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Minorities Score Low on AIMS

Requirement for Graduation Looms Large, Study Indicates

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Pat Kossan

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Minority students in Arizona's Class of 2006 continue to score very low on the high school AIMS exit exam and remain most in danger of not receiving their diplomas on graduation day, a study released Thursday concluded.

Despite two attempts to pass the AIMS math section, African-American, Hispanic and Native American students make up 70 percent of those students who appear to be stuck at the bottom, said Arizona State University researcher David Garcia, who co-authored the study and presented the findings to the Arizona State Board of Education during a study session on Thursday.

The results of the research sparked concern by the state board, which has been unanimous in its support for the 2006 exit exam.

Mitzi Epstein, the mother of two students in the Tempe Union High School District sat in on the study session to learn more about the test. She said she's still torn between using the test to gauge a school's progress and using it to keep a child from graduating. "To potentially ruin a student's life is not the answer," she said.

Arizona's Class of 2006 is the first that must pass the AIMS reading, writing and math tests to graduate, but 57 percent have yet to pass all three sections.

The study was conducted by Arizona's three state universities and also showed:

- Six percent of students who failed AIMS in the spring of 2004 did not bother to retake the test in the fall of 2004. Garcia said that is roughly equal to the 6.4 percent of Arizona students who dropped out between their sophomore and junior years in the 2003-04 school year.

- Sixty-five percent of White students have passed the math section, twice the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students. Only about 1 out of 4 Native American students have passed the math section.
- Most of the students who scored in the lowest category, called "falls far below standards," after the spring 2004 test remained there after they retook the test in the fall. After two attempts to pass the high school AIMS math section, research showed that 13,279 students continued to score in the lowest of four possible categories and 70 percent of those were minorities.

Board member Cecilia Owen, Coconino County superintendent of schools, said she isn't ready to throw out the test but wanted the state's policymakers to face the reality of what an exit exam means to students and their families.

"It's completely unacceptable to me to disenfranchise this percentage of the population," Owen said.

Members of the Class of 2006 had the option to retake the AIMS test for a third time this spring, a test state officials have made easier to pass. Arizona schools chief Tom Horne expects the results of the third round of testing to boost the passage rate for all high school students, including minorities.

"Students need an incentive to acquire the skills they need to survive in today's economy and for the rest of their lives," Horne said.

Horne and the State Board of Education will see the results of the spring high school AIMS test in mid-May and have the option of resetting the passing score on the sections. Some board members, see it as an opportunity to make sure more kids pass the test and get a diploma.

Board member Jesse Ary, the only African-American on the board, said state schools don't provide all children an equal playing field.

"This data was probably not surprising given the fact we have put a limited supply of resources into minority areas," Ary said.

Reach the reporter at pat.kossan@arizonarepublic.com.