

Many California high school tests, not enough learning: Editorial



By [The Los Angeles News Group Editorial Board](#), The San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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A [story in the Cabinet Report](#) on an effort to abandon California's high school exit exam notes that the test is especially controversial in light of "the growing emphasis on high school students graduating ready for college or to enter the workforce."

But hasn't that always been the emphasis when it comes to the expectations we put on a high school education? Otherwise, what's the point?

And the ironies abound here. When you look at the curriculum tackled by high school students in the 1940s, say, and the success with which many students of that era met its challenges, it's hard to believe there has been a lot of progress educationally in the ensuing decades. Pull out a yellowed high school newspaper from that time and look at the quality of the prose — know many high schoolers today writing, and therefore thinking, at that level?

But education then vs. now is way more complicated than that, of course. There is an entirely new world of science and computer-oriented instruction, and expertise, that didn't begin to exist

back then. It was a time when far fewer high schoolers had the opportunity or desire to go on to college, which was an educational level mostly reserved for the elite. There were far more jobs offering a liveable wage back then that simply didn't require college-level studies. But if fewer students were taking highly advanced sciences and calculus then, there were also far more courses in real-world economics that would prepare a young person for running a business or at least understanding a federal tax form.

But the central irony about California's required high school exit exam — which state Sen. Carol Liu, D-Pasadena, this month introduced legislation, AB 172, to get rid of beginning with the 2016-17 academic year — is the stunning number of students who pass it: some 95.5 percent of high school seniors in 2014.

Something is clearly amiss here — and that's probably enough to support getting rid of it — when we constantly hear from our community college teachers about how many of their students simply aren't ready for college-level work. In fact, [a study by the Legislative Analyst's Office](#) in Sacramento said that over 50 percent of California's high school students are in need of remedial work when they arrive at community colleges. How can that be when 95 percent of our students pass the California High School Exit Examination? It doesn't take a valedictorian to thereby deduce that the exam is bogus. Let's dump it.

But once we do, what to replace it with? Or should it be replaced at all?

That's why Liu's bill also would direct State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson to appoint an advisory panel to recommend whether some such test should be required in the future or whether there are alternatives that make more sense.

Right now, we're in the latter camp. Somehow, the system is being gamed if 95 percent of our students are deemed proficient by one test, yet over half of community college students are unprepared for college. To better understand how that has happened, a systematic study needs to be performed on the dichotomy. But anecdotally, it's clear high school teachers find themselves overwhelmed by trying to teach to this and myriad other standardized tests their students are required to take under today's no doubt well-meaning strictures, especially with the coming of the new Common Core curriculum. It's estimated that by using one suggested replacement for the exit exam, for instance, the Smarter Balanced test now given to 11th graders, far fewer students would be allowed to graduate. And, really, then where would we be?

The whole test-crazy environment needs to be re-evaluated so that students can get back to their educations.

About the Author

The editorial board supervises the Opinion pages for the Los Angeles News Group's nine publications: Los Angeles Daily News, Long Beach Press-Telegram, Torrance Daily Breeze, San Bernardino Sun, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin, San Gabriel Valley Tribune, Pasadena Star News, Whittier Daily News and the Redlands Daily Facts. Reach the author at opinion@langnews.com or follow The Los Angeles News Group on Twitter: [@SoCalOpinion](https://twitter.com/SoCalOpinion).