
Secondary school-leaving exams. Eraldo Affinati: “May it serve as a stepping stone to new experiences”

The secondary school-leaving exams in Italy will start on June 21 for 536,000 students. Among them, more than 267,000 are high-school students, over 173,000 are vocational school students, and approximately 95,000 are technical school students. An examination committee comprising an external chairman, three external members and three internal members within each educational institution, will assess the results of two written exams plus an oral exam. Candidates from the communities in the flooded areas of Emilia-Romagna will be required to take an interdisciplinary oral exam on which the evaluation of their cultural, educational and vocational achievements will be based. As customary on this occasion, SIR discussed the subject with **Eraldo Affinati**, Rome-based writer and teacher, founder with his wife Anna Luce Lenzi of the [Penny Wirton](#) school for teaching Italian to immigrants, based on volunteer teaching.



The Italian written composition, both in its many different forms and as a common foundation for all subject areas, remains at the heart of the Italian State examination because it allows us to assess the candidate's logical thinking and reflective skills, even prior to subject-specific knowledge. Through one's subject ties to another subject, the candidate has the opportunity to make connections, thereby highlighting his or her own skills. Should this examination prove to be original and convincing, it could also be used in the oral examination as a reference for further insights. **Candidates can choose one among seven guidelines for the written composition. As a writer, as well as a teacher, what is your advice to students to help them tackle this exam in the best possible way, overcoming anxiety and remaining clear-headed?** It's always good to start from one's personal experience to develop broader arguments. Those with a talent for synthesis will have an advantage. Others may find it useful to make an outline on which to base their reasoning. In my opinion, from a technical point of view, it's always better to write short sentences to ensure proper syntax. As for anxiety, one must learn to keep it at bay, while knowing that ultimately they stand good chances of passing, since almost all those admitted to the exam are likely to graduate. The oral questions by the examination committees will focus on the final mark, and the students' marks from previous years will be duly taken into account.

However, it will be up to the teachers to make the exam seen less daunting as adolescents, despite the numbers, continue to perceive it as a decisive stage in their lives, something similar to age-old initiation rites.

To us adults, this may make us smile, but for an 18-year-old, the state exam remains an important event, in an existential sense in particular, as it marks an epochal transition: school life ends and a new phase full of unknowns and expectations begins. **Unlike last year, when the commissions were made up of the teachers who had accompanied the students throughout their studies together with an external chairman, this year there are up to four external members, including the chairman. What does this mean for the students?** I know from experience that this change may increase the anxiety of some of them, but I would say to them that in life they will often have to deal with strangers, so it is better to get used to it now. Perhaps the candidates will discover that the new teachers, who are said to be strict, are not necessarily less understanding than the others. In some cases, they may even be more sympathetic. At least I hope so. Of course, in any examination there is a risk that someone will take advantage of the discretionary nature of the opinion they are asked to give, but the unanimity of the examination board should prevent any distortion in this respect. **An interdisciplinary oral exam is all that is required for students from the flooded areas. What do you think of this decision?** In a positive way. It can be said that those students have already taken their very own final school-leaving exam from which, it seems, they came out with flying colours, even refuting certain die-hard stereotypes concerning the supposed indifference of our young people. **The term "merit" included in the Ministry of Education's designation was met with considerable controversy. However, if understood as a combination of skills and commitment, to what extent could it 'motivate' young people to face up to this exam and, more generally, to face up to the challenges they will inevitably encounter in life and give them meaning?** Teachers should rightly value the strengths of their students and recognise their achievements. However, in my view

teachers should never isolate the successful students from the rest of the group, while the latter are expected to reciprocate what they achieved:

if they do so, their talents will increase manifold and will thus be given full meaning, if not, all the medals received will end up in a drawer and over time will lose the significance we placed on them. **What is your wish for these last-year students?** That this examination may serve as a stepping stone to new experiences, leaving behind the negative ones and cherishing the most positive ones.

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