

New Jersey students again face no diplomas if AHSA test not passed

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Once again, thousands of New Jersey students could be in danger of not graduating unless they pass the state's alternative exit exam in coming weeks.

Students' third and final opportunity to pass the Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) ends July 13. Many students failed the same test last school year, the first time it was administered.

The state Education Department declined to estimate how many are in jeopardy of not graduating this year, because the test-taking and appeals are continuing, said spokeswoman Allison Kobus.

She said a total graduation rate will not be available until at least September.

However, according to data from the department, only about 61 percent of students had passed all parts of the math AHSA - 5,010 out of 8,174 - after the first two testing periods.

In the language-arts AHSA, nearly 58 percent of the students failed to pass all three required parts of the test - 3,591 pupils out of 6,216 - during the same period.

The state did not provide updated appeals information, but through February, 293 students in math and 261 in language arts passed the appeals process out of 586 who submitted appeals in math and 324 who appealed on language arts.

The test is given to students who cannot pass the state's regular exit exam, the High School Proficiency Assessment.

In the 2009-10 school year, the AHSA replaced the Special Review Assessment (SRA), which critics said was overused and needed more accountability. The tests' content weren't that different, but they differed in terms of administration. With SRA, for example, the students had more opportunities to take the test sections and pass them.

One major difference was the teachers were no longer scoring their own students. Instead, the state hired Measurement Inc., a North Carolina-based firm, to take over the scoring process for \$550,000 a year. A couple of months before the end of the school year, high failure rates were disclosed. In the face of criticism and concern about the students, the state expanded its appeal process, allowing other proof of adequate academic proficiency.

Ultimately, according to state data, 56 percent of the 5,309 students who took the language arts AHSA passed, and 79 percent of the 10,816 who took the math parts passed. In the past, with SRA, the passing rate was about 96 percent.

Last year, state education officials said the low passing rate suggested teachers were grading their students too leniently, and they said pupils were reaching their senior year without basic academic skills.

Critics such as the Education Law Center said the state should have piloted the new process first to see what impact the changes would have before making the test count. They also questioned the qualifications of the test graders.

Stan Karp, the law center's Secondary Reform Project, faulted the state for not making information available sooner this year.