

EDITORIAL: Update high school exit exam — don't scrap it



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Such a pause might make sense given that the exam's questions should reflect what students are expected to learn, and those expectations are now changing. But we fear that the end result might be to kill the test altogether; that would be unfortunate.

The high school exit exam was created in the early 2000s as part of an ethnically diverse and bipartisan effort to give all Californians an objective way to assess whether students were learning the basic language and math skills they needed to at least perform an entry-level job and have a shot at getting into college. No longer would students get a diploma for simply showing up. They had to learn something.

Some of the test's strongest support came from low-income and minority communities, where many parents believed that the schools were holding their kids to too low a standard. They were right. Independent evaluations of the exit

exam have concluded that it succeeded in getting schools and districts to focus on what they needed to do to help every child learn.

Over a 15-year period, scores on the exam rose for all students and, importantly, for low-income and minority students. In 2014, more than 95% of graduating seniors passed the exam.

To ensure fairness and reduce pressure on students, they were allowed to take the test beginning in their sophomore year and retake it several times if they failed. Special accommodations were provided for disabled students.

But the test was never popular with the teachers unions, which to their discredit opposed most of the accountability reforms the state put in place. And there are parents and educators who do not believe that standardized tests are a valid way to assess student achievement.

We don't share that view. While testing has its flaws, it remains the best way to determine whether students have learned what they are expected to know. Relying only on classroom grades makes it too easy for schools to keep shuffling tough-to-teach students along until, in the end, they graduate with a meaningless diploma.

SB 172 calls on an advisory panel to suggest how to replace the current exam. But all the state needs to do is update the test so that it fully reflects the new Common Core standards. That shouldn't take three years.

A long hiatus and a vague mandate from the Legislature would leave students and teachers in limbo and give longtime opponents of the exit exam a chance to study and talk it to death. That is the last thing California's public schools need.