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SMALL GAINS, HUGE GAPS: THE EDUCATION TRUST—WEST'S STATEMENT ON THE RELEASE OF THE 2009 CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM RESULTS

(OAKLAND, CA) – Results from the 2009 California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) released today by the California Department of Education (CDE) show marginal statewide improvement across both English and Math and for all ethnic groups throughout the state. Overall, 90.6 percent of the class of 2009 passed the exam – a mere 0.2 percent higher than the class of 2008. And although this year's 10th grade African-American and Latino students made the greatest gains in Math pass rates since 2006, increasing by 6.9 and 7.2 percent respectively, that is where the "good news" ends.

While these pass rates are not reflective of the doomsday naysayers predicted when the CAHSEE became a graduation requirement in 2006, the achievement gaps revealed *are* a doomsday for our low-income students and students of color. But not because of the test. Indeed, the CAHSEE measures minimum competency levels, testing only mathematics standards from sixth and seventh grades, Algebra I, and English-Language Arts standards through tenth grade. In order to pass, students need to answer just 55 percent of the questions correctly in Math and 60 percent in English.

But despite this very low bar, only 81 percent of African-American students in the class of 2009 passed the CAHSEE— the lowest rate of any ethnic group in California. Latino students passed at just 87 percent, a rate about 10 percent lower than their more advantaged peers.

"Let us be clear: these failures do not result from student's demographics, innate ability or lack thereof, but rather serve as an indictment of our public school system. It has failed these students and in turn, these students struggle on the test" said Linda Murray, Acting Executive Director for The Education Trust—West.

Today's data reveal some disturbing trends among low-income students and students of color:

o In 2009, the percentage of Latino and African-American students who passed the CAHSEE by 12th grade has not changed dramatically since the CAHSEE became a graduation requirement in 2006.

o This year, the percentage of first time African-American test takers passing both portions of the CAHSEE improved almost 20 percentage points from their 10th grade peers who took the exam in 2007. But, despite this improvement, a 26 percentage point gap exists between African-American 10th graders (64%) and their White peers (90%).

o For first time CAHSEE test-takers (class of 2011), the vast majority of White students passed the English-Language Arts section (91%) By comparison, African-American and Latino first time test takers passed at a rate 20 percentage points lower than Whites—

only 69 percent of African-American and 71 percent of Latinos passed the English section.

- o In Math, the story remains the same. While 90 percent of White first time test-takers passed the Math section, only 64 percent of African-American and 73 percent of Latino students passed this section on their first try.

- o Of the 45,015 class of 2009 students that did not pass the CAHSEE, 35,020 of them were African American and Latino.

"It is no longer good enough to simply acknowledge the achievement gap exists. These data reveal that state leaders must actually get about the business of doing something about it or run the risk of watching yet another generation of our students be failed by our educational system.

We have enough information about student learning well before they enter high school to gauge whether a student is on track to pass the CAHSEE, or not. Early interventions with targeted resources and supports are key to improving CAHSEE pass rates for our most vulnerable students *before* they fail the CAHSEE in 10th grade.

While the debate rages on in Sacramento about California's firewall that prevents the linkage between student and teacher data, today's results shine a light on the critical importance of placing the most effective teachers with our most needy students. If California's schools are going to improve student outcomes and close the achievement gaps that persist between student groups, we need more—not less—critical information about what is happening inside of districts, schools, and classrooms.

Gaps are not inevitable. Having high expectations for all students, improving instruction, analyzing data to track student progress and individual student needs, providing a rigorous curriculum that is aligned to state standards, and using purposeful professional development to improve teachers' skills all significantly work to improve student outcomes and success.

It is time to ramp up. The CAHSEE remains the only accountability measure ensuring a diploma represents some measure of learning, rather than simply time served in a seat. But it just isn't enough to graduate our students knowing that they have only mastered minimum levels of competency.

The time is now to develop and implement a course of action that, over time, ratchets up the rigor of our high school exit exam so that it actually assesses the full range of skills we know our students need for post-secondary success, rather than those skills that relegate them to unemployment lines, dimly-lit futures and dead-end jobs", concluded Murray.

About the Education Trust—West

The Education Trust—West is the West Coast partner of the national policy organization, the Education Trust. The organization works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college with an emphasis on serving low-income, Latino, African-American and Native American students. The Education Trust—West works alongside policymakers, parents, education professionals, and business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California, who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. To learn more about the Education Trust—West, visit www.edtrustwest.org.