California Teachers Association

Testimony:
Recommendations for Alternatives to the California High School Exit Examination

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Good morning. We represent the 335,000 members of the California Teachers Association. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the very important issue of alternatives to the California High School Exit Examination [CAHSEE].

Over the years since the CAHSEE was made law, through hearings, member polling and other less formal venues, the California Teachers Association has heard from teachers interested in making this particular accountability measure more useful for students and teachers, and more valid for the purpose of accountability. We would like to share some of this information.

I will begin by reminding you that the original version of the legislation that created the CAHSEE included a provision that "alternative criteria" be developed. This process takes time. Further, experience and research predicted the present crisis, so it would have been prudent and responsible to begin work before today.

> *Education Code §60856.* Other criteria for evaluating students *"…study the appropriateness of other criteria by which high school pupils who are regarded as highly proficient but unable to pass the high school exit examination may demonstrate their competency and receive a high school diploma."*

As educators we know that different students have different learning styles. Equally as important, students have different styles for demonstrating what they know and what they are able to do. In addition, states and countries that have had high stakes tests have been forced by <u>this</u> reality to create and conduct alternative means for students to demonstrate proficiency. As teachers, therefore, we understand, and are compelled to insist, that no one format can and should be used either to teach or to test students. This is especially important in the area of high stakes assessment. It is because the spirit and letter of this legislation recognized this reality that the California Teachers Association supported the CAHSEE from the very beginning, when it was enacted in 1999.

But we are here now confronted with a very serious condition. We cannot and should not penalize students for the state's failure to exercise due diligence. We do not oppose assessment and accountability, but students must have alternatives that are both reasonable and defensible. For this reason, CTA vigorously supported two bills vetoed by the Governor that would have addressed alternative ways high school students could demonstrate their knowledge of the state's academic content standards and satisfy the CAHSEEE requirement as specified in AB 1531 (Bass) and SB 586 (Romero).

The CTA therefore recommends the following:

Recommendations

Our recommendations address the need for immediate action and the more important reality that the assessment system in California has to be designed in a manner that is more useful.

Short Term

- That the California Board of Education approve, as an alternative route for students who have failed the CAHSEE, the use of passing grades from all classes/courses (taught based on California content standards) and units to meet high school graduation requirements. This is a one-time option for students of the class of 2006.

- That a statewide advisory workgroup be formed to investigate the appropriateness of other criteria by which proficient students, who are unable to pass the exit exam, may demonstrate their competency and receive a diploma. This group should consider the recommendations made by the SB 964 Advisory Committee and those contained in the 2005 HUMMRO Report. Deadline: 30 June 2006

Long Term

In preparation for the issues of accountability, assessment and intervention, CTA has held several hearings and has conducted surveys and focus groups of the membership. In addition we have been consulting with several experts in the field of school improvement and student assessment. These include Jim Popham [UCLA, Emeritus] and Richard Stiggins [Assessment Training Institute, Portland, Oregon]

On the basis of the information that we have gathered we further recommend that:

- The California Board of Education fund and approve an independent and rigorous study for the 2006-07 school year to show creditable evidence that all students taking the CAHSEE for 2007 graduation have had an "opportunity to learn" the necessary standard-based information(curricular/instructional test validity) included on the test.

- That California provide parallel forms of assessment that use multiple measures. For example, students may demonstrate their knowledge through essay and personal communications.

- That the students demonstrate mastery of standards through a portfolio process guided by teachers. Evidence from this process (as analyzed by the state) can identify areas that were not completed successfully by the students.

Background

A U.S. Supreme Court case, Debra P. v. Turlington (1981), confirmed that a high school diploma is a constitutionally protected property interest, and that the due process provisions of the Fifth and Fourteenth amendments of the U.S. Constitution are applicable to graduation tests. These indicate that students must be given adequate notice of the exams (which, according to Debra P., is four years), and they must have been taught the information included on the tests.

Consistent with the spirit of "Debra P.," CTA believes no state-mandated subject exam should be used as the sole determination of a passing or failing grade within a course of study or to determine eligibility for promotion or graduation. In spite of this position, we supported the CAHSEE because we believed that students would be given ample opportunity, assistance and resources to achieve the standards on which the test is based, and that provisions would be made to offer students alternatives to the test.

The anecdotal evidence and the research indicate that preparation for CAHSEE is far from adequate. There are indicators that upward of 100,000 students will have failed to meet the CAHSEE in the 2006 school year. The failure to prepare students adequately is especially acute in the communities of color. To wit: 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 will have failed at least one of the two sections. These numbers are as numbing as they are unacceptable.

It is the school system, and especially the dismally under-funded programs that should have helped these students that have failed. To put the onus on the students is disingenuous: a betrayal of the hopes that these students and their parents have placed on the very institutions that have been created to help them.

Rather than helping schools, the current system offers few options to students who realize that they have no hope of passing this examination. These will include: dropping out of school, pursuing the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), or course completion through California's community colleges.

With just six months for the graduating class of 2006, time is short. We owe these students immediate action. We urge you to accept our proposal for a one-time solution and we insist that you begin now to address the shortcomings that have created this crisis.

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