Students likely to fail high school exit exam can be identified as early as 4th grade, study says

The authors use the findings to question the wisdom of spending millions to tutor older students struggling with the test.

By Seema Mehta
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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As early as fourth grade, students who will be at risk of failing the high school exit exam -- a state requirement to earn a diploma -- can be identified based on grades, classroom behavior and test scores, according to a new study released Tuesday.

The findings, based on an extensive study of student achievement in San Diego schools, call into question the effectiveness of aiming significant efforts and tens of millions of dollars at struggling high school seniors and older students to help them pass the exam.

"From a political standpoint, such spending seems necessary. However, our results strongly suggest that these 11th-hour interventions by themselves are unlikely to yield the intended results," according to the report by the Public Policy Institute of California.

Instead, the authors suggested, "moving a portion of these tutoring dollars to struggling students in earlier grades -- when the students are still in school -- could be a wise choice. An ounce of prevention could indeed be worth a pound of cure."

Assemblyman Pedro Nava (D-Santa Barbara), who wrote legislation that provides more than $72 million annually for two years to tutor seniors who couldn't pass the exam, said it would be unfair to reduce support for older students to pay for increased support for younger ones.

"I suppose they should sit down with the parents of these kids who are looking at failing the [exit] exam and persuade these parents that they don't need the money," Nava said. "Inherent in the conclusion of the report is that education needs help at all levels. We shouldn't be put in a position where we are pitting the outcomes of seniors against the future of preschoolers. That makes no sense."

State Supt. of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said school districts ought to have greater flexibility in how they spend such funds.

"We need to have comprehensive intervention and not wait till 12th grade," he said.

Additionally, he said, the study underscored the need for universal preschool, as well as expanding the state's class-size reduction efforts.

The exit exam was created by state legislators in an effort to standardize the achievement of high school graduates across the state's 1,053 school districts. Students in the class of 2006 were the first who were required to pass the exam to receive diplomas.

From their sophomore through senior years, students have six chances to take the exam, which includes math and English. Students must score at least 55% on the math portion, which is eighth-grade level, and 60% on the English part, which is ninth- or 10th-grade level. More than 93% of students pass the exam by the end of their senior year.

Educators said the study results are buttressed by earlier research that shows early academic achievement, the mastering of basic math skills and reading comprehension, is a building block for future success.

"We've recognized for a long time that performance in the earlier grades is one of the best indicators of success later in school and in life," said Chris Eftychiou, spokesman for the Long Beach Unified School District.

At Pasadena High School, guidance counselor Allison Steppes said she worried that social promotion and lack of parental involvement led to some students passing through elementary schools without mastering basic skills.
"I don't think we're doing enough at the elementary stages because it's ridiculous to get to 12th grade, take the [exit exam] six times and still not pass it," she said.

But she questioned the validity of a student retaking the test after failing it half a dozen times. Steppes said she advised students who repeatedly failed the exam but finished 12th grade to get their high school degree at a community college, which does not require students to pass the exam.

"I want the student to move on with life," she said.

seema.mehta@latimes.com
Students at risk of failing California's high school exit exam can be identified as early as the fourth grade, which has broad implications for when educators should offer remedial help, according to a report by the Public Policy Institute of California.

At the moment, the state invests in tutoring students in the last year of high school and beyond who fail the California High School Exit Exam, which became a graduation requirement in 2006. Authors of the report released Tuesday say the money might be better spent assisting students in elementary and middle school.

"People should be concerned because a significant minority is not passing," said Julian Betts, a professor of economics at UC San Diego and co-author of "Predicting Success, Preventing Failure: An Investigation of the California High School Exit Exam."

"One of the things we suggest is that the state of California or individual districts should develop an early warning system of students who are likely to fail the exam," Betts said.

The exit exam measures students' proficiency in seventh- to 10th-grade math and English. Students begin attempting to pass the exit exam as sophomores but can continue trying even after their peers have graduated.

In 2007, 93 percent of the graduating class passed, up from 91 percent the year before. Low-income students, as well as African American and Latino students of all income levels, had roughly an 88 percent pass rate in 2007. Among English learners, 77 percent passed the test.

California schools Superintendent Jack O'Connell said students needs more remedial intervention at all levels - elementary, middle and high school. He said the study underscores the need for reduced class size in fourth through sixth grades to 20 students per teacher (down from some as high as 35) to match the reduced class size already in kindergarten to third grade.

"We need to provide more personalized and individualized instructional opportunity for students."

The report's authors examined the cohort of 10th-graders slated to graduate in 2006 in the San Diego Unified School District, which is the second largest district in the state and highly representative of the state's overall K-12 population, according to the authors. They studied the students' performance from fourth grade through graduation.

A particularly strong predictor of success is grade point average in the fourth grade: for every one-point increase in GPA, students improve their chances of passing the exit exam by 11.6 percent, the
The study also found that classroom behavior in the elementary grades is more important than math and reading test scores in predicting performance. (In San Diego, teachers use categories such as "follows directions" and "self-discipline" to evaluate students and the report's authors translated those measures into a "behavior GPA.")

Among the report's other findings:

-- Students classified as English learners in fourth grade are as likely to pass as their peers who are otherwise similar, but those who are still considered English learners by ninth grade are less likely to pass.

-- High school teachers' qualifications such as education level, credentials and years of teaching experience play just a small role in how well students do on the exit exam.

The study concludes that focusing on remedial help in the 12th grade and beyond alone isn't likely to be effective. Seniors who failed the exam in 2006 and retook it the following year nudged up the passing rate only slightly - from 90.4 to 90.7.

The authors suggest the state and/or districts develop an "early warning" system to predict which students are at risk for failing and spend more money on remedial help in earlier grades.

O'Connell said California already has a pilot program that allows two school districts - Fresno and Long Beach - to use state funding to offer exit exam tutoring earlier.

"Somewhat to our surprise, you can forecast remarkably well using grades and test scores and behavior of students as early as grade four," said Betts. "That at least gives educators an option to think about how they might intervene earlier."

**Report highlights**

-- Fourth-grade GPA is an especially strong predictor of success on the exam.

-- Classroom behavior in the elementary grades is nearly as important.

-- Test scores are less powerful predictors, and they differ across grades.

-- English learner status matters less in early grades than later on.

-- High school teachers' qualifications play a minor role in test performance.

For more information on the report, go to: [links.sfgate.com/ZDSX](http://links.sfgate.com/ZDSX)