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New Research: California High School Exit Exam Lowers Graduation Rates for Girls and Students of Color

*Among Low-Achieving Girls and Students of Color, Graduation Rates Decline
by Nearly 20 Percentage Points Because of the Exit Exam*

Palo Alto – A new study released by the Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice at Stanford University reveals a startling impact of the California High School Exit Exam on California’s lowest performing students. The exit exam has reduced graduation rates among girls and students of color in the lowest-performing quartile by nearly 20 percentage points. The study uses longitudinal data to examine the effects of the exit exam by comparing students scheduled to graduate just before (2005) and after (2006-07) the exit exam became a requirement for graduation from California’s high schools. The study was funded by The James Irvine Foundation.

According to the study, the exit exam has had a severe impact on graduation rates among students who performed poorly on previous standardized tests. In particular, the data show the negative effects of the exit exam were very large for female and minority students:

- On average, graduation rates for female students whose scores were in the lowest quartile on earlier standardized tests were 19 percentage points lower than those of similar female students in the same quartile who were not subject to the exit exam. Graduation rates for males in the same quartile were 12 percentage points lower.
- The same unintended effect of the exit exam was found among minority students (Black, Latino and Asian) in the lowest quartile of academic achievement. Graduation rates of minority students in the bottom quartile declined by 15 to 19 percentage points after the introduction of the exit exam requirement. Graduation rates of similar white students declined by only 1 percentage point.

“The research clearly indicates that the exit exam requirement has had a disproportionately negative impact on girls and students of color,” said Dr. Sean Reardon, Associate Professor of Education at Stanford University and lead researcher for the study. “Moreover, the findings

were universal across each of the school districts in the study, indicating that this is a statewide phenomenon.”

The study examined records for students in four of the largest school districts in California: San Francisco, Fresno, Long Beach and San Diego. Researchers analyzed data measuring student persistence (whether or not students stayed in school), achievement, and graduation rates for the first classes required to pass the exit exam for graduation (the classes of 2006 and 2007). These figures were then compared to similar students from the same districts who were scheduled to graduate in 2005, before the exit exam was a graduation requirement.

Unlike prior research on the California exit exam, this study examined the varying effects of the exit exam for students of different achievement levels and demographic characteristics. Other key findings from the study include:

- **There is no evidence that the exit exam has improved student achievement.** Students subject to the exit exam learned no more between 10th and 11th grade (as measured by the California Standards Tests) than did similar students from the cohort not required to take the exam.
- **The findings of the study are consistent with “stereotype threat” explanations of test performance.** The study found that female students and Black and Hispanic students underperform on the math exit exam, and that Black, Hispanic, and Asian students underperform on the English Language Arts exit exam, compared to male and White students with similar levels of academic skills. As a result, exit exam passing rates for female and minority students are much lower than for comparably-skilled male and White students. This is consistent with well-documented “stereotype threat” explanations of test performance, which explain that high-stakes tests (like the exit exam) produce more stress in minority students and girls than in white students and boys because students fear that their performance on the test will confirm negative stereotypes about the academic skills of their group.

“This research serves as a reminder that our policy decisions have very real implications for young people,” said Anne Stanton, Youth Program Director for The James Irvine Foundation. “This new data provides an opportunity for all of us to consider what adjustments are needed to ensure that all of California’s youth have the chance to succeed in high school.”

“The study shows that the exit exam has to date not been an effective approach to improving student achievement,” added Reardon. “We need to improve it or try other approaches to accountability and school improvement.”

The full report and an executive summary are available online at irepp.stanford.edu.

About the Researcher:

Dr. Sean Reardon, Ed.D. is Associate Professor of Education at Stanford University. Dr. Reardon's research focuses on the causes and consequences of social and educational inequality and on the evaluation of educational policy.

About [The James Irvine Foundation](#):

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California to participate in a vibrant, successful and inclusive society. With current assets of over \$1.4 billion, the Foundation made grants of \$78 million in 2008 for the people of California.

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