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Stakes Increase for End of Course Exams in 2009-10

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OVERVIEW

As of the 2009-10 academic year, high school students in Arkansas will be required to pass so-called “End of Course” (or “EOC”) examinations in Algebra I, Biology, Geometry, and English. Students who fail to meet the requisite passing standard will be required to retake the class or to pass “an appropriate alternative exit course in order to receive credit for the course on his or her transcript and in order to graduate.” In other words, these four EOC tests will become high school exit exams. Thus, as of 2009-10, Arkansas will join some 23 other states that have high school exit exams.

Given that a majority of all Arkansas students currently fail to meet the proficient level on one or more of the EOC tests — a figure that is much higher in certain districts or schools — Arkansas may soon be faced with large numbers of students who are unable to graduate from high school on time (if at all).

Arkansas is thus caught in a bind: On one hand, high school diplomas should represent a meaningful academic accomplishment, not the mere passage of 12 years. On the other hand, it would be problematic to deny or delay high school diplomas to an overwhelming majority of Arkansas students. Rather than pursuing either extreme, it may be more prudent for the legislature to seek a middle ground, for example, by phasing in any exit exam requirement over a period of years, so that previous elementary education reforms have time to kick in, and so that Arkansas schools have time to adapt and prepare for such a requirement.

WHAT ARE EXIT EXAMS?

Exit exams have been implemented in over 20 states, and are used to measure whether a student is proficient in one or more subjects before that student can “exit” the high school system. States do not generally employ an all-or-nothing policy on exit

exams, instead providing opportunities to retake the test or pursue some alternative path to graduation.

While the Arkansas EOC tests have not literally been designated as “exit exams,” they will function in just that way. That is, as of 2009-10, students must obtain at least a proficient score on the following EOC exams (or some alternative course), or they will be denied a high school diploma:

- Algebra I
- Geometry
- Biology
- Grade 11 Literacy

The primary difference between Arkansas’ EOC exams and an actual exit exam is the timing. While the typical high school exit exam is given to high school seniors prior to graduation, EOC exams are given to students as they complete a given class. The lone exception is the Literacy exam, which every student must take at the end of the 11th grade.

WHY HAVE EXIT EXAMS? THE PROS AND CONS

The case for exit exams is straightforward: A high school diploma should stand for an actual record of achievement, as opposed to merely having sat in a classroom for 12 years. In addition, everyone’s high school diploma will be worth less if diplomas are awarded even to students who cannot read or write. Thus, before students graduate from high school and present their academic record to colleges or potential employers, they should be required to demonstrate that they are actually proficient in at least a few of the basic academic subjects. This view is supported by some research indicating that states that adopt exit exams do see additional improvement on national test scores¹. Another study found that even though exit exams caused the graduation rate to drop slightly, the value of the high school diploma increased enough that students (including particularly black males) faced better employment opportunities².

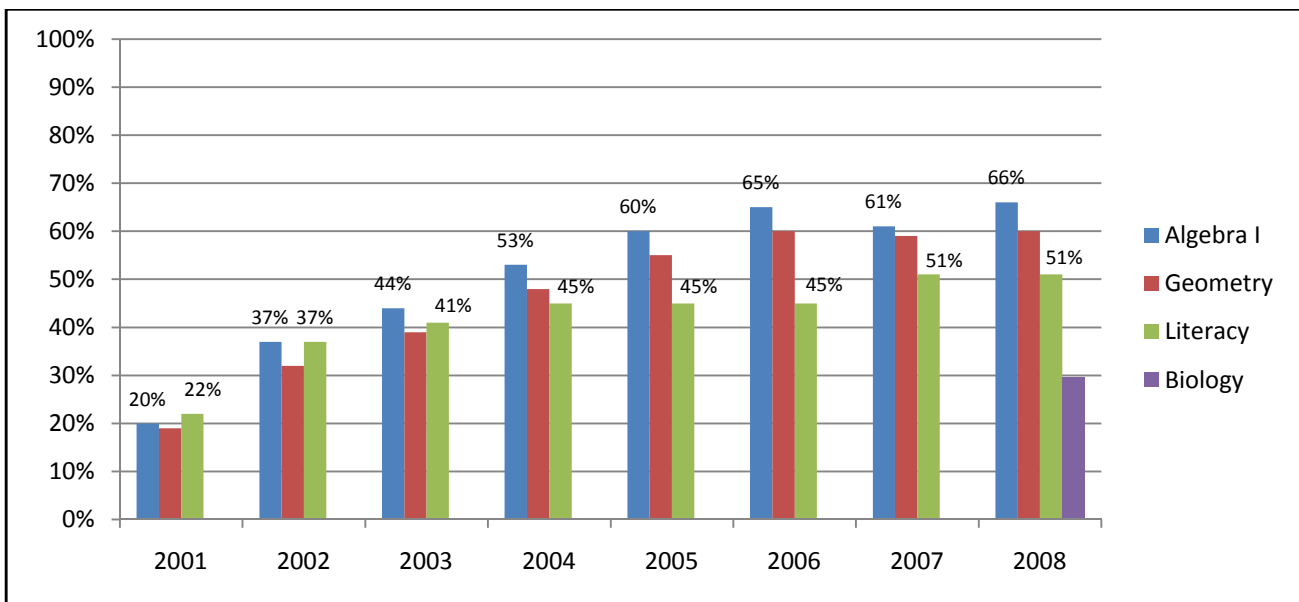
On the other hand, opponents of exit exams point out that minority and economically disadvantaged populations often have a harder time passing an exit exam. Moreover, after failing such an exam (or perhaps in anticipation of failing), some of those students may drop out of high school or be unable to graduate. The studies on that question tend to show that exit exams lead to small declines in graduation rates. One study found that compared to their peers in states with no exit exams, the lowest 10% of students in states with exit exams were about 33% more likely to drop out³. Another study found that states with exit exams had an 8% lower graduation rate than other states⁴ (this could be merely because states that already have poor high schools are more likely to adopt exit exams in the hope of forcing improvement).

In any event, it is difficult to estimate from the scholarly evidence what the impact is likely to be in Arkansas, given that these studies all concerned different states with different populations and different exit exams.

CHALLENGES FOR ARKANSAS

In Arkansas, the graduating class of 2010 will need to have successfully passed EOC exams in Algebra I, Biology, Geometry, and English (grade 11 Literacy). The most recent statistics from the Arkansas Department of Education show, however, that many students — well over a majority of Arkansans — currently fail to meet the proficiency standards⁵. Consider the results from the past few years⁶.

Figure 1: Percent of Arkansas students scoring proficient or above on End-of-Course exams, 2001-2008



As can be seen in Figure 1, the overall percentage of Arkansas students who achieve the “proficient” level has risen dramatically since 2001, when only 19%-22% of Arkansas high school students met the proficiency standard on any of the EOC exams. Still, the results show that a majority of Arkansas students are still falling short of proficiency on one or more EOC exams.

As of the April 2008 exams, the percentage of Arkansas high school students who scored proficient in Literacy was only 51%, and the fraction of students who scored proficient in Biology was even lower, at 30%. Thus, by the Biology test alone, over 70% of Arkansas high school students this year would be required to retake a high school course, thus possibly postponing or even preventing their graduation. Put another way, at most only 30% of Arkansas students could have passed all four EOC

exams, and it is likely that far fewer than 30% passed all four exams.

In addition, the passing rates can be much worse in certain districts. In Little Rock, Pine Bluff, and Osceola, for example, only 38%, 29%, and 14% of students (respectively) passed the literacy test, compared to the 51% statewide passing rate. In one

North Little Rock high school, a mere 4% of students passed the algebra test in April of 2008.

As for future results on EOC exams, we can form an educated guess by examining how grades 3 through 8 did on the Arkansas Benchmark exams between 2003 and 2008.

Figure 2: Percent scoring proficient or above on Arkansas Math Benchmark exams, 2005-2008

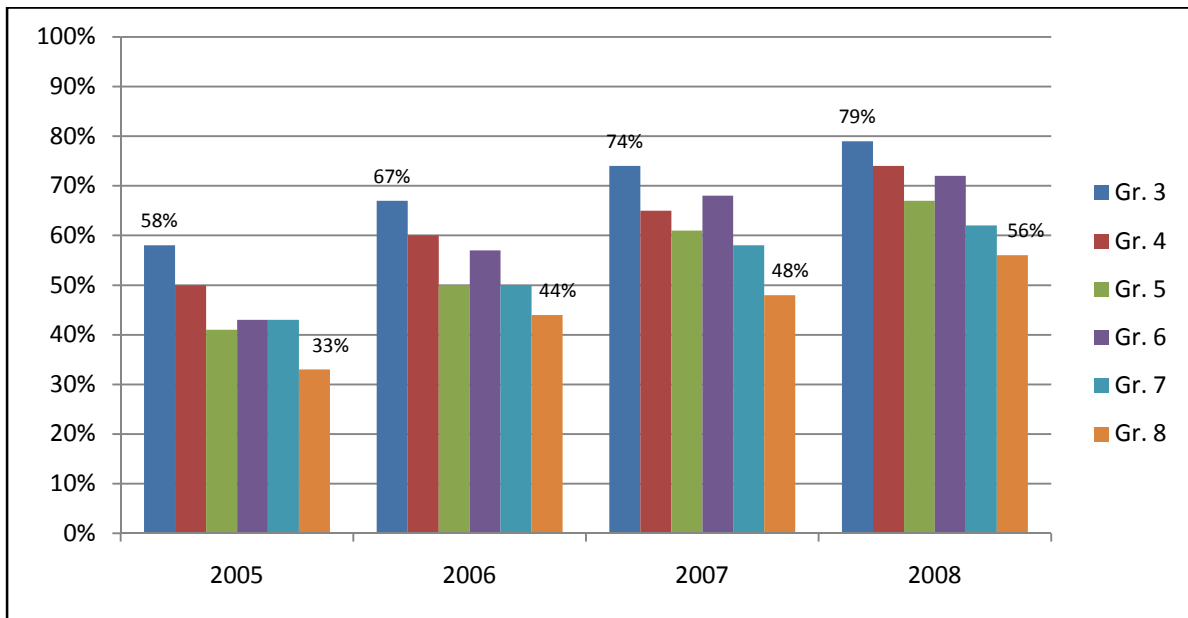
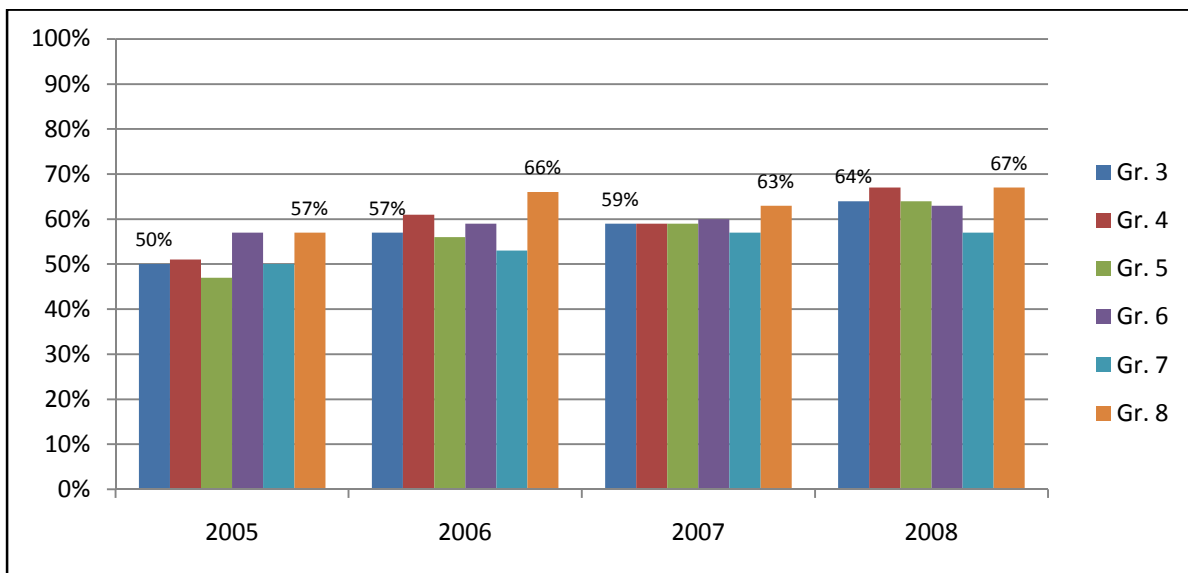


Figure 3: Percent scoring proficient or above on Arkansas Literacy Benchmark exams, 2005-2008



As can be seen from Figure 2, third and fourth graders are doing better than seventh and eighth graders, and all groups are doing substantially better in 2008 than in 2005. Thus, if the Arkansas school system can get today's third graders to maintain their 80% proficiency level for the next several years, tomorrow's high schoolers will be achieving at a markedly higher level, and would be better prepared to pass the EOC exams in Algebra and Geometry. That said, only 56% of today's eighth graders are meeting the proficient standard on math, which indicates that it may be difficult to achieve high levels of proficiency on the high school Math EOC exam.

The literacy results in Figure 3 tell a somewhat different story. Students in 2008 are doing somewhat better than 2005 students, but there is no grade (from third to eighth) that is clearly doing better than the rest. About 67% of today's eighth graders are meeting the proficiency standard in literacy, which is a hopeful sign that when they might be able to exceed the 51% of 11th grade students who tested as proficient on the EOC Literacy exam. Still, the challenge here will be to bring up the achievement of all grades so that they can best be prepared to pass the 11th grade Literacy exam.

As in other states, performance on EOC exams in Arkansas can differ among students from different backgrounds. For example, the percent of ELL students scoring proficient on the Algebra I exam declined 20 percentage points between 2006 and 2007, and Hispanic student performance on the same EOC exam also declined 11 percentage points.

Indeed, several state exit exam policies have faced legal challenges based on the impacts the exams might have on minority students. An Arizona lawsuit, for example, has alleged that students who need to learn English have not received adequate funding to ensure the academic proficiency necessary to pass the state's exit exam. Similarly, a California lawsuit alleged that the state exit exam unfairly penalized students who lacked adequate learning resources; that lawsuit has been tentatively settled with the mandate that any student who completes grade 12 without a passing score on both sections of the state exit exam may receive two years of academic assistance in the material tested.

WHAT SHOULD ARKANSAS DO?

As noted above, as of 2009-10, Arkansas will require passage on four end-of-course exams in order for high school students to graduate. But nearly half of all Arkansas students failed the literacy exam in 2008, and a stunning 70% failed the biology exam. If performance does not drastically improve within the next year, an overwhelming majority of Arkansas students would be unable to graduate from high school without taking further courses (or perhaps at all). The Arkansas Legislature should carefully weigh the implications of adopting a sudden change in policy that could cause the graduation of so many Arkansas high school students to be delayed, and that could even require a few high schools to flunk 90 percent or more of their students.

To be sure, Arkansas does offer an alternative route to graduation to students who fail the EOC exams. Students will have three chances to retake any of the exams before graduation; if students fail to pass on an additional attempt, they must take and pass an alternative course to graduate. While this alternative path does offer an escape hatch, some students may well become disillusioned and drop out during such a process.

As an alternative to the immediate adoption of four exit exams, the Legislature might consider adopting a phase-in schedule for converting the EOC exams into *de facto* exit exams. For example, rather than going from zero exit exams to four in one fell swoop, it might be more feasible to require one such exam in year 1, two such exams in year 3 or 4, and so forth.

The key advantage of such a phase-in schedule that it would allow time for districts and schools to bring up the proficiency levels of their students. Such a process would take a few years, to be sure, but not a full 12 years (in other words, we would not need to wait until today's first-graders are in high school to impose an exit exam requirement).

Another advantage of a phase-in schedule is that it would allow time for officials and researchers to examine carefully how the first exit exam affects graduation rates, dropout rates, achievement levels, and school improvement in general. It might turn

out after a few years of implementation that the initial exit exam had mostly positive effects, in which case more exit exams could be phased in as well. On the other hand, if it turns out that the initial exit exam has few positive effects and causes more students to drop out, the Legislature and the Department of Education would then have time to consider whether to redesign the exam, implement new school improvements, postpone any further phase-in, or even discontinue the exit exam requirement altogether.

Finally, a phase-in would allow more time to study and implement a better way for students who fail the EOC exams to attain proficiency in that particular subject. During the phase-in, the Legislature might consider programs or interventions, such as tutoring or special classes, to aid students who are at risk of failing the EOC exams.

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⁵ See http://arkansased.org/testing/test_scores.html.

⁶ Data from the Arkansas DOE website at http://www.arkansased.org/testing/test_scores.html. The 2008 biology passing rates are available here: http://arkedu.state.ar.us/commemos/attachments/EOC_Biology_Cut_scores.pdf.