

in brief...

Dropping out of school: the impact of US exit exams

What is the difference between barely passing and barely failing an exam? Technically, just mere points. But for American school children taking high school exit exams (which pupils in some states need to pass to get a regular high school diploma), it can mean the difference between graduating and dropping out, even when there are opportunities to retake the test. These are the findings of a study by **Dongshu Ou**.

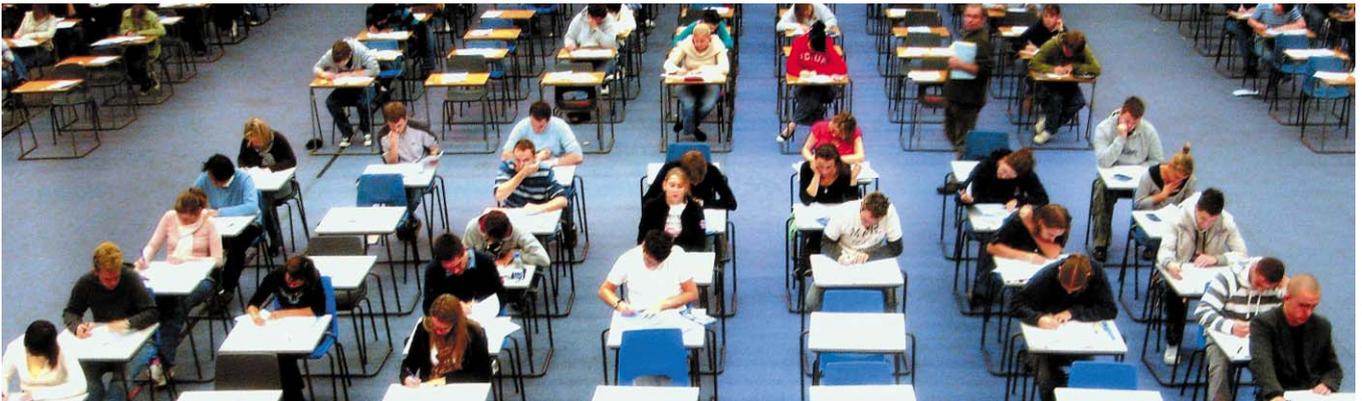


Photo: Jack Hynes

The high school exit exam is rapidly becoming a standardised assessment procedure for educational accountability in the United States. In 2007, pupils in 23 states were required to pass an exit exam to obtain their high school diplomas. By 2012, an additional three states will have the requirement.

The exams were initially introduced to verify that children leaving high school had mastered the core curriculum. But there is controversy over whether the exams stimulate pupils' motivation and enhance learning – or whether they prevent some pupils from graduating. There is also concern that the potential gain of high-stakes testing comes at the cost of increasing inequality between different social groups.

Ou's study analyses test results for pupils in their penultimate ('junior') year who took the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment between 2002 and 2006. Pupils have three opportunities to pass the state's maths and language arts exit exams. There is also an alternative graduation test at the end of twelfth grade (the final or 'senior' year), which pupils can take if they fail the three previous exams.

Ou finds that despite having the opportunity to retake the exam, pupils who barely failed one of the tests have a higher probability of dropping out than pupils who barely passed. This effect is especially pronounced for children from poor and minority ethnic backgrounds. Barely failing the English test also causes a more than 10% increase in the likelihood of leaving school for pupils with limited proficiency in the English language.

It seems natural that exit exams will cause some pupils to drop out. But Ou's findings point to one of the unintended consequences of the move towards test-based school accountability – the disproportionate dropout rate among disadvantaged children.

The study also highlights the importance of investing resources effectively. Pupils who barely fail the exam may drop out if they are discouraged by the result given their efforts. But they also may drop out because of the high perceived cost of preparing to retake the exam when few remedial resources are available or schools fail to provide sufficient information on the retake opportunities and alternative ways to graduate.

Ou concludes that allocating additional resources to counsel children who barely fail the exams and assist them in passing a retake (lessening the stigma of failing the exam and informing them about retake opportunities) could go a long way towards reducing their risk of dropping out. She also emphasises the need for further evaluation of the exit exam policy to provide a solid background for reforms currently under consideration in various states.

This article summarises 'To Leave or Not to Leave? A Regression Discontinuity Analysis of the Impact of Failing the High School Exit Exam' by Dongshu Ou, CEP Discussion Paper No. 907 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp0907.pdf>) and forthcoming in *Economics of Education Review*.

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