

CA K-16 Initiatives	CA Data and Presentations	CA State and Local Policy	CA District and School Services	CA Community Center	CA Press Room	
Dispelling the Myth	GO	EdTrust West Home	NCLB in California	College & Work Prep/A-G for All	Conferences and Meetings	Reports and Publications



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- Mission and History
- Contact Us

-Career Opportunities

-Internships

- Related Links to CA
- Información y recursos en español

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Statement by Russlynn Ali on State Superintendent O'Connell's CAHSEE Announcement

Deciding the standards by which students will be awarded a high school diploma and sent off into the outside world is among the most important decisions any State Chief will ever make. And today, Superintendent Jack O'Connell did the right thing by holding the line on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), and declaring that there are no acceptable alternatives.

The push towards alternatives might seem compassionate. But, staying the course on high school standards represents the truly compassionate path. We cannot continue to send students out into the world with pathetically low skills. California needs education leaders and policy makers to do what it takes to make sure students have the solid skills they need to become contributing citizens. In the end, our young people will suffer far more – economically, socially and emotionally—if we tell them they are qualified for the adult world when their chances of actually completing college or retaining a job that can support a family are tragically low.

The truth is, an alternative to the CAHSEE ends up being a way out, an escape valve to give adults a free pass when it comes to educating high school students – this, despite all best intentions. Take New Jersey, for example. When the New Jersey alternative to the high school exit exam was enacted, it was intended to be an outlet for students deemed “test phobic.” But the results tell a different story: in New Jersey’s large high poverty urban schools, almost half of the students graduate under the alternative – in many of those schools the figures rise to a full 80 and 90 percent of students. Conversely, at schools serving the fewest numbers of low-income students, only 3% of students take the alternative assessments.

Mind you, while we’re applauding the Chief for his courage, we must also remember that much more could have, should have, and needs to be done by state and local officials to help students and schools succeed with the CAHSEE. Truth is, the CAHSEE is a minimum competency assessment. In fact, most educators we’ve spoken with refer to it as a middle school competency exam. Not far from the truth when you consider the relatively low grade level standards the CAHSEE assesses and that students only need to get 55% of the questions correct in order to pass.

That so many of our students continue to struggle on this test represents an indictment of California’s public schools, and we have been far too slow to recognize this crisis and respond with technical assistance and resources. This is a test of California’s will: do we believe that all students can learn up to a middle school education and will we do what it takes to

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get them there? If not, let's not pretend we're somehow doing the kids a favor.

Right now, the California high school diploma is a ticket to nowhere. Our goal must be to assure that it is a ticket to a real future. Yet that is only possible if the diploma means that a student has the fundamental skills necessary for success – at work and in college – in this new knowledge and technology based economy. The CAHSEE is a necessary first step. The pressure brought to bear by CAHSEE has finally forced traction on reforming high schools, and on remediating our lowest performing high school students. Unfortunately it's come to this. But in the end, if we demand that our schools and our students rise to this challenge, they will. Have faith in them.

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