

TEST

(Ambience of students outside)

The first week of summer school is quiet on the campus of Maxine Waters Employment Prep Center, an adult school in Watts. A few students in the picnic area joke around while eating lunch during another heat wave.

(Ambience of students inside)

Inside the classroom, students like Lovey McIntire aren't smiling. That's because Lovey had planned to graduate from King/Drew High School in June. But she did not pass the California High School Exit Exam, the CAHSEE. Lovey is one of 250 students enrolled at Maxine Waters where they are studying to retake the exam in order to earn their diplomas. Lovey's bright, brown eyes dim when she remembers failing the test by two points.

(McIntire) I felt sad because I couldn't get my diploma. It's not fair at all because the people that worked hard to graduate can't graduate because of this test. It's really messing us up.

The CAHSEE tests students' basic math, algebra and English skills through 10th grade levels. Students begin taking the test as sophomores, but can retake it their junior and senior years if they fail the first time around.

High schools offer CAHSEE prep courses beginning in the 10th grade. But, the test is still relatively new. The class of 2006 was the first required to pass the CAHSEE as a graduation requirement. In Los Angeles—the state's largest school district—14 percent of seniors failed the exam. This is higher than the statewide rate of nine percent.

Although most California seniors passed the exam, the test has been criticized as being too arbitrary.

(Ambience of UCLA)

UCLA education professor John Rogers has done numerous studies on the exam. He says the CAHSEE is unfair.

(Rogers) In 1999, when the legislation was created, it said very clearly that it was the responsibility of districts to ensure that conditions were in place for all students to be successful on the exam. That has not happened in many schools across the state. In particular that has not happened in a large proportion serving low-income kids of color and immigrant students.

Throughout California, African American, Latino and low-income students have an 11-14 percent lower pass rate than white students.

Ed Morris is Director of LA Unified's Adult Instruction. He says a lack of resources in school and at home affects student performance on the test.

(Morris) You can pretty much tell by the zip code whether they're going to pass or not....Many of the schools in South Central all had problems with numbers and getting people to pass the test.

(Ambience from the cafeteria)

Lizeth Urbina is a Venice High graduate. She passed the exam on the first try and says students can't point the finger at schools if they failed.

(Urbina) It's not about the school being a bad school it's about the student. If you're not a good student then for sure you're not going to graduate. If you can't multiply and do simple stuff like that where are you going to work?

Some teachers support the test but don't feel it's unfair. Like Joann Manning, a continuation school teacher I met at the mall. Joann has been teaching for more than 20 years.

(Ambience of the mall)

(Manning) Our students are at risk...But we do a lot of prep for our students and most of them have been successful in passing the high school exit exam. Its information they should know. It's not anything they can't get.

(Ambience of classroom)

Back at Maxine Waters school, self esteem is low for CAHSEE students. De Andre Saunders took prep courses during the school year to sharpen his math skills. An outspoken teen from Locke High, De Andre's confidence dips when its test time.

(Saunders) I have no idea why I didn't pass. I tried the hardest I could. Maybe I just wasn't qualified.

Dr. Janet Clark is the tough-love principal at Maxine Waters Prep. She recognizes another challenge after hearing De Andre's doubts.

(Clark) We gotta change that thought process. That the test is to assess what I need know. I'm going to take this test to identify the areas I need to study more.

And that takes the weight off of it. Rather than I'm go take this test and fail and I'm not go get my diploma.

Educators say the length of prep courses depends on the students' skills. This means it may take students a few months to more than a year before they pass the exam.

For Intern Edition, I'm Jeneé Darden.