

California Bar at a Crossroads: Hybrid Exam Rollout, Fallout, and What's Next



California, August 2025 – The State Bar of California is grappling with a turning point after the controversial debut of its new hybrid bar examination in February—a format that combined both remote and in-person testing and departed from the longstanding national bar exam system. The fallout has triggered intense scrutiny, financial strain, leadership changes, and renewed pressure from the courts and lawmakers to chart a more dependable path forward.

A Cost-Saving Venture That Backfired

In a bid to save an estimated \$3.8 million per year by eliminating venue rentals, California initiated a five-year, \$8.25 million contract with Kaplan Exam Services in mid-2024 to craft its own exam questions. The new hybrid format was intended to modernize testing and expand accessibility—but the rollout was marred by serious technological failures. [euters+5Wikipedia+5](#)

Exam Day Disaster and Its Aftermath

The February 2025 bar exam quickly unraveled. Test takers encountered frozen screens, inconsistent proctoring, and software crashes. The exam’s remote and in-person hybrid model, still unproven, exposed the State Bar to widespread criticism.

Back to the National Exam

By May, in response to the chaos, the California Supreme Court ordered a return to the National Conference of Bar Examiners’ (NCBE) Multistate Bar Exam (MBE) format for the July administration. This decisive move scrap the newly created exam and introduced student-focused remedies—including adjusted scoring and lowering the February pass threshold to 534. Implementing these changes is projected to cost at least \$2.3 million.

Leadership Shift Amid Critics’ Fire

Executive Director Leah Wilson—who had served since 2017—announced she will step down on July 7, 2025. While she affirmed pride in her broader reforms, she acknowledged the February exam rollout’s failures and its adverse impact on aspiring attorneys.

Deepening Controversy: AI, Question Creation & Trust

Further controversy erupted when it was revealed that some multiple-choice questions were drafted with AI assistance by ACS Ventures. Critics labeled this a conflict of interest, raising concerns about exam integrity and fairness. The California Supreme Court has demanded a full explanation of AI’s use and the reliability measures taken.

The Choices Ahead

With the test’s credibility shaken and finances under pressure, the State Bar is evaluating multiple paths forward:

- Reverting to the traditional NCBE exam for all future sessions.
- Refining its own exam system if it can guarantee reliability and transparency.
- Strengthening oversight and restoring trust among law graduates, educators, and licensing boards across the state.

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