Thomas Dee, “The ‘First Wave’ of Accountability,” in *No Child Left Behind? The Politics and Practice of School Accountability*, ed. Paul E. Petersen and Martin R. West (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).
9. Bishop, “Nerd Harassment.”
10. Although ETS does not provide the exact numbers of students who scored at least a four on one exam in publicly available data, nearly 40 percent of the exams that receive a grade of three, four, or five are scored a three. To achieve our estimate we divided the number of tests passed at levels four and five by the average number of tests taken by a single student (three and

a half tests) and then divided that number by the number of seventeen-year-olds in the population in 2012. The 7 percent to 8 percent of the age cohort passing at the four and five level in 2012 is up from 3.5 percent in 2002.

11. Ludger Woessmann, “Central Exit Exams and Student Achievement: International Evidence,” in *No Child Left Behind?*, ed. Peterson and West.
12. Timothy Bartik and Marta Lachowska, “The Short-Term Effects of the Kalamazoo Promise Scholarship on Student Outcomes” (working paper, Upjohn Institute, 2012).
13. Achieve, “Do Graduation Tests Measure Up? A Closer Look at State High School Exit Exams” (Washington, DC: Achieve Inc., 2004.)
14. NCLB asks schools to test all students in grades three through eight and once in high school. Districts were told to report aggregate student performance at each school, and each year schools were expected to make “adequate yearly progress” toward a goal of 100 percent student proficiency by the year 2014. Penalties were imposed upon schools that fell short of meeting the goals established by the law. But nothing in the law held students responsible for their own performance.
15. Paul E. Peterson and Peter Kaplan, “Despite Common Core, States Still Lack Common Standards,” *Education Next* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2013); and Paul E. Peterson and Carlos X. Lastra-Anadón, “State Standards Rise in Reading, Fall in Math,” *Education Next* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 12–16.
16. Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann, *Endangering Prosperity*.