

The Sacramento Bee

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Dear Judges,

California's high school seniors face a challenge: They are the first students in state history required to pass an exit exam to graduate. Their compelling stories - tightly tied to the bureaucratic troubles in launching the statewide exam and the enormous pressure on educators to boost a woeful passage rate - are at the core of Laurel Rosenhall's ongoing series, "Put to the Test."


Laurel covers education for The Sacramento Bee and wanted to find out why, for the class of 2006, this was a school year unlike any other. At Sacramento's Hiram Johnson High, a racially diverse school with a large number of low-income families, she found five students struggling with the exam and the thought that after 12 years of schooling their education could end without a diploma. The goal of the series is simple: To explore from every angle the controversy around the exit exam; the anxieties circulating among state and local educators over its implementation; and the overarching dream each of the students has of walking across the graduation stage next year.

Laurel's first stories describe the effect the June 2006 deadline is having on the seniors and their teachers, and the students' down-to-the-wire attempts to overcome their own lack of effort and early years of poor schooling. Her sharply written articles take us into the classroom and into the students' homes while exploring their struggles in a very human way.

California education officials candidly admit that the exit exam is the dominant educational issue in the state. No other reporter in California is covering it as comprehensively and as thoughtfully as Laurel. We believe this is the kind of compelling journalism that newspapers do best, helping our readers to understand issues that affect their lives.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards,



Joyce Terhaar
Managing Editor

The

MONDAY October 31, 2005 **

Sacramento Bee

WHAT IS THE EXIT EXAM?

The California High School Exit Exam consists of two parts, math and English, given on consecutive days. Each part usually takes students less than four hours to complete. But the exam is untimed; students may take as much time as they need during each of the two days.

Math: The math section tests students on sixth- and seventh-grade skills, plus Algebra 1, typically taught in eighth or ninth grade. This section includes 80 multiple-choice questions. Students must get 55 percent right to pass.

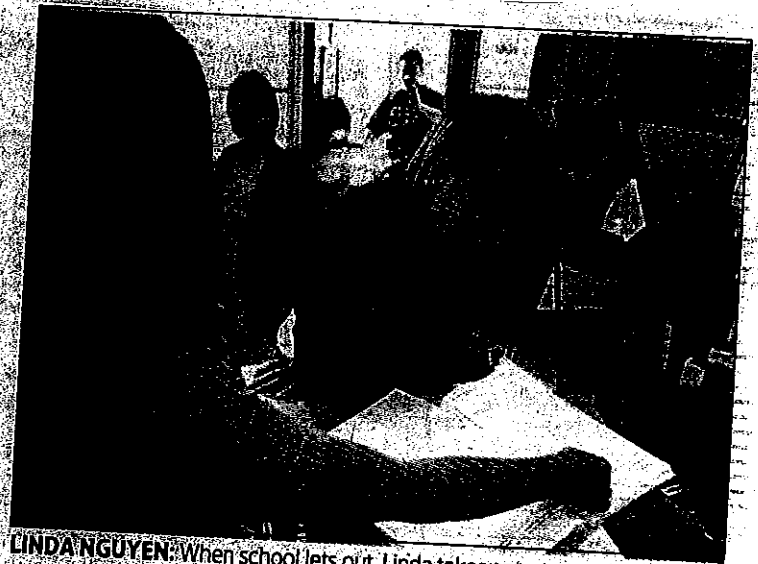
English: The English language arts portion tests students on ninth- and 10th-grade reading and writing skills. It includes 72 multiple-choice questions and one essay question. Students must get 60 percent right to pass.

First in an occasional series on the California High School Exit Exam and its impact on the class of 2006.

By Laurel Rosenhall
BEE STAFF WRITER

Within the next few months, a staggering number of California high school seniors may see their worlds come crashing down. They are the guinea pigs in a tough new state experiment: the California High School Exit Exam. So many now are at risk of not graduating, it would take 60 high school campuses to seat them all.

A practice that's gone on for decades will come to an end. Principals no longer will hand diplomas to students who can barely read, write and calculate. This spring, for the first time, seniors who can't pass the exam will not be allowed to graduate. They could be kids like Linda Nguyen, who started in Sacramento City Unified schools as a



LINDA NGUYEN: When school lets out, Linda takes an extra math class as she prepares to tackle the exit exam. Hiram Johnson is trying to tailor classes to help students pass the exam, but lack of participation forced cancellations.

kindergartner and has earned a C average ever since. Or Kevin Muhammad, who hopes to attend college on a basketball scholarship. Or Juan Calderon, who left Mexico at age 4 and

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sacbee
online

To find tips for preparing for the California High School Exit Exam and links to sites offering free assistance, go to:
www.sacbee.com/links

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PUT TO THE TEST

Young futures on the line

This year's seniors must pass the state's exit exam to graduate, and time is running out for 4,643 local students



BRANDON REYNOLDS: Acting out a skit in his drama class at Hiram Johnson, he hopes to study drama at college. Brandon is confident he will pass the exit exam.



KEVIN HODAMIAN: As a varsity football player and a new father with a job outside school, his time is in demand. Kevin hopes to attend college on a football scholarship, but like 181 other Hiram Johnson High School seniors, he hasn't passed the California High School Exit Exam.

Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas

Passing the test

A Bee survey of every district with high schools in El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento and Yolo counties shows that, as of the start of the school year, 4,643 seniors have yet to pass the California High School Exit Exam. The state estimates that 3 percent of California 12th-graders have passed the test.

SCHOOL	TOTAL # OF SENIORS	% PASSED STATEWIDE ESTIMATE = 78%	# OF SENIORS NOT PASSED
SACRAMENTO COUNTY			
Center Unified	373	87%	49
Center High School	375	91%	29
Antelope View Charter School	48	71%	14
McClellan Continuation High School	10	40%	6
Elk Grove Unified	4,111	81%	801
Sheldon High School	788	85%	118
Elk Grove High School	629	88%	77
Franklin High School	603	92%	48
Laguna Creek High School	579	87%	76
Florin High School	502	81%	97
Valley High School	426	76%	106
Calvine Continuation	128	58%	50
Rio Cordero Continuation	116	54%	53
Dayton Continuation	96	83%	16
Las Flores Alternative	90	72%	25
Elk Grove Charter	88	66%	30
Non-public schools	33	15%	28
Monterey Trail High School	28	10%	26
Capital Community Day	16	0%	16
Elk Grove Community Day	4	75%	1
Other programs	13	40%	8
Folsom Cordova Unified	1,119	85%	169
Folsom High	622	95%	29
Cordova High	374	79%	79
Kinney High (continuation)	46	43%	26
Walnutwood (Independent study)	34	44%	19
Folsom Lake High (continuation)	29	83%	5
Non-public schools	10	30%	7
Mather Youth Academy (community day)	4	0%	4
It Joint Union	471	79%	101
Galt High School	395	81%	73
Estrella High School (continuation)	76	42%	45
Grant Joint Union	1,301	71%	372
Rio Linda High School	377	83%	65
Grant High School	324	64%	117
Foothill High School	251	82%	46
Highlands High School	189	74%	50
Keema High School	102	47%	54
Vista Nueva Career & Technology HS	38	32%	26
Pacific Career & Technology HS	20	30%	14
Natomas Unified	638	69%	185
Natomas High	474	70%	142
Discovery High (continuation)	93	47%	49
Natomas Charter	31	38%	19
River Delta Unified	173	78%	38
Rio Vista High School	111	68%	35
Delta High School	62	95%	3
Sacramento City Unified	3,096	70%	921
C. K. McClatchy High	598	76%	145
John F. Kennedy High	552	84%	86
Luther Burbank High	510	61%	201
Hiram W. Johnson High	496	63%	182
West Campus High	205	99%	3
Capital City School (Independent study)	103	62%	39
Non-public schools	73	0%	73
New Technology High	56	61%	21
Genesis High	34	37%	21
American Legion	34	71%	10
America's Choice High	33	64%	12
The Mer High School	3	67%	1
Sacramento Charter High	335	66%	113
VAPAC Charter High	46	67%	15
San Juan Unified	4,226	81%	782
Isions in Education (Independent study)	633	57%	270
Mira Loma High School	441	86%	63
Bella Vista High School	423	95%	22
Rio Americano High School	412	94%	25
Casa Roble Fundamental	411	93%	30
El Camino Fundamental	399	94%	23
Del Campo High School	385	92%	29
Mesa Verde High School	284	89%	31

San Juan High School	243	72%	69
El Sereno Independent Study	204	75%	51
Encina High School	159	64%	58
San Juan Choices	93	67%	31
La Entrada Continuation	79	38%	49
Home and Hospital	29	66%	10
Sierra Nueva	16	38%	10
La Vista	15	27%	11
EL DORADO COUNTY			
Black Oak Mine Unified	165	84%	26
Golden Sierra High School	149	89%	16
Divide Continuation	15	40%	9
Black Oak Mine Community Day School	1	0%	1
El Dorado Union	1,778	92%	148
Oak Ridge High School	476	95%	23
Ponderosa High School	461	95%	21
Union Mine High School	336	96%	15
El Dorado High School	267	93%	19
Independent Learning Center	119	70%	38
Independence High School (continuation)	51	75%	13
Shenandoah High School (charter)	30	90%	3
Vista High School (alternative)	19	63%	7
Mountain View High School (alternative)	17	41%	10
EDUHS Community Day School	2	50%	1
Lake Tahoe Unified	449	62%	171
South Tahoe High School	387	69%	120
McTallac High School (continuation)	50	14%	43
Transitional Learning Center (continuation)	12	33%	8
PLACER COUNTY			
Placer Union High	1,094	91%	96
Placer High School	372	95%	17
Del Oro High School	354	94%	20
Colfax High School	206	95%	11
Chana High School (continuation)	81	67%	27
Madison High School (Independent study)	79	73%	21
Forest Hill High School	2	100%	0
Rocklin Unified	659	89%	71
Rocklin High School	571	92%	47
Victory High School (continuation)	56	68%	18
Rocklin Independent School	32	81%	6
Roseville Joint Union	992	92%	158
Grange Bay High School	505	98%	18
Woodcreek High School	446	92%	36
Roseville High School	397	91%	35
Oakmont High School	391	93%	27
Independent Study	60	90%	16
Adelphi High School (continuation)	90	60%	36
Tahoe Truckee Unified	345	83%	60
North Tahoe High School	109	78%	24
Truckee High School	215	88%	26
Sierra High School (continuation)	25	60%	10
Western Placer Unified	276	87%	37
Lincoln High School	248	90%	27
Phoenix High School (continuation)	28	54%	13
YOLO COUNTY			
Davis Joint Unified	732	90%	76
Davis Senior High School	599	92%	50
Leonardo da Vinci High School	55	96%	2
Davis School for Independent Study	33	97%	1
Martin Luther King (continuation)	45	49%	23
Esposito Unified	58	83%	10
Esposito High School	58	83%	10
Washington Unified	397	77%	92
River City High School	358	80%	73
Yolo Continuation High School	25	48%	13
West Sacramento School for Ind. Study	14	57%	6
Winters Joint Unified	183	74%	48
Winters High School	155	75%	38
Independent Study	14	57%	6
Wardell Continuation	14	71%	4
Woodland Joint Unified	797	72%	222
Woodland High School	369	76%	89
Pioneer High School	334	76%	80
Cache Creek Continuation High School	94	44%	53

TOTAL 4,643
Source: local school districts
Sacramento Bee/Olivia Nguyen

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PUT TO THE TEST

Exam: State pass rate 66% among lower-income students

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dreams of becoming a lawyer. The seniors are among 182 at Hiram Johnson High School and nearly 5,000 locally and 90,000 statewide — who still have not passed the test. The exam is in two parts — math and English language arts — and students must pass both sections.

"I just want to get my education and make my parents proud of me," Linda said. "I'm just nervous about that test."

Despite their aspirations, many face tough odds. Linda is studying hard for the math test — very little for the English portion. Kevin has a 2-week-old baby and has contemplated dropping some classes so he can pick up more hours at his dishwashing job. Juan, though he has failed that part of the exam three times, is not taking a math course this year.

Anxiety, apathy and confidence swirl on the Johnson campus. It's already time for seniors to take portraits and order their caps and gowns — even though more than one-third of the class has not passed the test they need to graduate.

The actions of state and local educators haven't made things easy. The school, as required by state law, offered extra help to seniors who have yet to pass the exam, but the law doesn't require them to attend.

Classes, too, are not always aligned with students' needs. Johnson seniors, for example, can opt out of math if they've completed the required credits — even if they haven't passed that of the exit exam.

And teachers say that state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, an exam supporter, confused students further when he said in September that he would consider alter-

natives for those who haven't passed. They say students wonder if the exam will be postponed, as it was for the class of 2004, the group originally in line to first face the consequences.

Depending on each school's calendar, seniors get two or three more chances to pass before graduation day. Hiram Johnson seniors will try again Tuesday and Wednesday and then in March.

"I want to walk the stage," Juan said. "You see in the movies, you see it everywhere. I want to be just like them."

The state does not track individual student performance, so it can't accurately report how many seniors have passed the test. But a Bee survey of all high schools in Sacramento, Yolo, El Dorado and Placer counties shows that 4,643 seniors have yet to pass the exam. One-third of them are concentrated in just 10 schools — most of them campuses that serve large numbers of low-income and nonwhite students.

That means graduation ceremonies could be much smaller than usual next year at the region's neediest schools.

Johnson is one of them.

Teaching the standards

At the east end of Sacramento's Tahoe Park neighborhood, Hiram Johnson High School is dotted with rosebushes and neatly clipped lawns. Low-lying brick buildings surround a courtyard where students hold brownie-eating contests during homecoming week. The corridors are lined with posters reminding seniors to order their class rings.

Student enrollment at Johnson is roughly 20 percent each African American and white, and 30 percent each Latino and Asian American. Most students

come from low-income homes, with 64 percent qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Nearly four in 10 are learning English as a second language.

"It is just the kind of school that is supposed to benefit from standards-based education and testing. These federal and state efforts are designed to hold administrators and teachers accountable for teaching all students the same skills no matter what school they attend."

The exit exam adds a new wrinkle to the growing accountability movement. It is the only piece that holds students accountable.

Some students know that. Each day when school lets out, 17-year-old Linda Nguyen heads to an extra math class.

On the board:

$$2y + 4 - 6 + 6y > 2$$

"I want to try," Linda calls out from the back of the room.

She combines like terms to get

$$8y - 2 > 2$$

Then she adds 2 to both sides of the equation and quickly solves it.

"The answer is B," Linda said. "It's greater than or equal to."

The teacher rewards her with a lollipop.

Yet, like so many kids, Linda also exhibits contradictions. She works hard on math, is active in the school's Asian club and has an after-school job at Quizno's.

But Linda is doing little to prepare for the English part of the test. Last year, she took an exit exam English class — but dropped it this year because her favorite teacher left the school.

She changed her mind a week before Tuesday's test and enrolled in a before-school English class. But by then, she had time for only a couple of lessons.

A team of Hiram Johnson educators planned math and

English classes for students failing the exit exam: six classes before school, seven after and another one on Saturdays.

"We have a lot of opportunities for these kids, but they have to take some responsibility for their learning," said math coach Theresa Cummings, who worked on the classes.

In the end, however, so few students showed up for the English classes that the school canceled two of them just 10 days before the test. School officials said they've contacted parents and urged students to attend. But they can't force students to come to classes outside the school day.

"We walk around in terror for them," said Cummings' colleague John Andersen. "And if they are terrified, they certainly are covering very well."

Looking for role models

Two weeks before the November test date, Juan Calderon didn't know when the test was being held. But he was working hard in other ways — helping his father run a concrete-pouring business, taking care of his younger brother and choreographing quinceañera dances.

Juan, 18, has passed the English part of the test but not the math. You wouldn't know it by looking at his class schedule. He's taking English 12 — like most seniors — but is not enrolled in math.

Juan has all the math credits he needs for graduation and said he didn't want the stress of taking it again. It's the only subject in which Juan has been placed in special education.

"I don't know how I passed geometry and Algebra 1," he said. "I don't feel I learned enough to pass the California High School Exit Exam."

Many of Hiram Johnson's

struggling seniors have never done well in school but always have been promoted. They've gotten by with C's and D's. They don't always attend class.

Some have learning disabilities. Some were born in other countries and are still learning English. Some live in homes where adults have little education.

But if education is society's "great equalizer" — as posters in Johnson's hallways boast — all students should be able to graduate with the same basic skills. That's the hope with the high school exit exam.

So far, it hasn't proved true. Across California, the seniors who haven't yet passed are largely black or brown and poor.

Statewide 99 percent of white seniors and 89 percent of Asian American seniors have passed. That compares with 68 percent of Latino seniors and 63 percent of African American seniors. Among poor seniors of all ethnic backgrounds, 66 percent have passed, compared with 78 percent of the general population.

By many measures the exam should not be difficult for students, who start taking it as sophomores and get a total of six tries. It tests students on reading and writing at a ninth- and 10th-grade level and math skills typically taught in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. Students must get 55 percent to 60 percent of the questions right to pass.

The first class facing an exit exam's consequences usually has the highest rate of failure, said Patty Sullivan, director of the Center on Education Policy, which studies exit exams in the 25 states that have or are developing them. Once younger students see their friends held back from graduation, the pass rate typically jumps, she said.

Good or bad, by the end of the school year California's seniors will become the role models they themselves never had.

"You do have to make an example out of some kids, which is really harsh," said Cummings, the math coach. "This year is going to be a really rough year."

Frustration grows

Most states with exit exams require that schools offer remediation to failing students. But only four states require students to attend the classes, and California is not among them.

That's created a sticky situation for Brandon Reynolds, 18, and Larissa Aguilar, 17.

At the start of the school year the two were enrolled in an after-school English class. Students learned how to construct essays. They worked on thesis statements and topic sentences.

But — like most of the 22 students enrolled — neither attended every day, and the class was canceled.

Brandon, who hopes to go to acting college and dreams of a career on the stage, remains confident he will pass the exam next time. His last score was very close to passing.

"I have a lot more knowledge than last year," Brandon said.

But his mother is frustrated.

"They're kids," said Darleen Reynolds. "They take on or granted that someone is going to push them right through. And why not? They've gotten through all these years like that."

Reynolds supports the exam. She thinks it could help improve low-performing schools. If teachers don't demand that students learn the basics before they graduate, at least the test will, she figures.

Larissa was five points from passing the English section last time, but her math score was much further away.

For years, her mother said, she's been asking school officials to test Larissa for learning disabilities.

"She's pretty much been failing every class since junior high," said Jennifer Almanza.

"But they kept putting her through."

That stopped this year — sort of. School officials held Larissa back to 11th grade. At the same time, they placed her in two special education classes and gave her a heavy course load that could allow her to graduate in June — if she passes all her

classes, attends night school, completes a senior project and passes the exit exam.

Larissa spent evenings on her senior project — learning to box and weekends working at Del Lago. She soon grew defeated.

The pressure of coursework and the exam became unbearable. Larissa told her mom not to order senior portraits. She now talks about dropping out.

A mother's dreams

The exit exam is a graduation requirement for all students, but legal challenges have been mounting. A hearing is set for January in a lawsuit seeking to exempt students with disabilities from having to pass the test this year.

Unless that happens, there will be no relief for Kevin Muhammad, 17. He participates eagerly in his special education classes but still stumbles over words like "wedding" and "folding" when he reads aloud.

In math, he volunteers to answer questions and sits in the front row.

Teacher Debra Schlim guides students through a lesson on exponents. She shows them a poster illustrating how to add, subtract, multiply and divide numbers with exponents. Use the rules on the poster to solve the workbook problems, she says.

"Sitting there going, 'I don't know what to do' with your head down is not going to get you to pass an exit exam."

Schlim said. "You have to take some personal responsibility and think about what you want."

Kevin knows what he wants. Like Linda and Juan and Larissa and Brandon, he wants to graduate and make his mother proud.

And Kevin's mother wants what so many parents do. She wants Kevin to have the opportunities she never did.

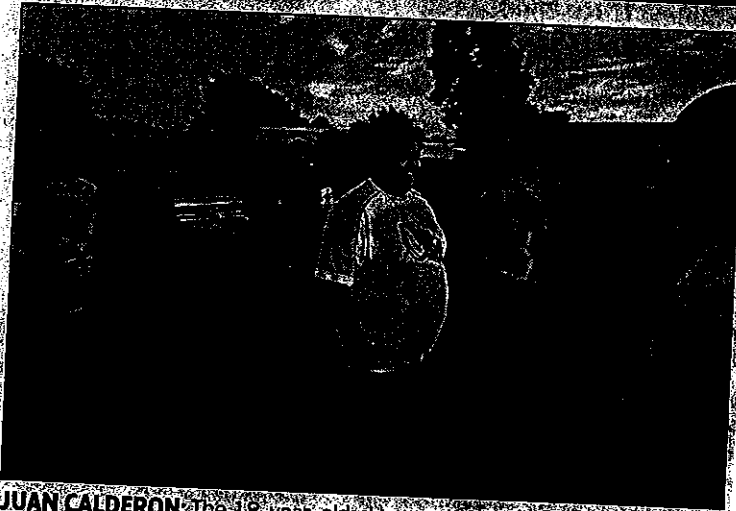
That includes going to the prom, posing for senior portraits and crossing the stage on graduation day. Yeavonne Turner said she never did those things because she dropped out of high school when she became pregnant with Kevin during her senior year.

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LARISSA AGUILAR: The Hiram Johnson senior works the speed bag at the Washington Neighborhood Center. Larissa, who spent evenings on her senior project — learning to box — and weekends working at Del Taco, has felt the pressure of coursework and the exam become unbearable. She now talks about dropping out.

Sacramento Bee/
Carl Costas



JUAN CALDERON: The 18-year-old, shown rehearsing a dance he choreographed for his cousin's quinceañera, has passed the English part of the exit exam, but the math portion poses a more difficult challenge for him.

"It's all up to my boy here to make sure that he gets to do what I didn't get to do," Turner said. "Everything is like a dream come true for me, this whole year."

Kevin hasn't passed either part of the exit exam. As a young father and varsity athlete, his time is in demand. But Turner is planning his graduation.

She has taken him for his senior portraits. She has fawned over the proofs. In her favorite pose, Kevin is wearing a red cap and gown. His teeth peek through a little smile and his cheeks glow.

■ ■ ■
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The

SUNDAY December 11, 2005 ★★

Sacramento

Bee

PUT TO THE TEST

THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE

Students feel weight of schools' woes

Second in an occasional series on the California High School Exit Exam and its impact on the class of 2006

By Laurel Rosenhall
BEE STAFF WRITER

Larissa Aguilar started her education the way so many students do: with a kindergarten teacher who emphasized the letters of the alphabet and snapped her fingers when it was time for the class to quiet down.

Throughout the mid-1990s, Larissa remembers some teachers who brought cookies, some who taught vivid lessons on the dangers of smoking, and some who played with the children outside.

But things changed drastically in fifth grade. That year, Larissa and her mother say, class was a scene of daily chaos. Students acted out. Lesson plans were rarely in place. Parents never knew who would be teaching.

"That whole year was just a mess," said Larissa's mother, Jennifer Almanza. "It was different teachers every week, and they weren't learning anything."

Over the years, some classes went better for Larissa.

Others brought more of the same: strings of substitutes, whole semesters with minimally qualified teachers. Larissa says she played around too much and didn't pay enough attention.

Now she attends Hiram Johnson High School, but the consequences of her educational past loom: She is at risk of not graduating because she is behind in math and has not passed the California High School Exam. The class of 2006 is the first required to pass to graduate.

The exam is the latest in California's decade-long effort to standardize education and create more equity among the schools. But this time the approach is different. Unlike previous steps that pressured teachers and administrators, the exam puts the burden squarely on the shoulders of the state's roughly 450,000 high school seniors.

The result: a heated debate that has divided educators, civil rights advocates and the very families who soon will live through the exam's consequences.

By withholding diplomas from students who ha-

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Hiram Johnson senior Kevin Muhammad cuddles his daughter Alexyana. He sees a diploma as his path to a better future.

SAC BEE Dec. 11, 2005



Larissa Aguilar studies American government at home. She is one of 182 Hiram Johnson High School seniors who have yet to pass the exam required to receive a diploma. She says her education began normally enough, but classroom chaos in the fifth grade threw her off track and she's been playing catch-up ever since.

Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas

Exam: Some see test as

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received a substandard education, critics argue, the state is punishing the victims of an unjust system. Exam supporters are just as adamant that the test, which holds all students to one clear standard, is a step toward achieving an American ideal: equality for all.

For the seniors who haven't passed the test — more than 90,000 across California and 182 at Sacramento's Hiram Johnson High School — the debate raises a troubling question: Who is really failing — the students, or the system?

The answer depends on whom you ask.

Students split on blame

Linda Nguyen remembers caring teachers who helped her learn English. Brandon Reynolds recalls an elementary-school teacher who visited his house to remind his mother of the night's assignments.

Now seniors at Johnson, they blame themselves for failing the exam in 10th and 11th grades. Brandon, 18, says he was lazy and never did his homework. Linda, 17, says she spent much of her first two years in high school cutting class and getting into fights.

"Then I found out, end of my sophomore year, that it's really important for me to pass (the exam) to make my parents happy and for me to have a good future," she said, sitting in the living room of her Rosemont-area home.

The realization, Linda says, turned her behavior around. She started taking school seriously and stopped hanging out with troublemakers.

In that way, exam supporters say, the test is doing what it is supposed to: holding students accountable for their learning and their behavior.

Still, students like Juan Calderon feel they simply haven't been taught enough to succeed. He recalls an eighth-grade math teacher who showed movies every week.

"Monday through Thursday we would do work and then Friday it was always just like kick-back and free time," said Juan, 18.

key step to equality

That was at Will C. Wood Middle School, where just 36 percent of current teachers are considered "highly qualified," according to the Sacramento City Unified School District. Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, all teachers must become "highly qualified." That means they must have a bachelor's degree, a teaching credential and subject-specific expertise.

The teacher quality gap

But some of Sacramento's lowest-performing schools haven't met the requirement. At Larissa's middle school, Kit Carson, 36 percent of teachers now are highly qualified. When Larissa was there, a string of substitutes in eighth-grade math came to an end with a long-term sub on an emergency credential. "He wouldn't really teach us," said Larissa, 17. "He would mess around with the students a lot. Like goof off, play around."

Superintendent Maggie Carrillo Mejia said she has heard the "horror stories" of Sacramento schools in the 1990s, but says they have improved. She said she is determined that the lowest-performing schools not be filled with the least-prepared teachers.

"We have to take responsibility for making sure that doesn't continue to happen as a practice in Sac City," Mejia said.

Research shows students failing the exit exam are much more likely to attend schools lacking fully credentialed teachers with expertise in the subjects they teach. At Hiram Johnson, for example, half the student body is enrolled in at least one class where the teacher is not considered highly qualified.

And across the state, the high schools with the most students failing the test have the greatest numbers of untrained math and English teachers — the two subjects tested on the exit exam.

For test critics, these facts show how unfair the exit exam is.

"If there's bad meat out on the market, we don't punish the people who consume the meat. We punish the people who produce the meat," said Pedro Noguera, a New York University professor who specializes in urban education and served on the Berkeley school board in the early 1990s.

The schools Noguera considers "bad meat" largely serve students from poor and non-English-speaking families. That puts the American dream in jeopardy, he says, for millions who would especially benefit from a good education.

Waiting for utopia

Russlynn Ali believes in the exit exam. A civil rights lawyer before she became director of Ed Trust West, an Oakland-based group that advocates for students of color, she says the state can't wait for perfect conditions before imposing higher expectations on students.

"I wish we lived in utopia," Ali said. "I wish we could get a qualified teacher in every classroom. ... I wish we could get a rigorous curriculum taught to everybody. (But) it is going to be really hard to get that utopia without the spotlight that testing brings."

Juan's parents say the American dream compelled them to leave Mexico and work hard so their children could go to school in this country. The idea that her son might not graduate because he hasn't passed the math part of the exit exam causes Maria Calderon great pain. "I want (my children) to have something better than we have," she said.

Yet Calderon doesn't blame the state for creating strict criteria for graduation. "How can you pass someone if they don't know the information?" she said.

Test supporters say the exit exam will help schools restore the dream Calderon believes in. Students who have yet to pass are offered extra classes, more

time with teachers and additional math and English workbooks. Many have shown they can pass the test by working at

That means they're learning skills they otherwise might not have learned, says Jack O'Connell, the state superintendent of public instruction who, as a state legislator in the 1990s, created the exit exam.

"That's why we need to have high school exit exam, to make sure we're challenging the system," O'Connell said. "I knew that we would challenge the system and I knew that it wouldn't be easy. But I also knew it's in all of our students' best interest."

Schools already are making changes. Larissa's eighth-grade math teacher no longer works education, largely, he said, because of the effort to put fully credentialed teachers in every class.

Reached by phone at the resort his parents own near Truckee, Michael Waasdorp said he enjoyed the five years he spent at Kit Carson. But he said he was asked to leave in 2004 because he had an emergency credential and wasn't interested in becoming a highly qualified teacher.

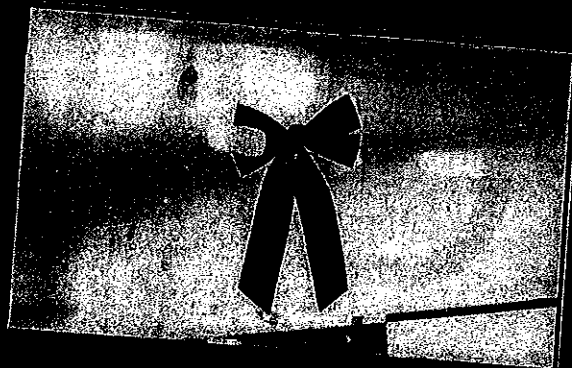
"I was more into the coachi and the sports aspect than I was into the teaching," he said.

Feeling left behind

Despite poor middle school grades, Larissa advanced to Sacramento High School. Again — for the third time in five years she was placed in a math class without a permanent teacher. "We had different teachers whole year," Larissa said.

Almanza pulled her daughter out. For 10th grade, Larissa enrolled in Hiram Johnson. She has taken Algebra I for three years, never earning higher than a D-plus.

Larissa has always lived in Oak Park and Tahoe Park, and her mother, a secretary for the



Larissa Aguilan works after part-time job. Her mother says she might have gotten a better education if she'd lived in a wealthier community.

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Test online, please go to:
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one point, things grew so dire that Kevin, his sister and their mother slept in the family's Ford Taurus.

"We used to (park) in front of the school, with clothes in the trunk and everything," Kevin said.

Now Kevin has his own child and divides his time between his mother's Sacramento home and his girlfriend's. He has been taking classes to prepare for the exit exam because he sees a high school diploma as his surest route to financial stability.

Darleen Reynolds, whose son Brandon attends Hiram Johnson, believes success rests on a student's desire to learn, not a family's income. Her older sons attended West Campus, where 99 percent of seniors have passed the exam. At Johnson to date, 63 percent of those in the class of 2006 have passed.

But both schools serve large numbers of students who come from low-income families—64 percent of Johnson students and 40 percent of those at West Campus qualify for subsidized lunch.

Reynolds doesn't blame educa-

tors for the differences in the schools' passage rates. "There's got to be a school for the kids who don't want to learn anything, who just need to get through the system," she said.

For some, getting through the system is an accomplishment on its own. Linda's mother came to the United States as a teenager and has little formal education. She hopes her daughter will pass the test and graduate. But she says Linda's years in school have been valuable no matter what.

"If Linda cannot reach high, it's OK if she only achieves at the low level," Ly Nguyen said in Vietnamese. "My thoughts about Linda will be the same."

In the kitchen of the family's Rosemont home, Nguyen points to a wall where Linda's kindergarten-class picture hangs. She said she wants to hang Linda's diploma there so visitors will see how well she has done.

Time is running out

That outcome remains to be seen. Seniors at Johnson took the exit exam again last month and will learn their scores in January. Juan and Brandon feel confident. Linda and Kevin aren't so sure.

They will get two more chances—in February and May. But only if they pass by February will they be allowed to walk the graduation stage in June.

Larissa doesn't see that happening. She thinks she has failed again. One section asked students to write an essay about a boomerang, and Larissa said she couldn't think of a thing to say.

And there's another barrier: She is about a semester behind in credits. Larissa's counselors have lightened her course load and told her she can graduate after summer school if she passes the exam and all her classes.

But the idea of not graduating with her class in June is so humiliating to Larissa that she says she would rather just drop out.

■ ■ ■

The Bee's Laurel Rosenhall can be reached at (916) 321-1083 or lrosenhall@sacbee.com. Bee staff writers Thuy Doan Le and Erika Chavez provided Vietnamese and Spanish translation for this report.

state feels Larissa would have received a better education if she could have afforded to raise her in a different community.

In the schools where there's no money to pay for things like uniforms, teachers don't care, Alvarez said. Student enrollment at Johnson is roughly 25 percent each white and African American and 30 percent Latino and Asian American. Johnson's principal disputes Alvarez's contention, saying her teachers work hard for the students. Teaching those from low-income areas is challenging, Johnson says, and because of problems with healthcare and housing, the state isn't helping.

The exit exam alone won't get things out, she said. In-

stead, Tafuya wants parents to discipline children for poor grades and teachers to inspire students to value education.

"The teacher is the single deciding factor, and if I don't have teachers who are showing up every day with thoughtful, well-planned instruction, then I'm failing my kids," she said.

Determined to succeed

Kevin Muhammad says he has had good teachers, but his early school years are a blur. Because of family illness and his mother's unstable employment, he has moved many times in his 17 years—so much so that Kevin can't remember where he started elementary school. At

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Final edition 50

WEDNESDAY January 25, 2006 **

Test's moment of truth painful for some

With chances to pass exit exam dwindling, students feel the heat

One in an occasional series on the California High School Exit Exam and its impact on the class of 2006.

By Laurel Rosenhall
BEE STAFF WRITER

On a damp, gray day earlier this month, as Juan Calderon passed through the halls of Hiram Johnson High School, a teacher handed him a sheet of paper carrying devastating news: "Ca HS Exit Exam MATH -

Failed."

Juan crumpled it in his fist and threw it in the trash. He growled in frustration and kicked a nearby garbage can with his bright white sneakers. Then tears began to run down his flushed cheeks.

"It sucks. It really does suck," he said. "I just feel I'm not going to make it anymore."

Just days before, state officials had reiterated their commitment to the California High School Exit Exam, leaving no alternatives for those who fail the test to graduate with their class.

As the November test results began to seep out at Hiram

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Hiram Johnson senior Larissa Aguilar got mixed news from counselor Jim Limonoff about the exam - she passed the English part but fell short in math. She's going to take night classes to try again.

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"That ain't my goal, to go to no night school and not walk the stage. Everyone wants to see me walk the stage and get my diploma."

Kevin Muhammad, 17, whose score improved but not enough to pass the latest state exit exam



A dejected Juan Calderon, a senior at Hiram Johnson High School, has just learned that he failed to pass the math portion of the California High School Exit Exam.

Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas

Exit exam: So close,

► FROM PAGE A1
Johnson, some students flashed big smiles along with their scores while others wanted to go home and cry. Counselors struggled to help the 114 seniors who had failed at least one section of the test again, including four of the five students whose progress The Bee is tracking.

More than 30,000 California public school students - including 102 at this inner-city high school - began their senior year without having passed the basic skills test. Since then, several thousand have passed both the math and English tests.

But the experience of most matches that of Juan, highlighting California's practice of passing students through their years in school without demanding grade-level learning.

Juan has a C average in high school and is on track to earn all the credits he needs to graduate. He passed the English exam the first time he took it as a sophomore but continues to find math daunting. In the past, Juan has received special education help in math. Yet, despite his repeated failure on the exit exam, school administrators allowed Juan to drop his math class this year. Another failure nonetheless came as a surprise to Juan.

"I really didn't expect this," he said, as a friend stopped to give him a hug. "I bought my cap and gown already and everything."

Juan and his classmates get five more chances - next month and in May. But to graduate with their class in June, they must pass the next test, on Feb. 7 and 8. And for many, the walk across the graduation stage feels as important as the diploma itself.

"If I don't pass next time, it's going to be hard," said Juan, 18. "Twelve years of school and tests and homework so they can tell you, 'No, you can't get your diploma.'"

Taking a hard line

The Jan. 6 message from Jack O'Connell, the state superintendent of public instruction, was clear: no pass, no diploma.

Opponents of the exit exam immediately threatened to sue.

Emphasizing that students who fail won't be kicked out of the education system, O'Connell said that after finishing high school they could still try to pass the test and earn a diploma. Adult education programs, independent study, community college and a fifth year of high school are some of the ways he said they could do that.

O'Connell also suggested students could earn a diploma equivalent without passing the exit exam by taking the General Educational Development (GED) test or the California High School Proficiency Exam.

so far for students

His suggestions drew immediate criticism, not just in the state capital but at Hiram Johnson High School in offices at some of the state's top universities.

Education experts say students who leave high school without a diploma have slimmer chances of success in work or further schooling. Some question whether those who fail the exit exam could pass the GED or proficiency tests, which demand more skills.

And students say O'Connell's options offer no way to fulfill their dream of tossing their graduation caps in June.

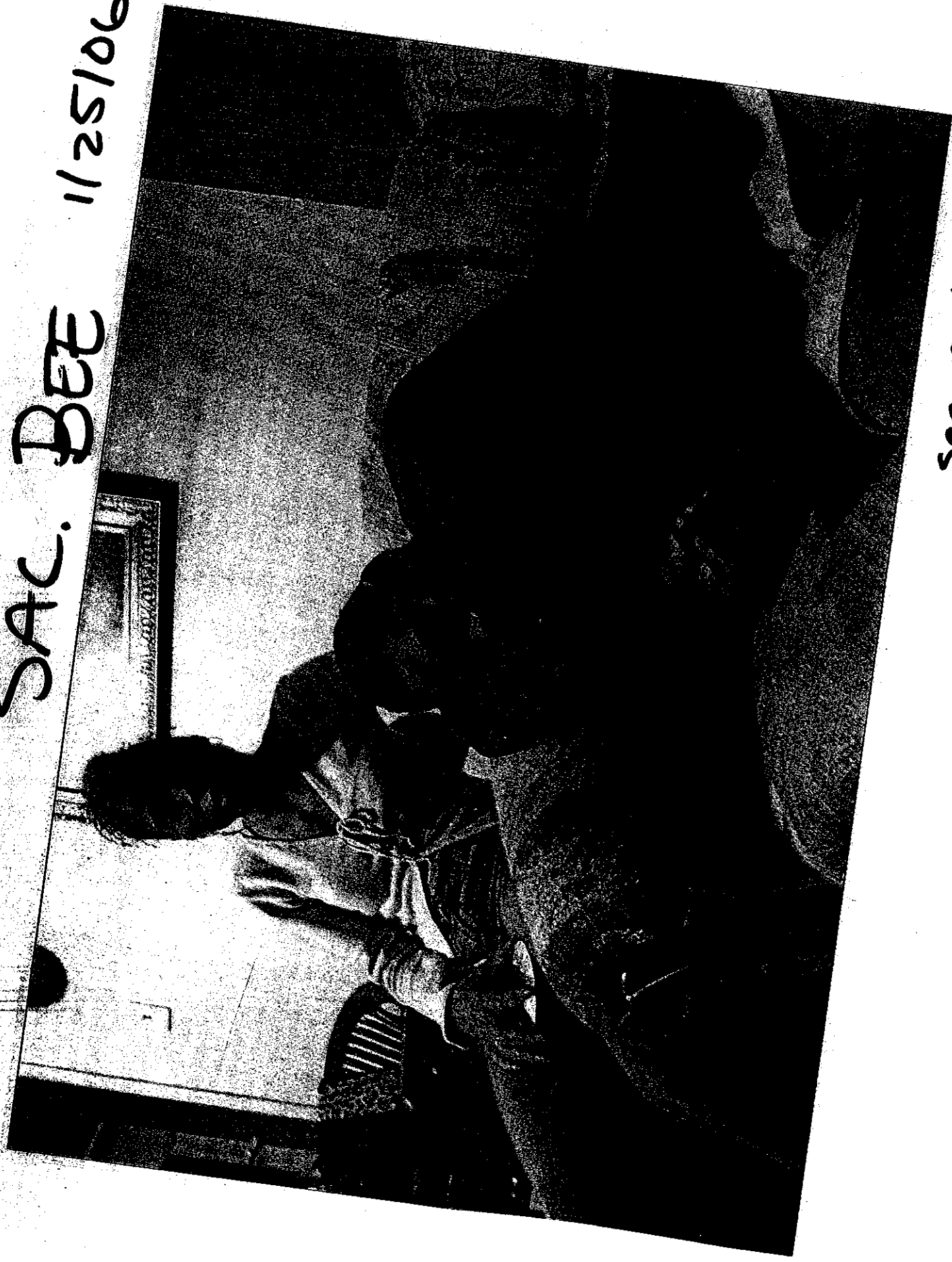
"That ain't my goal, to go to no night school and not walk the stage," said Kevin Muhammad, 17. "Everyone wants to see me walk the stage and get my diploma."

Kevin has worked hard to prepare for the exam and his math score shows it, jumping 18 points since he took the test last March. But the new score was still short - by only 3 points.

"I was just mad," Kevin said. "I ain't tripping about math, I got close on that. But the English and reading, though."

His voice trails off. Kevin has a learning disability. While some students his age take advanced literature classes, Kevin must still sound out many words. His exit exam English score has re-

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See next page
for details of photo

Hiram Johnson High School seniors Alejandra De La Isla, left, and Juan Calderon, second from left, rib each other good-naturedly earlier this month about the results of the state exit exam, which both of them failed. They must pass the next exam, scheduled Feb. 7 and 8, to be able to don a cap and gown and walk down the aisle with their classmates in the school's graduation ceremony.

Sacramento Bee/
Carl Costas

remained flat – around 20 points shy of the passing score of 350.

If a bipartisan proposal related to special education receives the governor's approval, Kevin appears to be the most likely candidate among the five students tracked by The Bee to get a reprieve.

Leaders of the Legislature, the state Department of Education and the governor's office of education have proposed a waiver of the exam for special education students in the class of 2006, but only if they take the exam at least twice after 10th grade and at least once during 12th grade, attend exam preparation classes at their school, and have an active special education plan and fulfill all other graduation requirements.

If Kevin qualifies for the waiver, or if he passes the exam, he will be the first in his family to graduate from high school. He is determined to achieve what his parents have not.

Beyond that, Kevin's plans for the future are fuzzy. He once wanted to play college basketball, but has left his high school team in a conflict with his coach. Kevin works weekends washing dishes at a midtown restaurant, but doesn't see that as a job for a high school graduate. Maybe, Kevin says, he'll seek employment as a janitor at Sacramento's Shriners Hospitals for Children Northern California, where he enjoyed working last summer, emptying garbage and watering plants.

Kevin has a lot of responsibilities: he has a daughter to support and is helping his mother raise his siblings. When his mom recently hurt her back, Kevin stayed home from school to care for the three small children.

But he remains optimistic, saying he won't give up and doesn't want his classmates to, either.

"If there's any other kids out there like me, just tell them to keep their heads up," Kevin said. "Keep on trying. ... We all in this together."

Sweating the results

Linda Nguyen felt sick to her stomach as she waited in the counseling office. She had made big strides in the past year, turning around her behavior and pulling up her grades. Now she was going to find out if she was a step closer to graduation.

A friend emerged from meeting with the counselor. "Waiting for your scores?" the girl asked, a smile beaming across her face.

Linda nodded.

"I passed," her friend said.

"I'm hecka nervous," Linda replied.

Minutes later, Linda was inside Leticia Flores' office, tapping her feet anxiously as the printer churned out her scores.

"They're both not passing," Flores said.

Linda looked down and sighed. She was sad, but not shocked. The scores were almost identical to her scores from last March. Only last year did the 17-year-old realize the importance of passing the exit exam and begin to study.

Born in the United States, Linda has attended Sacramento schools since kindergarten. But because she speaks Vietnamese at home, she takes classes for students learning English. In most academic subjects, she is surrounded by peers speaking Spanish, Hmong and Cantonese.

After delivering the bad news, Flores pulled out a list of test-prep classes and urged Linda to attend. The courses were nothing new to Linda – she took an exit exam English class after school last year

and an exit exam math class after school this fall.

Now she's going to add a before-school class and a Saturday workshop. She quit her job at Quizno's last month to focus on school and said she plans to go to the library every night and seek help from a cousin in math.

She is motivated by her desire to graduate with her friends. But if Linda doesn't pass the exit exam, teachers and counselors have told her she won't have to alter her plans to attend community college.

A handful of community colleges – in San Francisco and in Southern California – offer high school completion programs. At others, students lacking diplomas can skip the high school curriculum and move on to vocational training. That solution might work for Linda, who is interested in a career in hair styling or fashion design.

Linda isn't certain her family can afford community college without help, however, and current law bars students without diplomas from some types of financial aid. O'Connell said he wants to work with the Legislature to change that.

Even if he succeeds, the role of the community colleges for students failing the exit exam is a subject of debate. Exit exam critics say the K-12 system is shirking its responsibility by dumping those who don't pass on the community colleges. Staff at some community colleges worry that accommodating an influx of low-skilled students will mean cutting back on college-level courses.

Looking at other options

Long before O'Connell suggested alternatives for students who don't pass the exit exam, Larissa Aguilar had toyed with most of them. Behind in credits

and struggling with the test, she had contemplated staying for another year of high school, dropping out and going for a GED, taking more classes in adult school and even moving to Southern California and enrolling in a community college diploma completion program.

Her family's planned move to San Diego fell through, and Larissa hasn't yet pursued the other options.

"It was tough for a while," said her counselor, Jim Limonoff. "She gave up a little bit, but now she's back on track."

Larissa has attended some of Sacramento's lowest-performing schools. She spent years in math classes taught by substitutes and earned grades so dismal her mother begged school officials to hold her back. And then just last year - in the final stretch of her education - school administrators determined that Larissa had a learning disability that blocked processing of aural information.

The 17-year-old got a bit of good news last week when she learned that she had passed the English part of the exit exam on her fourth try. But she saw the glass half empty: her math score remains 30 points short of passing and Larissa doesn't think she'll be able to pull it up. On top of that, she is short 20 credits needed for graduation.

Still, she's made up her mind to try. Like Linda, she has quit her job - at Del Taco - to take night school classes. That will have her in school every day from 8:30 a.m. to almost 9 p.m. - and Larissa has struggled to pass classes even with a normal schedule. But for once she expressed optimism.

"I'll be tired," she said. "But I think I can keep up with it."

If she doesn't get the credits she needs, Larissa can stay at Hiram Johnson another year and keep taking the exit exam. Some days she says she'll do that. Other days she says she'll quit school and get a GED.

Some question whether the GED is a viable option for students like Larissa who have been unable to pass the exit exam. It, too, is a standardized test - offering no relief to those who struggle with multiple-choice tests. And it tests students on five subjects, while the exit exam tests only two.

The California High School Proficiency Exam poses other problems. It tests high school-level material; the exit exam tests middle school math and ninth- and 10th-grade English.

Even students who manage to get a diploma equivalent through such tests generally don't go on to the success that high school graduates enjoy, according to W. Norton Grubb, a UC Berkeley professor who studies the impact of education on the labor market.

"Passing the GED doesn't improve your employment status. Getting a GED does not help you go to postsecondary education," said Grubb, an expert witness in the lawsuit threatened by exit exam opponents.

"So the notion that all these high school dropouts, these kids who have been pushed out of high school by the exit exam, are somehow going to claw their way back into school and the labor market by getting a GED - that's just not going to work."

Life's tests loom

While the week that brought tears and frustration to some Hiram Johnson students brought relief and victory to others, it was only a temporary respite from the difficult task ahead. Pass or fail, students whose minimal skills have left them struggling with the test have begun to realize they soon must forge a life as adults.

For Brandon Reynolds, 18, the last month has brought many maturing experiences: his first job, starting to learn to drive and a sheet of paper that said "Passed."

"I'm just glad I don't have to study for that dang test again," he said, hours after learning he had succeeded on the exit exam.

Brandon had squeaked by - passing each section by just 4 points. The brown-eyed teen works on his school yearbook and loves drama class. His teachers say he's delightful, just not very academically inclined. Ask him

about his plans for the week and he talks more about working and hanging out than about studying.

Now Brandon must turn his attention to two courses he is failing - geometry and government. He says he's certain he can bring his grades up and graduate with his class.

Brandon's view of the future beyond June is wide open. His new job behind the counter at a trendy Mexican restaurant feels like an accomplishment that brings him closer to adulthood. What the rest of his adult years will look like remains a teenage blur of possibilities.

"He has a long way to go to really grow up," said his mother, Darleen Reynolds. "But at least he's shown that he wants to."

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The Bee's Laurel Rosenhall can be reached at (916) 321-1083 or lrosenhall@sacbee.com.

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Hiram Johnson senior Kevin Muhammad, at top, is consoled by his mother, Yeavonne, after another round of frustrating results, while at left, Brandon Reynolds, shown in an American government class, passed his exit exam.

Sacramento Bee/
Carl Costas

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PUT TO THE TEST

Teens with disabilities enjoy last-ditch reprieve

By Laurel Rosenhall
BEE STAFF WRITER

A collective sigh of relief swept the state on Jan. 30 when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill freeing students with disabilities from having to pass the California High School Exit Exam this year.

In classrooms and living rooms, students, teachers and parents celebrated the news that 12th-graders who cope with a host of difficulties — from learning delays to dyslexia to deafness — will be able to graduate even if they fail the math and English test. Three of

the five students The Bee is following this year as they work to pass the exit exam have documented learning disabilities. Of the three, two are likely to qualify for the exemption, as are at least 28 of their peers at Hiram Johnson High School.

The mood the day the news broke "wasn't elation, it was just relief," said Debra Schlimg, who teaches special education at the urban Sacramento school.

"They can actually think toward their future a little bit," she said. "They could never go

► EXAM, back page, A14

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there before."

The one-year exemption reflects a settlement between the state and advocates for special education, who had sued the state alleging the exit exam was unfair to students with disabilities.

The new law clears the path to graduation for between 20,000 and 25,000 California seniors, if they have completed enough credits and all other requirements to graduate this year, qualified for diploma-track special education since last summer, taken the exam at least twice since 10th grade and attended exam preparation classes.

Even though most students with disabilities will be off the hook this year, educators still want them to take, and pass, the exit exam. For most seniors, February's test marked the fifth time they've taken the exam, which tests the skills they should have acquired from the sixth through 10th grades.

"We're pushing for them to pass because it will make them feel better about themselves," said Vice Principal Cyndi Swindle, who oversees special education.

In January, as the school year edged closer to the final test dates, school administrators tried new tactics to help students over the hump. They started more exam preparation classes and they changed their rules to allow students with disabilities to use calculators and dictionaries during the test.

Getting help

About a week after learning in January that he had again failed the math part of the exit exam, Juan Calderon did something he probably should have done months before: At the urging of his counselor, the 18-year-old signed up for a math class.

Juan's learning disability affects his attention span; the intensive crash course he enrolled in was tailored for special education students. With just three weeks to prepare for the Feb. 7-8 test, Juan spent two hours after school every day reviewing fractions, exponents and algebraic functions.

"One of the things that will be allowed is this calculator," teacher Robin Kafouros told the students sitting in a ring around her, bright green calculators and math worksheets on their desks. Kafouros showed them how to use the square-root button for some problems and the multiplication button to solve problems with exponents. She read a question aloud.

"The Cowboys won 81 out of 161 games on their schedule," she said. "About what percent of the games did they win?"

"I hate percentages," groaned the girl sitting next to Juan.

Kafouros didn't skip a beat. "OK," she said to the class. "Are they asking for an exact number?"

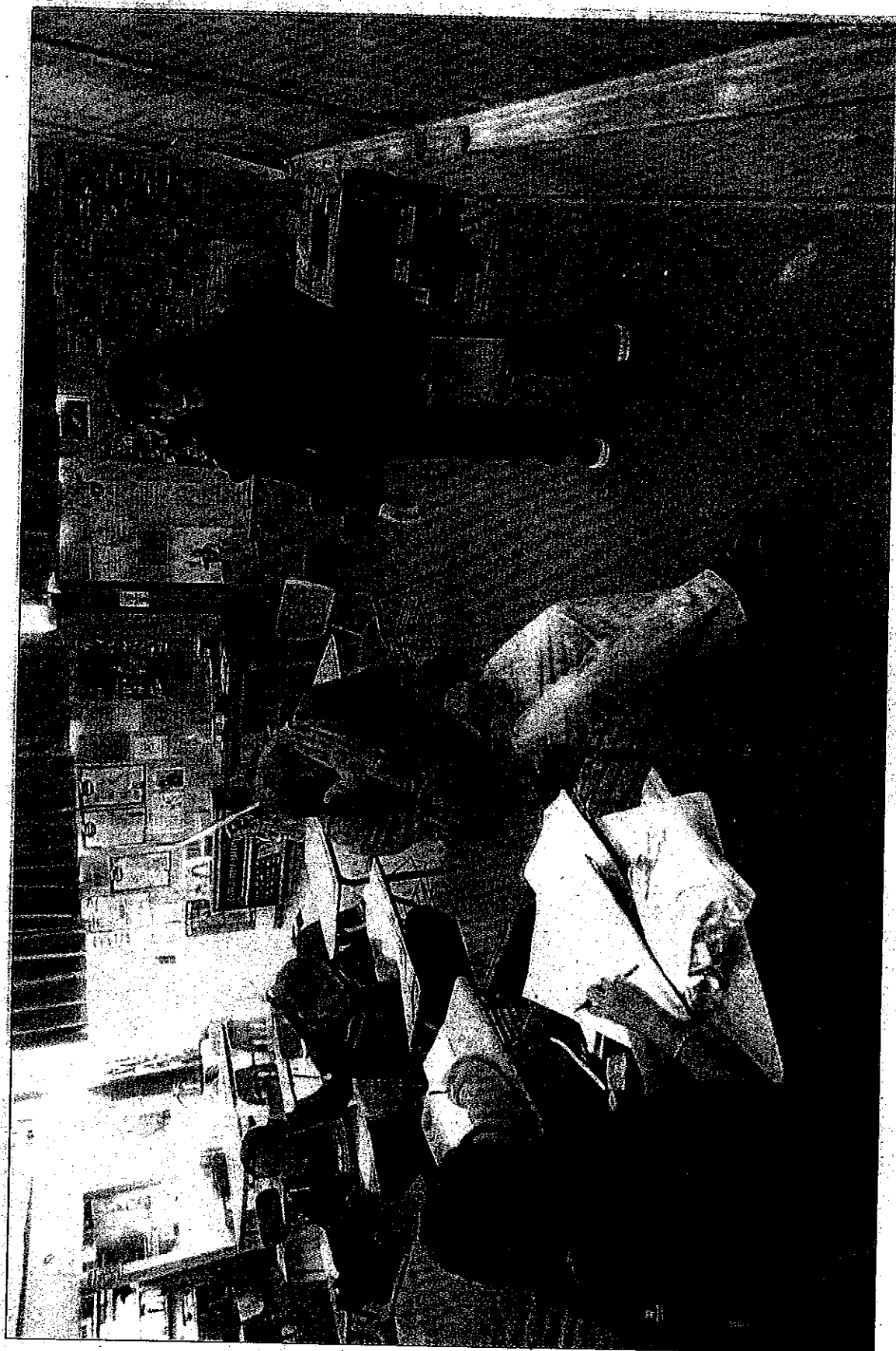
"No," said Juan. "About."

"About, right," Kafouros said. "Key word."

"It's a mixture of senior-itis and 'I don't need (to pass) this to graduate so I don't need to be here to learn this.'"

Debra Schlim

special education teacher at Hiram Johnson High School, on absenteeism from exam preparation classes



LARISSA AGUILAR: Teacher Tim Carter, center, shows frustration during a tutoring session with Aguilar, right, who needs to master math to pass the High School Exit Exam.

Exam: Stakes get higher 3/6/2006

Students knew that the problem involved division, but many could not remember which number would go on the top of the equation and which number on the bottom.

After Kafouros went over the difference between the numerator and the denominator, Juan leaned over his calculator and punched in $81 \div 161$. He came up with 0.503. But it wasn't one of the four answers offered in the multiple-choice problem.

"So what is that?" Kafouros asked, as Juan scanned the possible answers - 25 percent, 50 percent, 81 percent and 161 percent.

"50 percent," Juan replied, correctly.

Competing demands

While some students with disabilities are still trying to pass the exit exam, others appear to have given up. Now that they know they don't have to pass the test to graduate, some seniors are making a habit of skipping class, said Schlimg, the special ed teacher. She identified Kevin Muhammad as one of those students.

"It's a mixture of senioritis and 'I don't need (to pass) this to graduate so I don't need to be here to learn this,'" she said. "Disappointing, but true."

Attendance records show Kevin was absent for six days, from the day Schwarzenegger signed off on the exemption until he had to take the test again. Schlimg considers that no coincidence.

But Kevin, 17, has an explanation. He had to take his daughter to a doctor appointment one day, he said, and his little brother to the emergency room another.

The day before the test, as Schlimg reviewed math facts, vocabulary and test strategy, Kevin was at a recycling plant looking for a new job. The price of

parenthood had caught up with him as his baby neared four months.

"You got a baby, you got to step up your game," he said, mentioning the cost of diapers and formula. School had begun to feel like a drain from the other demands on his time.

Still, taking the exit exam was important to Kevin, whose learning disability affects how he processes what he hears. After the string of absences, Kevin showed up on test day.

That evening he said the ability to use a calculator and dictionary made him much more comfortable with the exam.

"It was pretty cool," he said.

When Kevin later returned to class, Schlimg scolded him for missing so much school.

"I said, 'I'm mad because you're not taking care of what you need to take care of,'" she said. "I told him, 'You're a senior, you're going to be out of here in a couple months. Is this the kind of man you're going to be?'"

Conflicting rules

Special education is guided by each student's "individualized education program." These documents set a course of study and list any special conditions under which students should be allowed to take tests - "accommodations" such as more time or a smaller setting, and "modifications" such as use of a calculator or a dictionary.

According to state law, students are supposed to be allowed those special conditions on the exit exam - though tests taken with modifications can negatively impact the state's assessment of the school's progress. Under requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law, a test with modifications counts as a test not taken, a burden since schools must test at least 95 percent of their students.

for one teen

SAC BEE

Hiram Johnson did not allow students to use modifications the first four times they took the exit exam. Then, in advance of February's test, school officials rewrote student education plans to include modifications such as dictionaries and calculators. The reason goes beyond conflicts between federal and state laws.

Swindle, the school's head of special education, said she was following directions from the state in denying the use of modifications. State officials say that's not possible. For years, they say, they've made it clear to schools that

students with disabilities must be allowed to use any accommodations or modifications in their education plans.

Sacramento City Unified School District officials, meanwhile, say they asked schools to first test students without modifications in order to properly gauge their strengths and weaknesses. After the first test, district officials said, modifications were to be allowed.

Legal clash

The spotty communication between schools, districts and the state - as well as the incentive to deny students modifications - were described in the lawsuit against the state that led to the one-year exemption for disabled students.

In *Chapman v. California, Disability Rights Advocates*, an Oakland-based group representing all students with disabilities who have not passed the exit exam, alleged that the state could not require students to pass an exam for graduation if they have not been taught the material on the test. The state agreed that schools needed another

KEVIN

MUHAMMAD: A special education senior at Hiram Johnson High School, Muhammad has little problem tapping out a rhythm on his keyboard at home. But his attendance at exam preparation classes has been disrupted by life's more pressing demands; he says. At 17, he has a baby to help care for, among other responsibilities.



year to prepare special education students for the exit exam.

The parties settled one part of the lawsuit by allowing seniors in special education to graduate even if they don't pass. While that should help Kevin and Juan reach the graduation stage, it probably won't do much for Larissa Aguilar.

The 17-year-old started the year behind in credits and has been in limbo all year - sometimes identified as a junior and other times as a senior. School officials held her back to 11th grade but also gave her a heavy load of classes and told her if she worked hard she could graduate by the end of the year.

Now the stakes are higher: If Larissa doesn't earn the credits to graduate on time, she'll have to pass the exit exam to graduate next year.

Leading up to the February test, some administrators told Larissa she would test in February, with the seniors. Others told her she would test with the 11th graders in March.

The day before the seniors tested, Larissa sat in Tim Carter's after-school math tutoring class. On one side of the room, enthusiastic students giggled as they worked on problems and asked the teacher to check their answers.

Larissa sat alone on the other side, leafing through the exit exam study guide as if it were a magazine. Inside the guide, on a page about adding and subtracting fractions, Larissa's notes indicated her mind was far from the work at hand:

"Blah, blah, blah. ... Carter," she had written.

Carter's assessment of Larissa wasn't much better. "She's all over the place," he said. Speaking of the computerized answer sheets used on the test, he added, "I wouldn't even bother turning in the scantron."

Behind their sarcastic relationship, the two have a good rapport. Larissa says Carter is the only math teacher she can learn from. His tough-love approach seems to work for her.

Larissa was glad to learn she can use a calculator on the exam this time, yet complained she didn't know how it would help her with fractions, word problems or algebra.

"It won't," Carter said. "If you don't know which buttons to push, it won't help."

Then he handed Larissa a calculator and chastised her for her last-minute approach to studying: "Why are you here at 4:15 the day before the test asking me how to use a calculator?"

As it turned out, that wasn't the day before the test for Larissa. When she showed up to take the exit exam, Larissa learned she would be testing with the juniors in March after all.

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Students rejoice, officials rethink

As exit exam ruling
sinks in, counselors
sense a wasted effort.

By Laurel Rosenhall
BEE STAFF WRITER

Springtime has burst alive on the Hiram Johnson High School campus with much of the certainty the season always brings: Rose bushes blooming in vibrant shades of red, pink and yellow. Sandal-footed students stealing kisses in the hallways. Announcements advertising tickets for senior prom.

But one giant ritual capping the high school experience — graduation itself — has become the subject of great uncertainty. A court ruling on Friday overturned a controversial graduation requirement that was supposed to kick

in this year. Students who have been told ever since they were freshmen that they would have to pass the California High School Exit Exam to graduate might now receive a diploma even if they've flunked the test of basic math and English skills.

"Talk about throwing everybody for a loop," says teacher Shana Just.

Lawyers for the state are planning an appeal. And a separate lawsuit challenging the exam on grounds that state officials have not adequately studied alternative ways of testing students goes to court Monday, furthering the confusion at Hiram Johnson in the weeks leading up to the campus' June 13 graduation ceremony.

"The uncertainty makes it difficult to know what comes next," says counselor Michael Brockman.

He and three other counselors

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at this Sacramento school of about 2,000 students had the tough job last month of telling 37 seniors they wouldn't be graduating because they had failed the exit exam.

Soon, counselors found themselves scrambling to figure out how to advise those students: whether to welcome them back for a fifth year of high school, whether they could enroll in community college at the same time they continued trying to pass the exam, whether they would be able to earn a Hiram Johnson diploma even if they finished their education at Fremont Adult School.

Now some counselors feel they wasted their time.

"It's almost like we were talking for the sake of talking," says counselor Rob Alloway.

"We've had to call them down three times to go over their results and keep encouraging them to work on a test that's all for nothing now."

For those students, naturally, the judge's ruling is cause for celebration. Despite having failed the exit exam five times, those who have completed all other graduation requirements could still participate in a rite of passage they thought would pass them by.

After learning of the court ruling, Linda Nguyen, 18, laughed joyously and had just one thing to say:

"Yay!"

Linda had learned a couple weeks earlier that she had passed the math section of the exam, but failed the English part. A major hurdle still remains: Linda may fall short in math credits; she must pull up her math grade dramatically to pass the class she needs to graduate.

Those who brought the lawsuit that toppled the exit exam say students shouldn't be punished for their schools' shortcomings. Across the state, research has shown, the schools with the most students failing the test also have the fewest teachers credentialed in math and English — the subjects on the exam.

And even though the state set aside \$10 million to pay for exam tutoring, many schools did not receive the funding.

State education officials acknowledge

disparities plague California's schools. But they say schools must demand a minimum competency from students even as officials strive to close the gaps between schools. They point out that the exit exam tests students at a relatively low level: eighth-grade math and 10th-grade English. Students must get a little more than half the questions right to pass and may take the test again and again.

Shana Just, a Hiram Johnson teacher who has served as the school's exit exam coordinator, says the test has forced teachers to raise expectations. Before, she said, teachers passed students without demanding they master the work because so many come from troubled backgrounds or are struggling to learn English.

"Kids from schools like Hiram Johnson didn't get the material they needed because teachers felt sorry for them," she says. "When in the end, we were only hurting them more because the only way for them to get out of the poverty their parents live in is through education."

Principal Lynne Tafoya says her staff has worked tenaciously to prepare students for the exam — and in most cases, the work has paid off. At the start of the school year, 182 seniors had not yet passed the test. More than half of them have since passed, including some with disabilities.

Officials started the year believing that all students — including those with disabilities — would have to pass the exam to graduate. In January, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation waiving the test requirement for students with disabilities for a year. Now the latest court ruling has stripped the requirement for everyone else, too.

Tafoya says she could understand overturning the exam requirement at schools that have done nothing to prepare students. But at her campus, she points out, teachers were trained in exam tutoring, students were given test preparation booklets, and staff were paid extra to teach test-prep classes before school, after school and on Saturdays.

The ruling, she says, "is discouraging

to me as a principal because we have worked very hard to make sure kids understand the consequences of this exam."

Others at Hiram Johnson say the school could have done better by its students. Linh Tran, who taught test prep math classes to students not fluent in English, says the classes should have started earlier in the school year, instead of a couple weeks before the first test date in November. She appreciates the extra training teachers got in the winter from a private test preparation company, but says it came too late.

Brockman, the counselor, says the experience has made him wish the school had more counselors to handle both the academic and emotional needs of students during the transition period of imposing a stiff new graduation requirement. He has had to comfort students like Juan Calderon, 18, who burst into tears upon learning in January that he had again failed the test.

And Just says that the school should have done more at the start of senior year to alert parents whose children were at risk of not graduating. This summer educators will visit the homes of every Hiram Johnson sophomore who fails the test to inform parents of the extra help available for them.

A handful of Hiram Johnson students in the class of 2006 have been held back because they didn't have enough credits to graduate — regardless of the exit exam requirement. For students like Larissa Aguilar, the dramatic twists and turns of the last year — as the state tried to implement the new graduation requirement — likely will replay all over again next year.

Yet even as she has struggled with the test, Larissa's view of her education has evolved. The 17-year-old with wide dark eyes once talked of dropping out and getting a GED. Now she says the GED test will be too hard. More than that, Larissa has decided she doesn't want to follow in her father's footsteps: He dropped out of high school nearly 25 years ago.

So despite repeatedly failing the math portion of the exit exam as well as several classes she needs to graduate, Larissa says she'll come back next year as a fifth-year senior and try to graduate.

with the class of 2007.

Principal Tafoya says the on-again, off-again nature of this year's test will make it hard for her to get Larissa's class of 2007 classmates to buckle down.

"My task is going to become much harder to convince the class of '07 that you absolutely must pass this exam," she says.

"I think we're sending the wrong message to students. Just bide your time and eventually a judge will overturn it."

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TO READ MORE

To read The Bee's coverage of the state's exit exam and the series, "Put to the Test," please go to:
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Hiram Johnson counselor Michael Brockman tells Juan Calderon in January that he passed the English portion of the exit exam but failed the math part. It's been an emotional ride for students and staff.

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Carl Costas

