

April 19, 2010

Honorable Bret Schundler
Commissioner of Education

Josephine Hernandez, President
NJ State Board of Education

Dear Commissioner Schundler and President Hernandez,

We write to share some concerns—and some timely research—about New Jersey’s Alternate High School Assessment (AHSA), previously known as the Special Review Assessment (SRA).

In 2007, the Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers, Education Law Center, the CUNY Graduate Center and Newark’s Project GRAD jointly released a report on *NJ’s Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* That report documented patterns associated with use of the SRA to satisfy state graduation requirements to earn a NJ high school diploma. It found that:

- The SRA accounted for about one third of all high school diplomas in urban Abbott districts.
- The SRA was used throughout the state, with nearly 60% of all SRA graduates coming from non-Abbott districts.
- Students of color, English Language Learners, immigrant youth, and youth from poor communities used SRA at higher rates than their peers. These groups were, therefore, most vulnerable to policies that would eliminate or narrow access to the SRA as an alternative pathway to a diploma.

The report concluded with a set of recommendations to “improve the consistency and reliability of the SRA process, to retain a performance assessment pathway to graduation, and to improve public confidence in its use as a way for students to demonstrate proficiency on state standards.” (Those recommendations are attached to this letter.)

We were encouraged when our report was cited by State Board members during discussions leading to its unanimous March 2008 decision to retain and reform the alternative assessment process, which led to the introduction this year of the AHSA.

During this same period, our colleague Dr. Andre Keeton of Rutgers undertook a statistical analysis of post-high school outcomes for nearly 10,000 students who graduated through the traditional High School Proficiency Assessment or the alternative SRA between 2003 and 2008 in NJ’s largest district, Newark. As documented in his dissertation, Dr. Keeton found that:

- 40% of SRA graduates went on to higher education after earning their diplomas.

- Nearly half of all the graduates that Newark sent on to post-secondary institutions during the five years studied were SRA graduates. Without the SRA, the numbers of Newark youth enrolling in college would have been reduced by about half.

This study has immediate relevance for NJ education policy. It shows conclusively that sustaining an alternative pathway to a high school diploma has added value to NJ secondary schools and contributed positively to maintaining one of the nation's highest graduation rates. A significant portion of SRA graduates is faring better than many have assumed and much better than if they had become high school dropouts. For these students and their families, the SRA has indeed served as a "lifeline."

Given these findings, we were understandably concerned when we read reports of very low preliminary scores on the first administration of the new AHSA given last January. Those reports showed extremely high failure rates that threaten graduation prospects for thousands of seniors this June. Initial failure rates for the more than 10,000 students tested were 90% in language arts and 66% in math. Only 3242 of 10,308 students tested received passing scores in the required four math standards, and only 428 of 4293 students tested received passing scores in the language arts literacy standards.

Since the content of the AHSA/SRA has not changed, it seems clear that these poor results are the result of new administration and scoring procedures implemented this year by the Department. The new scoring process, managed by Measurement, Inc. a state testing vendor, has apparently applied a very different standard than was used previously to evaluate the student performance tasks.

It is also our understanding that, despite public commitments to the Board that AHSA scoring would be done by certified NJ educators, about 70% of the January tests were scored by non-certified MI personnel. As we wrote in our 2007 report, we "have concerns about the reliability and appropriateness of using commercial vendors and uncertified personnel to make high-stakes decisions that impact student graduation." We have also received direct accounts of inconsistencies and irregularities in the scoring process that reinforce those concerns. (We are prepared to share these reports with the Department upon request.)

It is relevant to note that the HSPA was piloted for several years before it assumed high stakes for graduation. More recently, the Department has spent several years piloting new Biology and Algebra exams, gathering data, evaluating the results and discussing implications for curriculum and instruction without setting cut scores or attaching high stakes to those tests for students.

Developing an appropriate assessment system for the new AHSA may similarly take longer than this year's hastily implemented guidelines permitted. If the Department and the Board seek to implement a different standard for the AHSA/SRA than has been applied in the past, it is incumbent to do so in a way that allows the Department to develop and document a credible, transparent process, while minimizing the negative impact on students during the transition from one process to another. The goal should be to hold adult systems accountable rather than to impose "diploma penalties" on young people.

Given the high stakes, the extremely low passing rates, the absence of any pilot to test and verify the new procedures, and the substantial questions that have been raised about the scoring process, we think this round of assessment should be set aside or treated as a pilot. There are

major issues that should be addressed collaboratively by educators, the Department and the testing vendor before the AHSA results can be credibly used to make graduation decisions about individual students.

Our research on post-school outcomes indicates that it would be a major mistake for the State—and a negative life-altering experience for thousands of young people—if the Department used the scores produced by this year's AHSA process to deny diplomas to students who have successfully completed their coursework and met all other requirements for graduation.

We thank you in advance for your consideration of these concerns, and offer our continued assistance in developing appropriate policy options and research studies to help inform your important work.

Sincerely,



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