

The CASHEE: Fair for All?
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Juan's Transcript

- 3.2 GPA,
- 90% attendance
- Zero failures,
- "A" grade on Senior Project and Research Paper,
- Extensive extracurricular activities and community service.

This sounds like a student on the cusp of graduation and ready to take on the wacky yet wonderful world of college, right? Wrong—and this is all due to a little test that has completely revamped the requirements for graduation from California high schools: The California High School Exit Exam or the CAHSEE. You see, Juan has not passed the English Language Arts section of the CAHSEE and thus is unable to officially graduate with his peers. No, Juan was told along with 19 other fellow seniors (most of who were English Language Learners and fairly new to California) that he would not be able to walk the stage at graduation or receive a high school diploma. What do we do in this situation? Is the CAHSEE and its too rigid policies really a fair assessment for California's extensively diverse student population? Has the implementation of the CAHSEE really been an effective reform in education and achievement?

According to the California Department of Education, the CAHSEE, which was the first administered in 1999 in California, is a statewide graduation requirement test given in English that when passed demonstrates a student's competency in reading, writing, and mathematics at a 10th grade level or above. If a student fails to pass one or both of the two sections on the initial exam given in the spring of the 10th grade year, then the student is given five more opportunities to retake it (California Department of Education). However, as in Juan's case, if his chances are up and he still doesn't pass, he is unable to graduate despite above average grades, good attendance, and community involvement surmounting cultural linguistic barriers and urban strife.

Of course, options were immediately laid out for Juan and his 19 unfortunate classmates i.e. summer CAHSEE classes at Laney College and a chance to take the test again in July and receive a diploma along with a mini-graduation the following January. However, the damage was done. Juan was humiliated and devastated. When he came to my room that day in May with his shoulders slumped and tears in his eyes, I had to look away for fear of my own spilling. Pulling on the "counselor" hat, I used an arsenal of rationales and techniques to help soothe him, but whatever I said still couldn't erase the fact that he would not be able to partake in that all-important rite of passage. In fact this recent letdown conjured Juan's past academic insecurities which were just beginning to fade from all of his improvements this year particularly in writing and reading in general. My heart may have been breaking for him, but I knew his break was ten times worse as he felt the stamp of "failure" mark him as so at-risk students do.

As stated in The Principal's Partnership's Research Brief: "Effects of Exit Exams on At-Risk Students," the ultimate goal of the CAHSEE and other exit exams is to force improvements in curriculum and instruction which in turn will improve learning outcomes and close the ever glaring achievement gap ("Effects of Exit Exams on At-Risk Students"). This is an ideal we all yearn for and if a test could single-handedly do this, then I would say bring it on! However, this tough approach seems to have a counter-effect on at-risk students who make up a large percentage of the California education system. English Language Learners are an at-risk group in particular that has suffered significant effects of this exit exam. Paul Garcia and David Calhoun who conducted a one year CAHSEE study entitled "An Examination of the Correlates of Achievement on the California High School Exit Exam" claim that according to the California Senate Bill 2X, after 6 months of instruction in reading, writing and math, ELLs must take the student's level of English. Therefore, as a result only 3% of beginning ELLs were able to pass the ELA section of the test. Intermediate and advanced ELLs still didn't fair as well compared to their English Only counterparts, in that only 25% of ELLs compared to 61% of EOs passed the linguistic biases of the CAHSEE. Garcia and Calhoun's report further concludes that after removing the ELLs from the study, English speaking students such as African Americans, Asians and Hispanics all scored considerably lower on the CAHSEE than White California students further supporting the bias (Calhoun and Garcia).

Juan, as a first generation Mexican-American, is definitely one of those students who has not benefited, but has actually regressed from the CAHSEE. After the devastating results, I did all I could to convince Juan not to give up and "just quit" as I heard him continuously repeat, but I knew it would take a lot of inner strength and maturity that is difficult for most of us, let alone a 17 year old boy who has been in a low-performing system that makes demands benefiting a very small part of the population. Fortunately, Juan did stay and finished his senior project and three revisions of his research paper, but when I saw him at the graduation ceremony cheering for his friends and fellow CBIT's classmates from the bleachers, I have never felt more proud. Gone was Juan's chance at CSU East Bay, where he had been accepted before the CAHSEE, and gone was that momentous accomplishment of walking the stage and actually, officially graduating from high school, but at the moment I couldn't think of one student more worthy than Juan. But what about those non-Juan's who don't have the perseverance; friend, family and teacher support; and/or those whose skills are even more deficient? Is the CAHSEE really a fair assessment? The question still remains.