Conclusion 1: Although state policies continue to evolve, high school exit exams remain a substantial force in education policy, currently affecting nearly 7 out of 10 public school students across the nation.

- Twenty-five states administered exit exams in school year 2011-12, and a 26th state (Rhode Island) is planning to implement an exit exam requirement for the class of 2014. In two states (Oklahoma and Oregon), the graduating class of 2012 was the first group of students impacted by these policies.

- Nearly 7 out of 10 students, and an even larger share of students of color, attend school in states with exit exams. Sixty-nine percent of the nation’s students are enrolled in states with exit exams, including 71% of African American students, 85% of Hispanic students, 71% of low-income students, and 83% of English language learners (ELLs).

- Four states have recently decided to phase out their exit exam requirements. North Carolina and Tennessee made this change for the 2011-12 school year, and Alabama will eliminate its exit exam requirement with the graduating class of 2015. Georgia began phasing out its exit exam requirement for all subjects except writing in 2011-12.

- End-of-course (EOC) exams continue to grow in popularity. In recent years, several states have shifted from using comprehensive exit exams, which assess multiple subjects on the same test, to EOC exams, which test students’ mastery of the content in a particular course. Nine states required students in the class of 2012 to pass EOC exams to graduate, an increase from the two states with EOC exit exams in 2002. An additional six states required students in the class of 2012 to take EOC exams that are not considered exit exams because students do not have to pass them to graduate.

- The percentage of students who pass exit exams on the first try varies by state and by subject but generally ranges from 70% to 90% with few exceptions. Initial pass rates are important because students who fail exit exams on the first try may have very different school experiences from those who pass, even if students who fail the first time eventually pass the exam before graduation.

- All states with exit exams provide students who fail these exams on the first try with opportunities to retake them before the end of 12th grade, and many states offer alternate paths to graduation for students who continue to struggle to pass the exams. Twenty-two of the 26 states with current or future exit exams offer alternate paths to graduation for general education students who fail the exams, and 22 (though not always the same 22) offer alternate paths specifically for students with disabilities. Only three states provide alternate paths specifically designed for English language learners who fail these exams.

- States that continue to administer exit exams reported making some policy changes over the past year, such as introducing new exams, setting cut scores to reflect college readiness, and delaying the implementation of new exit exam requirements. Some states also reported making changes in response to state budget cuts, including eliminating exit exams in some subjects and offering fewer retake opportunities for students who fail.
Conclusion #2: Exit exams are becoming assessments of college and career readiness. Many states plan to use the Common Core State Standards, and often the common assessments, as a vehicle for this transition.

- More states with exit exams are requiring students to pass these exams in an attempt to ensure graduates are prepared for college and careers, among other reasons. Twelve of the 22 states with exit exams that responded to CEP’s special survey said that their exit exam requirement is intended to ensure their students are ready for college and/or a career. CEP first asked states in 2004 about the purpose of their exit exam policies, and at that time only one state (Georgia) specifically noted that its exit exam was intended for this purpose.

- Most states with exit exam policies have not yet aligned these exams to what they describe as college- and career-readiness standards, but many are planning to do so. Most states that are aligning their exit exams to college- and career-readiness standards are using the CCSS, or standards designed specifically for their state, or a combination of both for this purpose.

- Very few states with exit exam policies report that scores from these exams are used by postsecondary education institutions for admission, placement, or scholarship decisions. It is important to note, however, that in several states the survey respondents, who represent state elementary and secondary education departments, did not have this information. For example, respondents from 17 states said exit exams are not used by postsecondary institutions to make decisions about student admissions, while respondents from eight states did not have this information.

- Many states with exit exams that have also adopted the CCSS intend to maintain their requirement that students pass exit exams in English language arts and math to receive a high school diploma. Specifically, 13 of the 22 states with exit exams that responded to our survey and have adopted the CCSS plan to maintain their exit exam requirement, and 5 additional states are not yet sure.

- Most states with exit exams that have also adopted the CCSS plan to replace their current exit exams in English language arts and math with new assessments aligned to the common standards. Ten states plan to replace their exams with the CCSS-aligned assessments being developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), while three states plan to use the common assessments being developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment consortium. Two states plan to replace their current exit exams with new state assessments aligned to the common standards but have not yet specified which exams.

- A large majority of states that plan to replace their current exams with assessments aligned to the common standards expect their new assessments to be more rigorous than the current ones. No state responded that this requirement would make its exit exam less rigorous, and only one state said the rigor of its requirement would stay about the same (Oregon for English language arts only). One state respondent (Massachusetts) said the state is not yet sure how the rigor of its exit exam requirement will be impacted.
States have faced a number of challenges in implementing exit exam policies, including opposition from key education stakeholders, political disagreements or changes in state leadership, legal battles, low student passing rates, and high costs. In many states, these challenges have led to delays in implementation and changes (ranging from small to significant) in exit exam policies.

States have often responded to these challenges by offering alternate routes to graduation or alternate diplomas for some or all students and/or by funding remediation programs for students who struggle to pass exit exams. Regardless of how state leaders and policymakers have chosen to respond, successful implementation of an exit exam policy has required a great deal of flexibility from all education stakeholders.

Even with the introduction of student support services and alternate routes, the impacts of exit exams on student achievement, dropout rates, and other outcomes for historically lower-performing groups are not fully known and have yet to be fully addressed. Disparities in passing rates for different student groups continue to be a concern in states with exit exams.

Successful implementation of a new exit exam policy or changes to an existing policy often depend on states’ willingness to take certain actions. These actions include (among other things) maintaining the support of key state leaders and the public, implementing new or revised exit exam policies over several years rather than all at once, maintaining flexibility to adapt policies to meet changing times and needs, and making a full financial commitment. States should also keep in mind that policies not directly related to exit exams, such as requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, can still have an impact on these exams.

Several key questions about the success of exit exam policies remain unresolved. For example, have exit exams actually raised student achievement as intended? Also, will these exams ever be meaningful indicators for institutions of higher education or employers? State leaders have an ongoing responsibility to ensure the success of the reforms they enact; therefore, more monitoring, research, and evaluation is needed.