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Independent Evaluation of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): Analysis of the 2001 Administration

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Executive Summary

Background

California has moved through the second year of its schedule for requiring a graduation exam in mathematics and English-language arts (ELA) beginning with the Class of 2004. As is the case in nearly half of the states in the country, California began this initiative in response to widespread support for high standards and for some mechanism that holds students to them. This component of California's testing program is intended to ensure that all students graduating from high school can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. The California Education Code, Chapter 8, Section 60850, specifies requirements for the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). Since January 2000, the California Department of Education (CDE) has worked with a development contractor, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), throughout the development and tryout of test items for use in the CAHSEE and to develop and implement procedures for operational administration, scoring, and reporting. The first operational administration to 9th graders on a volunteer basis was completed in March and May of 2001. Results from these administrations were released in August 2001.

The California legislation specifying the requirements for the new exam also called for an independent evaluation of the CAHSEE. CDE awarded a contract for this evaluation to the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO). HumRRO's efforts focus on analyses of data from the field test of items (test questions), annual administrations of the CAHSEE, and on trends in pupil performance and pupil retention, graduation, dropout, and college attendance rates. As specified in the legislation, reports from the evaluation will include recommendations for improving the quality, fairness, validity, and reliability of the examination. As required under EC 60854, an initial report of results from the field tryout of test questions was issued June 30, 2000. The current report describes subsequent evaluation activities through December 2001, summarizes the results of these activities, and offers recommendations based on conclusions drawn from these results. The primary focus of this report is on results from the first operational administrations of the CAHSEE in 2001.

A detailed discussion of the background for this report is provided in Chapter 1. That discussion includes a summary of the prior, Year 1 report (Wise et al., 2000a), which described activities and findings leading to a general recommendation to consider delaying implementation of the CAHSEE requirement to allow more time to prepare a high quality test and, more importantly, more time to prepare students to pass the test. The background section also includes a brief description of a survey of all high school districts conducted at the request of the State Board of Education (SBE) to assess awareness of the exam and its requirements, plans for preparing and assisting students to pass the exam, expectations for the impact of the exam, and baseline data on graduation, retention, and post graduation plans.

Summary of Activities and Results

The activities and results from evaluation efforts to date are described in four separate chapters of the report. These sections summarize review of test development, administration, scoring, and reporting; school plans and perceptions; student preparation, reactions, and plans; and results of the Spring 2001 CAHSEE administrations.

Test Development, Administration, Scoring, and Reporting

Our review of the preparation and administration of the test is described in Chapter 2 of this report. The review activities and our associated findings are summarized here.

Quality of the Test Questions. The process for developing and reviewing test questions was found to be thorough and to meet common standards for such processes. We found no problems with the quality of the test questions based on analyses of results from the second tryout of test questions and on results from the operational 2001 administrations.

Administration Procedures. We observed preparation of test administration manuals and workshops to prepare testing coordinators and also observed the operational administration itself. Efforts to prepare for the administration were extensive and there were no major problems that would have invalidated test results. Nonetheless, administration procedures could be improved in a number of areas in the future. Most notably, students needed more time to complete the ELA test and administrators required more information on allowable testing accommodations. Plans for 2002 call for administering the ELA test over a 2-day period. CDE and the SBE have subsequently prepared more extensive descriptions and regulations with regard to accommodations and CDE is planning more extensive training of testing coordinators for the 2002 administration.

Setting the Minimum Passing Score. We observed the process used by the SBE to develop recommended passing standards for each test and to arrive at decisions on passing levels for the Class of 2004. The panels convened to develop recommendations represented teachers, other educators, and the general public across the state. The process that they used to review the test and develop recommended passing scores was fully consistent with sound practice. We also endorse the recommendation by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the decision by the SBE to adopt more lenient standards (60% of total possible points for ELA and 55% for math), because current content standards had not been in place when these students were developing prerequisite skills.

Equating. Statistical analyses were required to place results from the March and May 2001 test forms on the same scale. We reviewed the approach taken by AIR to develop the overall reporting scale and equate the two test forms, and we replicated their findings to within round-off error. No problems were found with the final tables used to map the number of correct responses onto the constant reporting scale.

Reporting. Reporting plans had to be significantly redrafted after the failure of SB 84, which would have made the 2001 administrations for practice only. The reports issued provided some diagnostic information on performance on different sections of each test along with the overall score and passing information. Aggregate reports provided information on the performance of different demographic groups on the test as a whole and also on each

section. Both reports lacked information on the accuracy of the scores reported (based on measurement error) as required by current professional standards. In addition, there are errors in assigning students to language fluency categories in the aggregate reports. The development contractor is now correcting these errors. We also would like to have seen greater caution in interpreting the aggregate reports in light of the voluntary nature of the samples of students from each school who were tested.

School Plans and Perceptions

Chapter 3 describes our review of school plans and perceptions associated with the first administration of the CAHSEE based primarily on our Spring 2001 survey of principals and teachers. Findings from the first round of this longitudinal survey (Wise et al., 2000) resulted in our identification of several primary issues: awareness, planning and preparation, alignment, expectations, and potential outcomes. Each administration brings more clarity to these issues, and allows us to refine our questions. For consistency, however, we have continued to use the topics to guide the longitudinal surveys as well as interim surveys such as the census survey of all high school districts in Fall 2000 (Sipes et al., 2001). Surveys were administered following the Spring 2001 CAHSEE administrations but prior to results being provided to the schools. The findings are reported by *background, knowledge, preparation thus far, future plans, expectations, and standards taught*.

Background. Survey results indicated that most teachers are certified in their primary subject area. Comments revealed that principals view their schools' academic atmosphere as becoming increasingly rigorous. Principals and teachers agreed that inadequate preparation of students is the biggest challenge they face in meeting the CAHSEE requirements. They also agree that student motivation and alignment of curriculum are the biggest benefits they associate with the CAHSEE.

Knowledge. Survey results indicated that both principals' and teachers' familiarity with the CAHSEE increased markedly between 2000 and 2201. Similarly, principals' ratings of student and parent familiarity with the CAHSEE increased from 2000 to 2001.

Preparation Thus Far. Most principals indicated movement toward alignment with state content standards but with more to do. There was an increase from 2000 to 2001 in principals initiating activities to prepare students, and half to two thirds reported undertaking activities to prepare faculty/staff for the CAHSEE administration. The majority of teachers indicated that almost all of the standards are covered by their school's curriculum. Comments by ELA teachers revealed a fairly even split in judgment in describing as excellent/good or fair/poor their students' level of preparation in English for proficiency on the CAHSEE. Mathematics teachers, however, perceived twice as many of their students as having fair/poor preparation.

Future Plans. Compared to "Preparation Thus Far," the plans reported by principals for remediation of students who do not pass the CAHSEE included more concrete actions such as using results to change instruction and providing tutoring.

Expectations. HumRRO assessed the potential consequences of the CAHSEE by examining predicted pass rates, impact on student motivation and parental involvement, and impact on instructional practices. Predicted pass rates, collected before the discussion of

passing levels by the State Board, were similar to last year's predictions and, on average, were reasonably comparable to actual results. Teachers and administrators predicted a slightly more positive impact on student motivation and parental involvement prior to the first administration than they did upon receiving pass/fail results from the first attempt. Predictions of the impact of the CAHSEE on student retention and dropout rates were generally similar in 2000 and 2001, although principals' predicted impact on student dropout rates were slightly more negative this year. Principals and teachers continue to expect the CAHSEE to have a positive impact on instruction, and they generally expect that impact to grow increasingly positive over time. Principals' estimates of the percentage of students in subgroup populations who have had instruction in the ELA or mathematics content standards of the CAHSEE were less optimistic than for all students as a group.

Standards Taught. Most mathematics teachers responded that the standards asked about in the survey are covered in Beginning or Intermediate Algebra and Plane Geometry. Both ELA and mathematics teachers indicated that some of the more difficult standards included in our survey were not typically taught until 10th grade or later.

Student Preparation, Reactions, and Plans

At the end of the CAHSEE exams, students completed a brief questionnaire on their reactions to the test and their plans for high school and beyond. Chapter 4 summarizes their reactions. In general, student responses to the post-examination questionnaire indicated that the vast majority recognized the importance of the test. Many had not prepared extensively for the test, but they may have had reason to believe it would only be a practice test. Students who passed the test on this first, early try were confident that they would graduate from high school. A larger proportion of disadvantaged groups (i.e., economically disadvantaged, English learners, and exceptional needs students) were unsure of graduation. Those who did not pass the test reported, for the most part, that graduation would be harder if they have to pass a test like this. Students with exceptional needs, EL students, and to a lesser extent, economically disadvantaged students were more inclined to see graduation as harder to achieve because of the test.

Post-high-school plans were queried to establish a baseline for this ongoing evaluation. Responses to this question will be monitored carefully in subsequent test administrations to determine whether the CAHSEE may affect expected graduation and post-high-school plans.

In terms of curricular coverage of test content, the mathematics test seemed to present more unfamiliar materials than the ELA test as indicated by reasons given for low performance. One possible mitigating factor is that Spring 2001 examinees were 9th graders and thus may not yet have encountered some math concepts; responses to this item by 10th graders in Spring 2002 will be revealing. A slightly higher proportion of exceptional needs students reported encountering untaught topics than average, whereas a lower proportion of EL students did so.

Results of the Spring 2001 Administrations

Analyses of results from the 2001 administrations are described in Chapter 5 of this report. Overall, 64% of the students taking the ELA test passed and 44% of the students

taking the mathematics test passed. We estimate that 42% of the students taking both exams passed both, although there is a small amount of uncertainty about this number due to problems in matching students' ELA and mathematics results. Passing rates were considerably lower for economically disadvantaged students (22.7% overall) and particularly for English learners and students with disabilities (11.9% and 10.3% respectively passed both parts). Overall we estimate that about 30% of the Class of 2004 took and passed both parts of the CAHSEE. Only about 6 to 8% of the EL and SD students have completed the requirements as fewer of these students took the exam and fewer of those who took it passed.

Two factors were significantly related to the passing rates. For the ELA test, students who had been English learners but were reclassified as proficient in English passed the exam at relatively high rates in comparison to students still classified as English learners. Again, there is a small amount of uncertainty about these estimates due to data coding problems that are being corrected by AIR and CDE. For the mathematics test, completing an Algebra I course was significantly correlated to the passing rates. We also examined the consistency between scores on the essay and multiple-choice portions of the ELA test and found that relatively few students passed who did not have moderate to high scores on both parts.

We also analyzed the accuracy of the test scores. We found that a modest number of students were too near the cutoff to classify accurately. For students significantly below or above the cutoff, classification was quite accurate. The zone of uncertainty was modest for the ELA test and slightly narrower for the mathematics test.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Chapter 6 describes our key findings and recommendations. In our earlier evaluation reports, we expressed concern with the time line for implementing the new graduation requirement. Our concern was based on two key questions:

(1) Would the exam be ready for the students?

(2) Would students be ready for the exam?

The first question was asked with regard to the risk of problems in the assembling and printing of test forms, with the administration of the test, and with the reporting of results. Based on evaluation activities to date, we offer the following general findings:

General Finding 1: Progress in developing the exam has been noteworthy. We found no significant problems with the exams administered in March and May 2001 or with the scoring of these exams.

Given low initial passing rates, there may be a tendency to question the validity of the exam. Our analyses of data from the Spring 2001 administration, however, showed that all test questions performed as expected. The operational test forms were printed correctly and on time and delivered to districts with few difficulties. Administration of the exam presented a number of significant challenges to schools in finding times and spaces in which to schedule students to take the exam. Even though the spring administration was not a practice test, as it appeared for a while that it might be, it provided a good opportunity to identify

logistical and administrative issues to be addressed further in future administrations. The 2002 administrations will be the first time students who have completed much of the 10th grade curriculum will take the exam. Lessons learned from the 2001 administrations should be helpful in improving the process for 2002.

General Finding 2: The process used to establish minimum passing scores was well designed and executed and the resulting passing standards appear reasonable.

There was some concern that the passing scores for the two exams could not be set until data from a census testing of 10th graders were available. With the failure of the urgency legislation (SB 84), the SBE was required to set minimum passing scores without normative information on 10th graders. Many experts disagree with the use of normative information and, where it is used, it rarely has much impact on the recommendations of the standard setting process. CDE and AIR used a systematic process for identifying panels of teachers and others who were very familiar with California standards and students and were broadly representative of the state. The SBE appropriately considered the passing standards as provisional, recognizing concerns that results for students completing the 10th grade curriculum are not yet available.

General Finding 3: Administrative and reporting procedures could be strengthened in several areas in future administrations of the CAHSEE.

Schools and districts faced difficult logistical challenges in scheduling and locating the testing and in planning activities for other students who were not scheduled to take the test. Uncertainty, up to the last minute, as to whether the test would count added to planning difficulties. For the most part, administration was handled remarkably well and we are not aware of significant administration problems. Nonetheless, procedures could be improved for future administrations in a number of areas ranging from the precoding of student information to decisions about appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities and improvements to the score reports.

General Finding 4: Progress on providing all students adequate opportunity to learn the material covered by the CAHSEE has been good, but it is too soon to tell whether there will be significant problems in preparing students in the Class of 2004 to pass the exam.

Our earlier reports expressed concern as to whether all schools could provide the Class of 2004 adequate opportunity to master the standards tested by the CAHSEE. Awareness of the exam has increased and recent survey results indicate that schools are taking the content seriously and progressing in plans to provide all students with opportunities to meet these standards. New legislation now requires that all students take algebra. In addition, changes to the Academic Performance Index are planned that will hold schools accountable for seeing that students have opportunities to learn the material required to pass the test.

The fact that significant numbers of 9th graders have not yet mastered the standards covered by the CAHSEE is not surprising. Results from our Spring 2001 survey suggest that

many of the standards are covered by courses most students do not take until the 10th grade. Members of the standard-setting panels were generally optimistic about schools' capacity for bringing students up to standard.

Recommendations

Based on information available to date, as summarized in our four general findings, we offer two main recommendations at this time:

General Recommendation 1: Stay the course. The legislature and Board should continue to require students in the Class of 2004 to pass the exam, but monitor schools' progress in helping most or all of their students to master the required standards.

Notwithstanding earlier recommendations, we think it best not to alter the current schedule for implementing the CAHSEE requirements at this time. As expected, initial passing rates are low, indicating that many 9th grade students have not yet had the opportunity to learn the material covered by the CAHSEE. Continuing with the current requirement means demanding that schools, teachers, and even parents not give up on the Class of 2004 just because their education to this point may not have been as comprehensive as we would like it to be. Most educators with whom we have spoken are optimistic regarding the potential for most students to master the required content standards given more years of instruction and targeted assistance. Schools and districts have expended considerable effort in improving the curriculum to increase coverage of the state content standards, particularly those covered by the CAHSEE. A decision to delay the requirement at this point could be seen as undercutting these efforts.

While we think the state should move ahead, we continue to have concerns as to whether all students in the Class of 2004 will have adequate opportunity to learn the material covered by the CAHSEE by the time they complete the 12th grade. This cannot be determined from the results of the 2001 administration to 9th graders. ***The best evidence that a school system is providing its students adequate opportunity to learn the required material is whether most students do, in fact, learn the material.*** Our evaluation will continue to monitor passing rates by school as an indicator of the extent to which students in these schools have had effective opportunities to learn the required knowledge and skills. A critical factor will be whether schools with the most difficult challenges, as evidenced by low initial passing rates, will be given the guidance and resources needed to bring their students up to required levels.

Whether implementation is deferred or not, it will be very important to give the CAHSEE requirement time to work. The history of state assessment programs shows a lack of stability over any prolonged period of time. For students to achieve the skills embedded in California's content standards, success may take a sustained effort over an extended period of time. "Staying the course" will be required to allow this to happen.

General Recommendation 2: The legislature and SBE should continue to consider options for students with disabilities and English learners.

There is significant tension between the desire to have high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and English learners, and the need to be realistic about what some students can accomplish. Initial low passing rates for both of these groups suggest particular concern with the time it may take to help these students master the required standards. Options to be considered range from more liberal use of accommodations, to some form of alternative diploma for students who cannot reasonably be expected to develop or demonstrate the required skills, and also to deferring the graduation requirement for these students.

Other Specific Findings and Recommendations

A number of more specific recommendations are also described in Chapter 6. These include:

1. **More technical oversight is needed.**
2. **For future classes, testing should be delayed until the 10th grade.**
3. **A practice test of released CAHSEE items should be constructed and given to districts and schools to use with 9th graders to identify students at risk of failing the CAHSEE**
4. **More extensive monitoring of test administration and a system for identifying and resolving issues is needed.**
5. **The state needs a more comprehensive information system that will allow it to monitor individual student progress.**
6. **The legislature should specify in more detail how students in special circumstances will be treated by the CAHSEE requirements.**

More detailed explanations and rationales for each of these recommendations are presented in the full text of the report.

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