

# With Exit Exam scrapped, search for now-qualified graduates is on

By Jill Tucker

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Sifting through old high school transcripts and searching for names on Facebook, school officials across California are scrambling to hand out thousands of diplomas to former students, many of whom gave up on graduating and don't realize they're now eligible.

The young men and women, some in their late 20s, became sudden qualifiers for a diploma after Gov. Jerry Brown last week retroactively revoked the requirement that all students pass the controversial California High School Exit Exam. With the stroke of a pen, the governor brought relief to up to 32,000 students since the class of 2006 who only needed to pass the test to graduate.

## College dreams on hold after state cancels Exit Exam

With the law kicking in Jan. 1, though, finding the soon-to-be graduates — not only who they are but where they are — won't be easy.

School officials first have to figure out which students failed the Exit Exam but completed all the other graduation requirements that were in effect when they were seniors in high school. In San Francisco, the job is big enough that district leaders say they will hire a special counselor to go through 700 transcripts of former students.

While the law does not require local districts to launch such an effort to track down the newly minted graduates, many districts say they will try anyway, sending notes to student addresses they had on record, making phone calls to family contacts listed years earlier and blasting out the news on social media.

Students who believe they qualify for a diploma are encouraged to contact their former high school district to provide contact information and ensure a review of their transcripts.

Zuleima Giron has done just that. The 20-year-old is already on San Francisco's radar because she never left it.

### **Kept going to school**

Because she failed the Exit Exam, Giron couldn't graduate with her class in 2013. She enrolled for a fifth year at San Francisco International High School to continue studying for the test, then started taking community college classes last year.

In the meantime, she became a mom, to a now-20-month-old girl, but she never gave up on passing the exam so she could follow her dream of becoming a nursing assistant. Now that she doesn't have to pass, Giron says she isn't angry that the state changed its mind about the requirement, nor does she wonder what her life would have been like had she received her diploma in the spring of 2013.

"It's frustrating, but it's OK," she said. "I am excited, because I've been waiting for this for so long."

However, not all those who qualify for a diploma have, like Giron, kept in touch with school officials. That's not an insurmountable problem, said Julie Kessler, principal of San Francisco International High School, which serves mostly students new to the country.

"We're thrilled," she said. "This is where Facebook is so our friend in this."

The about-face on the Exit Exam began earlier this year when the state Department of Education stopped administering the test while the Legislature considered suspending the graduation requirement.

As The Chronicle reported in August, that left thousands of members of the class of 2015 in limbo, required to pass a test the state no longer offered. An emergency state law waived the Exit Exam requirement for the class of 2015, but did not address what would happen to former students still trying to pass the test and get a diploma years after they left high school.

### **Future of tests unclear**

The new law, signed by the governor Wednesday, not only revoked the Exit Exam graduation requirement going back to the class of 2006, but also suspended it through 2017. State officials now must decide whether to create a new test aligned with the new Common Core standards or come up with another way to verify a level of academic proficiency needed to get a diploma.

While Kessler is happy that the Exit Exam has been rendered moot, the whole boondoggle is bittersweet. She remembers students who had their dreams of college degrees and careers dashed because they missed a few questions on a multiple-choice bubble test that the state now says doesn't matter.

Researchers have generally agreed that the Exit Exam in California, and other similar tests across the country, haven't paid off in better-qualified graduates. Those who didn't pass were more likely to be students of color and girls, said Professor Sean Reardon of the Stanford University Graduate School of Education.

Studies showed that many California students who didn't pass the Exit Exam performed as well as those who did when it came to other academic indicators such as annual standardized tests and class work, indicating that factors other than academic ability might be at play. Reardon said the high-stakes nature of the test, and the fear of failure based on stereotypes related to race or gender, could offer an explanation.

### **Students who lost out**

To some, that suggests there were a lot of students who didn't get a diploma when they could have or should have.

"I am wondering when someone is going to sue the state for disrupting their future," said Rachel Norton, a San Francisco school board member. "It's like we sent a generation into an alternate reality for those 10 years."

Kessler recalled one student who had been accepted to UC Berkeley, and had a scholarship in hand, but never passed the English portion of the Exit Exam. While supporters of the test argue that perhaps such students lack the skills expected of a high school graduate, Kessler disagrees.

"I think UC Berkeley would disagree, too," she said.

Instead of college, the young man attended a job training program and became a security guard, Kessler said.

"That is a student who is not at this point in his life going to go back and try again for Berkeley," she said. "It does feel like a lost opportunity."

### **New hope for many**

For many other students, receiving a diploma in January could kick-start old dreams, Kessler said.

"They've had a different view of their own academic identity for the last few years," she said. Now they are "eager to get back on track and get off the detour they've been on the last few years."