

June 22, 2006

Deb Sigman
California Department of Education
Standards and Assessment Division
1430 N Street, Suite 5408
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Correction to Arturo J. Gonzalez' statements on June 18, 2006, *Reasons for challenging the exit exam*

Dear Deb:

In an opinion piece printed by the *Sacramento Bee* on June 18, 2006 entitled *Reasons for challenging the exit exam*, Arturo J. González cited two of our recent findings inaccurately. Mr. González stated: "The state's own consultant, HumRRO, has reported that as of the start of the 2005-06 academic year, half of the high schools in California had not been taught all of the material on the test. In addition, the law requires schools to provide "remediation," or supplemental instruction, for students who do not pass. HumRRO reported that as of the start of the 2005-06 academic year, half of the high schools had not done that". We find both of these statements to be misleading and address each here.

1. First, as to the conclusion that "half of the high schools... had not been taught all of the material" (sic): While the exact citation is not entirely clear, we believe Mr. González has focused on responses to a survey question asked of a sample of high school principals (September 2005 report, page 147). The question asked the degree to which the CAHSEE standards are covered in their curriculum. Response options include *complete* (96-100%), *most* (61-95%), *partial* (40-60%), *little* (less than 40%), and *don't know*. Our analyses of the responses to this question indicated a positive increase over several years in the percentage of principals saying that most or all standards were covered (from 27% to 94% for ELA, from 31% to 92% for math). Mr. Gonzalez picked out the result that fewer than half of the principals said that all of the CAHSEE content standards were covered in their curriculum.

We believe that Mr. González' interpretation is incorrect. First, many of the standards covered by the CAHSEE are introduced in 7th and 8th grade, prior to high school. Thus, even if some of the standards were not covered in the high school curriculum, students may well have been taught this material prior to high school. We are not surprised if principals who might be uncertain of the details of their curriculum choose a slightly more conservative response (most) rather than asserting *all* content is covered.

For mathematics, all of the CAHSEE content is introduced prior to high school with the possible exception of Algebra. All high schools we have visited or surveyed offer one or more Algebra courses. The Algebra content covered by the CAHSEE does not include obscure or non-central concepts. We believe that this material is covered in all of the Algebra courses we have seen.

Similarly, every school that we surveyed or visited offers 9th and 10th grade English courses that cover the content of the CAHSEE English/language arts (ELA) test. Here too, the required content includes general and important skills that are surely covered at several points in the middle school and high school curriculum.

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2. Second, regarding Mr. González' report that half the high schools were not providing remediation for students who do not pass the CAHSEE: In fact, we found that "all visited schools reported offering programs designed to meet the needs of students who had either been identified as at risk or who had not passed the CAHSEE during previous administrations" (September 2005 report, page 178).

Again, the specific source of Mr. Gonzalez' claim is not obvious from this sentence, but we believe he is referring to a question asked during site visits to a sample of high schools in spring 2005 (September 2005 report, page 175). We asked principals at 47 high schools, "Have there been any changes made to your school's curriculum that you attribute to CAHSEE's impact?" In response to this question, 52% indicated they have implemented new CAHSEE prep or remediation classes or tutoring for students who previously have not passed or are determined to be at risk of not passing the CAHSEE. Contrary to Mr. Gonzalez' interpretation, this does not indicate that remediation is offered at only these schools (or at half of all high schools), but rather that the CAHSEE motivated additional course offerings at these schools.

In our judgment, every student has at least two opportunities to learn the required material -- one during the normal sequence of instruction and one or more opportunities later in high school. Of course, students do need prerequisite skills to benefit from the courses that are available. There are special issues for English learners, since basic mastery of English is a prerequisite skill for many courses. Students who enter the program after the 10th grade or who have not mastered basic English by the 10th grade may need additional time to develop prerequisite skills and then master the required content.

In summary, we believe that Mr. González does a great disservice to California students and parents in his characterization of our findings. We have consistently reported that the CAHSEE assesses skills that graduates will surely need to be successful after high school and that the California school system has made great strides in ensuring appropriate instruction is made available to students. We recommended the graduation requirement be delayed from 2004 to 2006, but have not found evidence that it should be delayed further. A diploma alone may help California youth in the short run, but the lack of basic verbal and quantitative skills will limit their opportunities for the rest of their lives.

Sincerely,



Laress L. Wise and Sunny Becker
Principal Investigators, California High School Exit Exam Evaluation

cc: Jack O'Connell, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Glee Johnson, President, State Board of Education
Arturo González, Morrison & Foerster
