



August 22, 2006

## California at the Crossroads: Embracing the CAHSEE and Moving Forward.

Dear Reader:

It will come as no surprise to most of you that the EdTrust—West supports the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). We've been one of the only organizations — and perhaps the only civil rights organization — that does. Our decision didn't come easy. The CAHSEE is by far the most wrenching issue any organization that cares about making public education work better for poor kids and kids of color has to contend with. Why? At its core, this test challenges every belief one holds about student and school potential, and embodies a new kind of responsibility for student achievement — one borne by educators and students alike. And that makes people angry and afraid.

I and my colleagues often feel compelled to defend ourselves, because of our support of the CAHSEE. Our political affiliations have been questioned. Indeed, we've been called “sell-outs.” Personally, before every conversation about the CAHSEE I find myself wanting to shout, “I'm a democrat, too,” “I'm Black,” “I'm a first generation American, grew up in a single parent home, grew up poor,” as if somehow doing so validates my authenticity enough to push past the finger pointing and get to a new conversation on the merits. But supporting the exit exam doesn't mean that we don't recognize the damage that poverty and racism do in America. To the contrary, as this report shows, the CAHSEE is a step toward alleviating that damage, and is beginning to level the playing field.

Despite what the data say, it's been difficult to weave through the rhetoric and debunk the myths surrounding CAHSEE to show the good that the test has brought to bear on public education in California. The CAHSEE, after all, is a *minimum* competency test – testing only up to middle school math and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English; and even then students only need to get about half of the questions correct in order to pass. The standard we're wrestling over is too low to begin with. And it's especially difficult to look past the tragedy when a well intentioned high school student doesn't get a diploma because they can't meet the basic skills the CAHSEE tests, even after 7 chances.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with an African-American 11<sup>th</sup> grader, a young person involved in extra-curricular activities including the Debate Team, let's call her Dei. Dei attended all her classes, got passing grades and was all and all a “good” kid. We talked about data and civil rights in America, and social change. She hadn't passed the CAHSEE. Though she spoke broken English, and could not interpret the words in the newspapers we were talking about, she wanted to go to college but didn't think she would. She turned to me and said about the CAHSEE, “If I make it to the end of high school, I deserve a diploma.”

My heart broke for Dei. Was she right? “But your diploma”, I explained, “has to mean something.” “Right now it’s an empty promise. A gateway to nowhere. What does it say about your skills to potential employers or to any post-secondary institution – a two year, four year or technical school? What does it mean to you?” “Nothing,” she acquiesced.

A friend and organizer in South Central Los Angeles challenged me a few months ago. “You talk about poor kids and kids of color getting less of everything, and then you turn around and endorse a policy that punishes them more by denying them a diploma,” he said. I replied, “They’ve already been punished for a dozen years. California’s standards were adopted when this year’s senior class was in the first grade. And we haven’t taught many of them even up to middle school standards. It only punishes them more to keep lying to them by giving them an empty piece of paper we call a diploma when their high school experience hasn’t prepared them for any of the skills they’ll need after high school. We give them a diploma that is a doorway to a street corner or an unemployment line.”

In the end both of us were right. The question is one of strategy. And the truth is, nothing – no litigation, no law, no resolution – has brought about more focus, change and targeting of resources to our lowest performing high school students than the CAHSEE. Unfortunately. And now that the highest court in California has declared that the test is here to stay, we’ve got to debunk the myths and get to the root causes of why so many low-income, Latino and African-American students continue to fail the CAHSEE at higher rates than their White, Asian and more wealthy counterparts.

The biggest myth is that our kids and their teachers aren’t up to the challenge, or that the CAHSEE increases drop out rates. Recently, I had this debate with a school board member from the Central Valley, who quite angrily said kids in his district dropped out because of the CAHSEE. How did he possibly know that? This is the first year that the test is mandatory, and graduation rate data isn’t even available yet. As we talked, it became ever more clear: He has no evidence that kids were dropping out, or would. He’s afraid they will. And he’s afraid they will fail because he doesn’t think they can pass.

I thought, if our local policy makers don’t think students can rise to the challenge, they simply don’t enact policies that make it happen. And if the expectation for kids of color and poor kids is low, educators teach them to low levels. Period. It’s like a student from a high school in East Los Angeles said, “They showed me how to fill out a McDonald’s application in my Life Skills class.<sup>1</sup>” No wonder. Because if that’s all students are expected to do, then somehow well meaning adults are preparing them for success at it.

At the heart of the myths about the CAHSEE is a pattern of thinking that goes something like this: Because we give them less of everything, we shouldn’t stretch poor kids or kids of color, or their teachers, very far. The thinking implies that given the current situation, if we ask any more of the students or their teachers, they – especially if they’re poor, Black and Brown – will fail. It says that “these kids” have so little of everything, we can’t expect them to jump over even the lowest bar and that somehow it’s better to remove the bar all together.

The problem is, that train of thought allows and perpetuates excuses. It shelters students based on where they came from without regard to how much doing so will hinder them moving forward. It allows poverty to become an excuse for bad teaching and inequitable resource distribution. It allows lack of parental education, or immigrant and language learner status, or race to become an excuse for failing schools. And it allows the conversation to steer away from the hard stuff – how are we going to make sure our best teachers are teaching our neediest kids for example – and keeps the conversation focused on the victims as victims.

Yes, kids of color and poor kids get less of everything that research says makes a difference in public education, and yes the CAHSEE has turned out to be a policy that gives them a diploma at a lesser rate,

too. (But take a look at the data in the attached report and you'll see that more kids of color and poor kids passed at much higher rates than initially "predicted.") Yes, just a little over ½ of African American and Latino 9<sup>th</sup> grade students graduate within 4 years in California – but that's a problem that pre-dates the CAHSEE.

The CAHSEE shines a bright spotlight, like never before, on these inequities. Before the CAHSEE, adults got a free pass – allowing students in droves to leave their doors without the basic sets of skills that will prepare them for life after high school. Now, schools and districts across the state have to do something about it – teach our young people better. Because of CAHSEE the state has made some leaps forward in the right direction. For the first time ever, state policy makers earmarked \$20 million for students struggling with CAHSEE in the graduating class of '06. Over three times that much – \$70 million – has been devoted for next year's seniors.

This report shares some of the good ways districts are using new resources and stepping up to the challenge. We've also shared some powerful student voices in this report: Latino, African-American, low-income students studying for the CAHSEE like no other assessment, challenging themselves to master the results and beaming with pride when they do. These student voices are especially important to do away with past perceptions. You've heard the stories, accounts that high school students were *choosing* not to perform well on school level achievement tests or with some intentionality "throwing the test" in order to punish an unpopular teacher or principal. There were rumors of anti-testing educators actually encouraging students not to take the tests too seriously. But now, everyone takes the CAHSEE seriously.

The CAHSEE doesn't just challenge students and educators. It challenges the beliefs of outsiders to the system, too. Not very long ago, while I was in a room full of mostly policy wonks and lawyers debating theory and school funding, a piece of legislation moved its way through the California legislature. Led by one of the state's leading Democrat and liberal stalwarts, the bill proposes to lower standards by changing the definition of "proficient" so that students would no longer need to perform at grade level to be considered proficient. Instead, students would be required to demonstrate that they are gaining enough skills to pass the exit exam by the end of high school, standards that are significantly lower than current grade level expectations.

From the podium, I criticized the bill, its legislative intent and the inherent low expectations espoused in the sentiments made by policymakers who supported it – statements like, "schools need breathing room." The President calls stuff like this the soft bigotry of low expectations, but the truth is . . . the bigotry is not so soft no matter who's holding the low expectations, Democrat or Republican. Liberal or conservative. White, Asian, African American or Latino.

Some of California's leading advocates for education reform came up to me after my remarks. They each agreed with what I'd said, but pushed back with something like "[the author] is a powerful democrat, she's been on our side and so we can't publicly be against her now." Why not? Lowering California's standards and deflating its accountability system would be disastrous for poor kids and kids of color. When will we have the courage to put the old bargains aside and say as much? The job of advocates moving forward needs to be to make sure all practices and every policy hold the line on high standards and on channeling the right resources to the neediest kids.

Now, it's finally time to embrace the CAHSEE. For students and teachers alike the past few years have been a roller coaster, full of uncertainty about whether the test really mattered. The consequences of CAHSEE were supposed to take effect in 2004. Back then, organizers statewide pushed the State Board of Education to delay, and the Board agreed, giving schools another 2 years to get ready. (They'd already had 5 years, since the CAHSEE law was enacted in 1999.) Then, as the class of 2006 geared up to take the exam, litigation began and alternatives to the CAHSEE were proposed.

As we've said before, alternatives end up being a way out of educating high school students. Take New Jersey for example. New Jersey enacted an alternative to their high school exit exam for students deemed "test phobic." Over time, though, the results told a different story: In New Jersey's high-poverty high schools, almost half of the students graduate under the alternative – in some urban high 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 percent of students take the alternative assessments. Recognizing that the alternative became a way to keep chronic low performance out of public view and under the state's accountability radar, New Jersey has decided to cease its alternative.

All the while, as adults in Sacramento debated changes to the CAHSEE and the litigation attempting to cease the exam ensued, we heard from students, teachers and administrators who said they believed the consequences were never going to kick in, so they didn't even try. Now, instead of focusing on ways out, there are new questions to answer. Do we believe all kids can meet a minimum standard by the end of high school and are we going to do what it takes to support them and their teachers? Can we challenge and change the cycle of low expectations that we hold for ourselves, and our leaders hold for our communities?

Through the CAHSEE we have a clearer picture of some painful truths about public education in California. Students who are poor, Latino, African-American, or English Learners have not been given the same opportunities as their peers. High-poverty and high-minority schools have less money to educate their students; have the least experienced teachers; have the largest numbers of under-prepared teachers; and offer far less rigorous coursework. These patterns are pervasive, and indefensible. Now let's set about changing them. Channel the right interventions. Provide necessary supports – early. Take on this system that says we can't get our best teachers into our neediest schools. Together, let us close the opportunity gaps that give rise to the achievement gap. And let's continue to push our kids and our teachers further than we've done so in the past.

Very truly yours,

Russlynn Ali, Director

## California at the Crossroads: Embracing the CAHSEE and Moving Forward.

Today, the California Department of Education released the much anticipated data about passage rates on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) for the class of 2007, and initial passing rates for the class of 2008. This release is timely. Earlier this month, the highest court in California put an end to the question of whether the CAHSEE was here to stay. It is. The bar has been set.

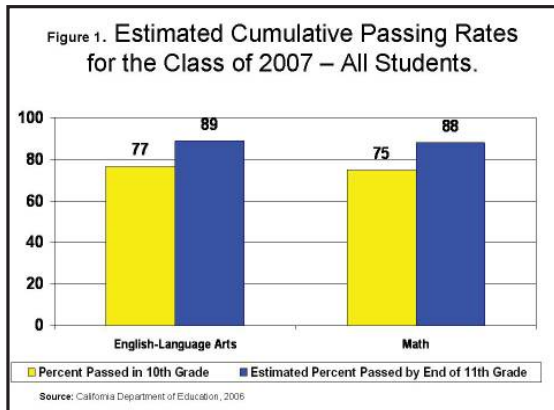
A full 72 % of California's adults believe that students should have to pass a statewide test in reading and math irrespective of whether they have a passing grade in high school coursework.<sup>2</sup>

The CAHSEE is that assessment, testing mathematics standards from sixth and seventh grades, as well as Algebra I, and English Language Arts standards through tenth grade. In order to pass, students need to answer 55% of the questions correctly in math and 60% in English. It is the only assessment given to all high school students. Other end of course assessments, like the California Standards Test in Geometry and Biology, are given only to students enrolled in those classes.

At least one thing is abundantly clear from today's release, the California high school diploma now has some measurable meaning. While

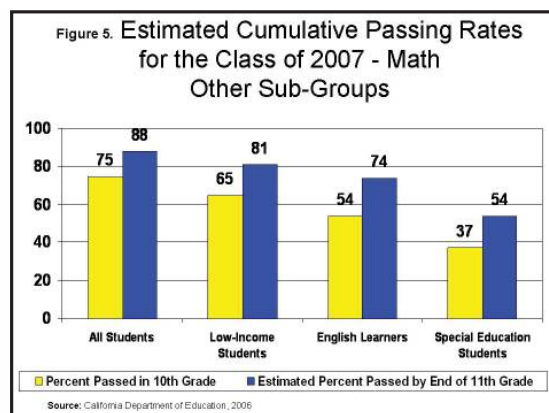
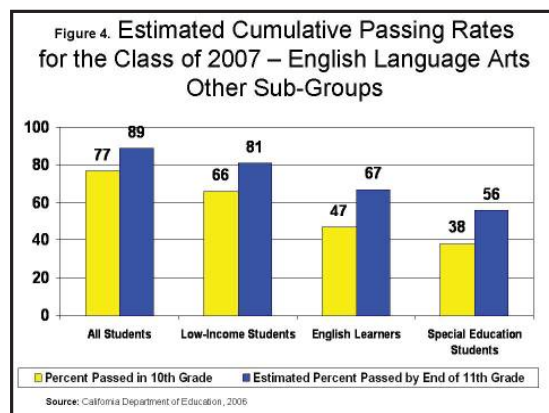
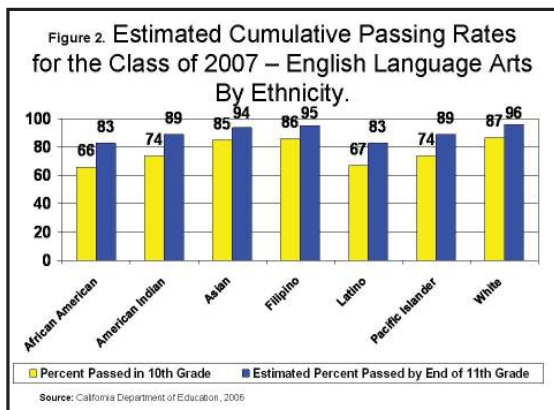
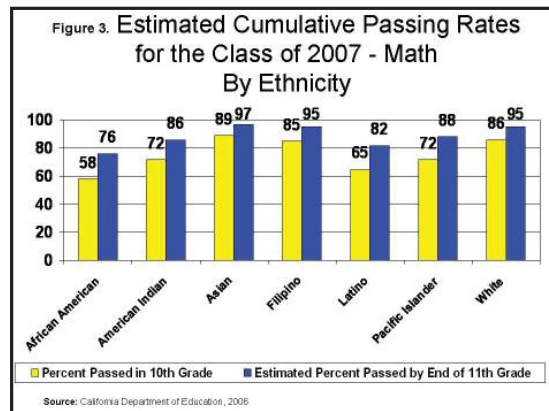
district graduation requirements vary across the state, we now know that most of the students in the Class of 2006 and beyond have mastered a minimum level of math and English skills. But still Latino, African-American, English Learners and low-income seniors are failing at higher rates than their peers.

American and Latino students have done so (Figure 2). The good news is, with each attempt, and with supports, more kids pass at higher rates. Similar patterns show up for math. For example, although Latino students are passing at lesser rates than their White and Asian peers, their progress has been impressive: Latino students jumped their passing rates from 65% as sophomores to 82% as incoming seniors. (Figure 3).



**What does the CAHSEE reveal about the class of 2007?**

The state released totals for how many students in each class passed either the math or English section of the CAHSEE each time it is administered, and can add those totals for a cumulative picture. The resulting ‘picture’ is telling. A full 89% of this fall’s entering seniors passed the English and 88% have passed the mathematics portion of the CAHSEE in 2006. (Figure 1). It appears then that the vast majority of California’s Class of 2007 are on track to meet the CAHSEE requirements and graduate next June.



African-American and Latino students have made marginal strides in catching up to their peers on the CAHSEE. Still, there are significant achievement gaps between groups of students. While 96% of incoming White seniors have already mastered the English Language Arts portion of the CAHSEE, only 83% of African-

Low-income students, English learners and special education students from the Class of 2007 also made great gains from their initial passing rates. Incoming seniors that are English Language Learners have made a 20 percentage point

increase from when they first took the English portion of the CAHSEE as 10<sup>th</sup> graders. (Figure 4). Low-income students made similar gains, up from 65% on their first try to 81% as they enter their senior year. (Figure 5).

## “What do students say about needing the CAHSEE?”

“There is a problem with racial favoritism, among many other things within the school systems that need to be addressed—and the CAHSEE is the first good step to really address the problem and solve it. We have to have higher standards of ourselves as low-income folks and as people of color—we can challenge ourselves to get what we want to experience out of our education.”<sup>i</sup>

– Bianca Butler, Class of 2006, El Cerrito High, El Cerrito, CA, youth commentator for NPR’s Youth Radio.

“Before February’s testing period, Rudy Segura had failed the English portion of the exit exam by just one point. Segura studied and told his classmates not to give up, although some dropped out of school. He bought a cap and gown on faith. ‘Inside, I knew I was going to pass. Deep inside, I just knew,’ he said. Segura was right. He passed the February test with a score of 370. ‘I felt relieved, like a big pressure off of me,’ he said, grinning...he’ll be the first of his siblings to graduate from high school.”<sup>ii</sup>

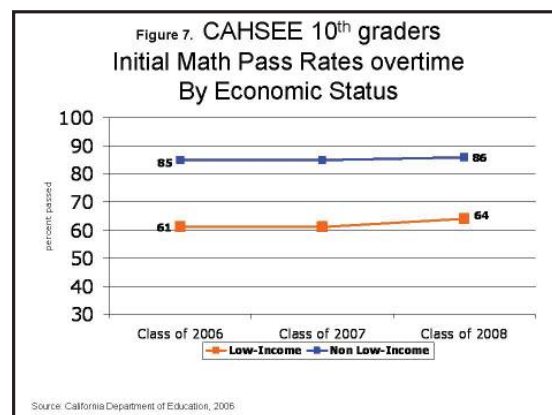
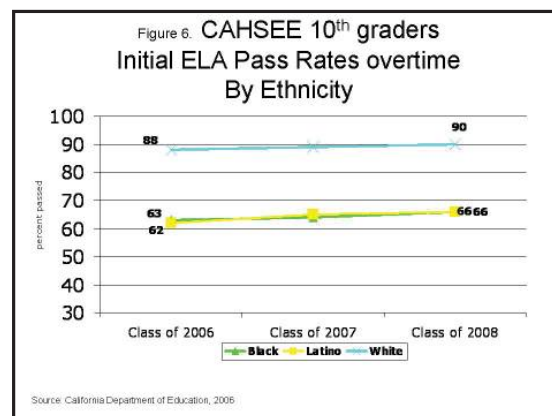
– Rudy Segura, Class of 2006, McLane High School, Fresno, CA as quoted in the Fresno Bee, on 9 May 2006.

Jennifer Sybounheuang believes that although it was difficult, the exit exam requirement is fair. She said, ‘If we get out there in the real world, we need to know what to do.’”<sup>iii</sup>

– Jennifer Sybounheuang, Class of 2006, Franklin High School, Stockton, CA as quoted in The Record, 8 June 2006.

## What do we know about initial passing rates over time?

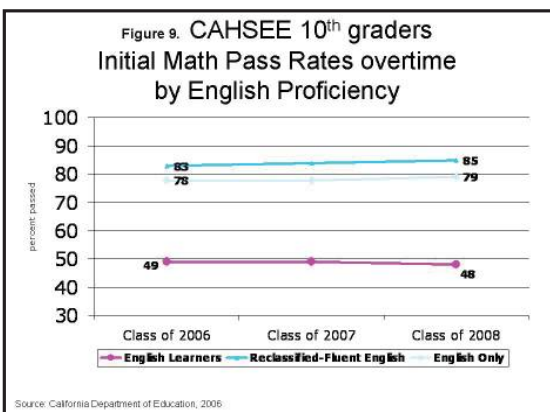
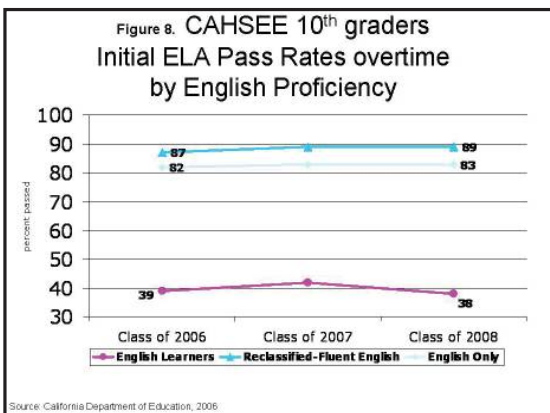
As the CAHSEE became a reality for high schools and their students, initial passing rates improved. Furthermore, when we look at initial passing rates for the classes of 2006 through 2008, it becomes clear that achievement gaps are indeed closing, albeit slowly. And Latino, African-American and low-income students in the class of 2008—last year’s 10<sup>th</sup> graders—are all passing the CAHSEE at higher rates than their predecessors.



When the class of 2006 was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and took the CAHSEE for the first time, the gap separating Latino students from their White counterparts on the English portion was 26 percentage points. There was still a wide achievement gap endured by their successors in the class of 2008, but the gap decreased by 2 percentage points: they now trail their white counterparts by 24 percentage points. (Figure 6). African-Americans saw similar progress in math: First time African-American test takers from the class of 2006 trailed their white peers by 33 percentage points, while the gap separating black and White 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the class of 2008 was reduced to 31 percentage points.

Low-income students made the same progress. (Figure 7).

Though this progress is marginal, at least it's a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for tenth grade English Language Learners as compared to first-time test takers in previous years. While English-Only and Reclassified English proficient students taking the CAHSEE as 10<sup>th</sup> graders show some improvement, English Language Learners have seen a drop in passing rates over the last three years: First time English Language Learner test takers in the Class of 2006 had a 49% passing rate in math, and a 39% passing rate in English. Only 48% of their successors in the class of 2008 passed the math section and 38% passed English. (Figures 8 and 9).



## Acting on CAHSEE Results and Rising to the Challenge.

Despite the achievement gaps that persist in this year's CAHSEE results, there's good news. State policymakers have earmarked nearly \$70 million dollars targeted to seniors who have yet to pass the exam in the class of 2007 – over three times the already unprecedented resources

## “What do students say about needing the CAHSEE?”

“The Mira Mesa High School senior [Daunte Hayes] passed the English portion of the exit exam on his first try, but the math portion took four tries. Each time he failed it, he was short a few points, but he kept trying because of support from his girlfriend and the school staff. ‘They cared about me more than I did myself.’ He said. Hayes said at first he didn’t take the test seriously, but once he realized he couldn’t get his diploma without passing it, he began to study for it and attended Saturday tutoring classes. ‘I am actually proud of myself I made it,’ he said, adding that he believes the test does serve ‘a purpose.’”<sup>iv</sup>

– Daunte Hayes, Class of 2006, Mira Mesa High School, San Diego, CA as quoted in the San Diego Union-Tribune, 21 June 2006.

“The skills needed to pass are essential to a successful life, even if you don’t plan on going to college. Not knowing them doesn’t make things any easier once you enter “the real world.” That may sound harsh, but it’s how I feel. After all, you may not realize it, but you use basic math in just about every job you can think of. And even something as normal as a rental lease or a job application requires the English proficiency that the test also measures. I mean, you have to know what you’re getting into, right?”<sup>v</sup>

– Jazmine Livingston, Class of 2006, Berkeley High, Berkeley, CA, entering freshman at Santa Clara University, youth commentator and teacher at NPR’s Youth Radio and author of “Making an Exit” commentary on the CAHSEE.

devoted to helping the seniors from the class of 2006 pass the assessment.

Whether these resources are sufficient to help teachers and their students remains to be seen. But it is more money, and better targeted to

who need it, than ever before.<sup>3</sup> Local education leaders have started Saturday schools, after school programs, and in-school classes to help students who are struggling with the CAHSEE. They have developed curricula and workbooks, and set up home visits. They tell us stories of a new found commitment to ensuring struggling students get what they need to be successful.

How are districts spending the new resources? A look at two urban districts in California provides some insight.

“What do students say about embracing the challenge?”

“One of my friends didn’t pass the first time, and it’s terrifying to think that even if you have all your credits, you can’t graduate—especially for students that recently emigrated from China or the Phillippines, like one of my friends did—it’s hard. But our schools and school districts need to look at how well students are learning so that by the time we graduate, we have mastered those basic skills so that we can be prepared for the work world, to go out and get a good job—it’s a signal that they need to change the curriculum, to change what

– Alice Tam, rising senior, Skyline High School, Oakland, CA Alice is planning to apply to UC Berkeley.

“I passed the exit exam the first time. It’s not really that hard; it’s basic math and English. I had a few friends that took the test two times because they didn’t pass—but they studied hard and passed the second time. I feel like if we didn’t pass the first 2 or 3 times, maybe we shouldn’t graduate. A lot of teachers had helped us to prepare for it—and yeah, there was a lot of pressure to pass in order to graduate—but it motivated me to do well.”<sup>vii</sup>

– Aja McNeil, Senior, Quartz Hill High, Lancaster-Palmdale, CA Aja is planning to go to UCLA or USC and is looking to major in psychology or psychiatry.

**LAUSD responds to the CAHSEE.**

Last year, the Los Angeles Unified School District developed a three-pronged approach to help seniors struggling with the CAHSEE. All students who needed the help were required to participate in at least one of the following:

**1. The CAHSEE Boot Camp:**

LAUSD provided in-school, pull-out classes to students that failed CAHSEE. They individually rearranged the schedules of struggling students and assigned them to CAHSEE specific classes, all with 20/1 student-teacher ratio. Classes met in the mornings, Monday through Friday, alternating week by week between math and English. District officials report that some schools insisted they simply did not have the physical room to create these special classes. The district responded by setting up facilities at local community colleges and then went further by providing transportation for both students and the teachers to get there. Additionally, the district targeted its professional development for teachers to better support student learning on the CAHSEE.

**2. Making Use of After School Hours:**

LAUSD integrated its after school and Saturday morning program to include CAHSEE remedial support. Beyond the Bell streamlined its high school services for the needs of its students struggling with CAHSEE, and provided high-intensity, CAHSEE-specific instructional skills to its after school and Saturday class teachers. Beyond the Bell focused on drilling down into the CAHSEE needs of seniors and contributed more than 30 hours a week of additional help.

**3. CAHSEE and Special Ed Students:**

Although the CAHSEE was waived for special education students in the class of 2006, the district didn’t shirk its responsibility for those kids. Instead, they designed a ‘Pre-CAHSEE Boot Camp’ for special education high school students. They devoted substantial resources to teacher training focusing on ensuring special ed students mastered the CAHSEE skills. The student/teacher ratio in the Pre-CAHSEE Boot Camp classes was reduced to 10 to 1.

Moving forward, LAUSD is going to beef-up its efforts. They’ll monitor the effectiveness of its CAHSEE Boot Camp, Beyond the Bell,



and teacher professional development. They'll continue to focus on improving the learning of their special education students. Best yet, district officials are committed to intervening early. They will track the performance of next year's 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders and act quickly to ensure CAHSEE supports are available before students reach their senior year.

Best yet, LAUSD is using the CAHSEE data to identify weaknesses in its instructional practice. For example, the district is bringing to light the struggles of its English Language Learners like never before. By digging deep into their results, LAUSD learned and published a comprehensive picture of the students struggling to pass the CAHSEE in the class of 2006. It was clear to district officials that English Language Learners, like their counterparts statewide, failed the CAHSEE at significantly higher rates than their peers. But the district didn't stop there. They further disaggregated their English Language Learner data and realized that of the English Language Learners still struggling to pass, 66% of them had been in English language programs for more than ten years. Now, district officials are armed with new information to tackle a long standing problem—students languishing in ELL classes without ever learning English.

### San José Unified responds to the CAHSEE.

Using Saturdays and after school hours, as well as what district officials call 'twilight study,' San José began intense intervention programs for struggling students in the Class of 2006 at the onset of their senior year. The programs provided students with CAHSEE-trained teachers and test-prep materials. The district intensely monitored the success of the programs and student progress on the exam. After every test administration throughout the year, educators held 'test chat' sessions — with students and their parents — to go over passing rates and scores, and identify the precise areas where each student still needed help. Their efforts paid off. By graduation day, only 31 seniors from San José Unified's Class of 2006 still had not passed the CAHSEE and received a Certificate of Completion in lieu of a high school diploma. To date, every one of those 31 struggling students remains in San José's system. Those students

## “What do students say about embracing the challenge?”

“When I first took the exit exam, I was in the ELD classes—I felt that it was harder for low-income students of color and students who are just learning English, like I was in 10th grade, because a lot of the questions were asking about things that I had never experienced...I was taking geometry that year, but I hadn't taken Algebra I yet. I took Algebra I in 11th grade, and I failed the math section again, but I took it a third time a couple months later, I studied by myself, and I just received my scores this past week—I passed. I am going to take Trigonometry this year, and I want to go to San Francisco State University—I think we need to use the exit exam to determine what we know; it should be used to measure what the schools need to work on if we aren't learning these things by 11th grade—to change so that they can give us the

– Roseann Leybag, rising senior, Oakland Technical High School, Oakland, CA.  
Roseann Leybag moved to Oakland from the Philippines in 2004, and is a youth activist with AYPAL, Asian Pacific Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership.”

have either returned for a 5<sup>th</sup> year of high school, enrolled in summer school and either took the July administration of the CAHSEE, or will return in October to take the test then. Many have already returned to the district offices over the last two months, having received their passing scores, and turned in their Certificates of Completion for a diploma.

### Moving Forward.

#### 1. The Need for Better Data.

The data revealed today by the CDE are good estimates, but estimates nevertheless. California lacks a sophisticated longitudinal data system which would allow tracking student progress over time and an exact accounting of CAHSEE passage rates. Our celebration of improved student success on the CAHSEE is also tempered

by the knowledge that many students simply are missing from these results. We have long known that a lot of students drop out of high school in California – that’s a problem that pre-dates the CAHSEE. But we must be sure that we don’t report increasing pass rates as a result of fewer students. That said, while the dropout crisis in California is undeniable, the CAHSEE is not to blame. The Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), which has been independently evaluating the CAHSEE for over 6 years, determined CAHSEE didn’t increase drop out rates.<sup>4</sup> That said, the state taking responsibility for every high school graduate being taught up to state standards implies a responsibility to know how many high school students have dropped out along the way, and it is long past time for California to implement the student-level data system that will include all ninth graders in the cohort’s pass rate.

## 2. Keep momentum.

The higher levels of achievement reported today are a testament to the hard work and resolve of the educators and students who embraced the CAHSEE challenge, kept at it, and exceed the standard. Now more than ever, especially since the highest court in California has declared the CAHSEE is here to stay, we have to seize the momentum and pick up the pace.

## 3. Intervene Early and Effectively.

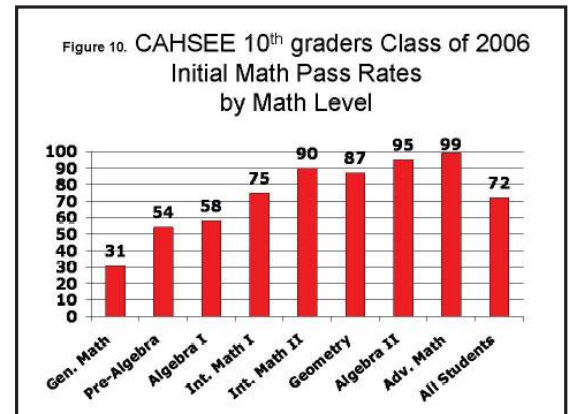
California starts measuring a students’ grade-level ability in math and English in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and does so every year through the 11<sup>th</sup>. We have enough information about student learning well before the first time a 10<sup>th</sup> grader takes the CAHSEE to gauge whether a student is on track to pass. The intervention models for seniors described in this report are necessary steps in the right direction. But schools and districts should not wait until struggling students become struggling seniors. Intervene early – before high school and definitely before the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## 4. All Students Need Algebra in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The opportunities – or lack thereof – for taking rigorous courses in middle and high schools will significantly affect student performance on the CAHSEE.

As Figure 10 shows, the higher the level of math students take is a strong predictor of CAHSEE success.<sup>5</sup> For example, according

to the HumRRO report, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student has a 99% chance of passing the CAHSEE if they’ve taken Advanced Math. Conversely, 10<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in Pre-Algebra in 2006, although they may still have met the statewide graduation requirement of Algebra by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, were almost half as likely to pass the CAHSEE on the first try.



Students need to learn the fundamental skills of Algebra before they take the CAHSEE. Districts should make the state goal of Algebra-for-all in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade a reality. Doing so would provide students the opportunity to learn the necessary skills earlier, and provide their teachers with a clearer understanding, sooner, about where students need help. More than that, it’ll allow students the time throughout their high school careers, to master higher levels of math.

## 5. Target Resources.

As this report shows, more resources than ever before have been targeted to help struggling high school seniors. But, is it too little too late? The answers: Yes. And Yes. In this state, low-income students and students of color get less of everything research says makes a difference. If we’re serious about making sure all students have the opportunity to pass the CAHSEE, we’ll do the opposite and provide them more, sooner. Use assessments for what they were designed to do—improve the rigor and intensity of the curriculum. All signs point to the need for a massive overhaul on curriculum and instruction—especially in California’s middle and high schools—one that prepares all students for the rigors of work in college.

## 6. Address Teacher Equity.

It’s clear from today’s results that low-income students and students of color pass the CAHSEE

at significantly lower rates than their peers. But there's more that separates them from their peers than differences in passing rates on the test: a pervasive, almost chilling difference in the quality of their teachers. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning reports that more than three times as many under-prepared teachers work at high-minority schools than at the lowest-minority schools, and that disparity is even higher among teachers of math, science, and Special Education. Furthermore, the

highest-minority schools employ 53% of intern teachers—novice teachers working toward their credential—while the lowest-minority schools employ only 3%. And schools with the lowest passing rates on the CAHSEE are almost twice as likely to have novice or under-prepared teachers than are schools with the highest passage rates on the exam.<sup>6</sup> California must develop a plan for both improving the quality of existing teachers, and making sure that our neediest students have access to the best teachers. Period.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Quote from Gabriela Perez, age 17, a student at Garfield High School in Los Angeles, quoted in "Coalition Demands Access to Higher Education," Inner City Struggle, March 24, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Baldassare, M., PPIC Statewide Survey, April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Center on Education Policy, *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year* August 2006, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Wise, et al., Human Resources Research Organization(HumRRO), *Independent Evaluation of California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): Third Biennial Report*. February 1, 2006, p. vi.

<sup>5</sup> Wise, et al., Human Resources Research Organization(HumRRO), *Independent Evaluation of California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE): Third Biennial Report*. February 1, 2006, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Esch, C.E., Chang-Ross, C.M., et al. *The Status of the Teaching Profession 2005*, The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Vance, Christina. "Students attempt exit exam once more: 200 Fresno Unified seniors need to pass test for a diploma." Fresno Bee, 9 May 2006 <<http://www.fresnobee.com/local/story/12158683p-12904806c.html>>

<sup>iii</sup> Torres, Jennifer. "High School exit exam leaves many searching for answers." The Record, 8 June 2006 <<http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060608/NEWS01/606080343/1001>>

<sup>iv</sup> Gao, Helen. "Nearly 7,000 graduate: Class of 2006 first required to pass exit exam." San Diego Union-Tribune, 21 June 2006 <<http://www.signon-sandiego.com/news/education/20060621-9999-7m21graduat.html>>

<sup>v</sup> Livingston, Jazmine. Telephone interview. 18 August 2006. And, Livingston, Jazmine. Personal interview. 21 August 2006. And, Livingston, Jazmine. "Making an 'Exit'." Youth Radio, <[http://www.youthradio.org/education/npr060517\\_exitexam.shtml](http://www.youthradio.org/education/npr060517_exitexam.shtml)>

<sup>vi</sup> Tam, Alice. Telephone interview. 18 August 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> McNeil, Aja. Telephone interview. 18 August 2006.

<sup>viii</sup> Leybag, Roseann. Telephone interview. 17 August 2006.

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#### Sidebar Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup>Butler, Bianca. Telephone interview. 17 August 2006. And, Butler, Bianca. "Remedial Classes." Youth Radio, <[http://www.youthradio.org/education/kqed060504\\_classes.shtml](http://www.youthradio.org/education/kqed060504_classes.shtml)>

The Education Trust—West is the West Coast presence of the national policy organization the Education Trust. We work for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, we concentrate on the institutions most often left behind—those serving low-income, Latino, African American, or 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. For more information please visit our website at [www.edtrustwest.org](http://www.edtrustwest.org).