

**NEW JERSEY'S SPECIAL REVIEW ASSESSMENT (SRA): AN
EXAMINATION OF THE POST SECONDARY OUTCOMES OF
NEWARK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES 2003-2008**

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INTRODUCTION

High school graduation requirements have been the subject of longstanding and contentious debate among American educational reformers. Advocates of alternative graduation requirements, promote the use of alternative assessment programs through which students may demonstrate mastery of graduation requirements. They also promote reliance on more than one “high-stakes” single assessment tool, traditional or alternative, in order to retain, promote or graduate. Critics of alternative assessment paths have argued that these assessments are watered-down and are nothing more than tools for social promotion that create more harm than good as they produce graduates who are inadequately prepared for work or post-secondary study. In contrast, supporters of alternative assessment argue that little or no evidence exists to support these criticisms. Additionally, they argue that passing a traditional high stakes exam does not necessarily indicate adequate preparation for post-secondary study. For example, Martha Foote, found that when Texas implemented its traditional high stakes graduation exam, the number of students who passed the exam did increase, but so did the percentage of Texas students who required remedial work at public colleges and universities. In Massachusetts, the introduction of the high stakes graduation exam did not result in a decrease in the number of unprepared “low skilled” public college and university students (Foote, 2007). Foote’s observations suggest that passing a high stakes exam is an imperfect predictor of post-secondary preparation and success.

Twenty-six states currently require exit exams to graduate from high school (Center on Education Policy, 2009); New Jersey is one of these states. New Jersey is also one of 19 states that offer an alternative assessment program. New Jersey’s earliest form of alternative assessment, the Special Review Assessment (or SRA), was implemented in 1991. In New Jersey, debate about SRA centered on whether to continue this alternative assessment pathway to high school graduation or, like its neighbor New York, to have a single, high stakes set of examinations. In 2005, the New Jersey Department of Education passed a resolution proposing elimination of the SRA and making the HSPA route the sole, high stakes pathway to high school graduation. This proposal was passed under pressure from the N.J. Chamber of Commerce and *ACHIEVE*- a national organization whose goal is to raise academic standards and rigor. The two organizations argued that the SRA devalued the high school degree, and its standards did not reflect adequate preparation for either postsecondary education or the workforce; the NJDOE sought to phase out the SRA over a three-year period.

In August of 2007, Fine et al. authored *New Jersey’s Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* In this report the authors argued that the DOE’s recommendation to eliminate the SRA was premature given the absence of empirical data on the differential effects of each pathway on post-secondary educational, occupational and criminal justice outcomes. Fine et al. argued that that the proposed elimination of the SRA had great potential of transforming potential SRA graduates into dropouts. The authors argued that SRA’s elimination could have devastating effects on the significant numbers of students who graduated via the SRA each year, especially those in the state’s urban districts. Fine et al. argued that if there was little difference between the post-secondary outcomes of SRA and HSPA graduates, and significantly different and negative differences between SRA and dropouts, then the elimination of the SRA might lower post-secondary educational enrollments while increasing postsecondary criminal justice involvement. However, if there were significant positive advantages to HSPA graduation

and less difference between SRA and dropouts, then this would be a strong reason to either strengthen the rigor of the SRA or eliminate it all together. Fine and colleagues argued that without data on these differential outcomes, the state would be playing Russian roulette with the futures of large numbers of low-income, mostly students of color.

In 2008, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) voted to restructure the SRA and renamed it the Alternate High School Proficiency Assessment (AHSA) examination beginning in January 2010 (*See section on AHSA below*). The NJDOE reports that the AHSA examination, as currently constituted, covers essentially the same material as the SRA (NJDOE, 2009). However, the administration and scoring of the new examination differs substantially. In particular, scheduling, administration and grading of the AHSA exam is now organized by the state as opposed to the school district as was the case under SRA.

This report answers some of the important questions identified in Fine et al.'s report *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* (Fine et al., 2007). We present analyses of the post-secondary outcomes of HSPA and SRA graduates from Newark, New Jersey between 2003 and 2008. Because these data pre-date the implementation of AHSA in January of 2010, this report does not address the post-secondary performance of AHSA graduates.

This report does the following:

- Reviews the history of the SRA assessment program
- Reviews the methodology of a two year study undertaken to determine whether there are substantive differences between HSPA and SRA graduates
- Presents the findings on the postsecondary outcomes of 9,725 Newark Public School (NPS) graduates from 2003-2008 with regard to:

1. WHO GRADUATED DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA?
2. WHO WENT ON TO COLLEGE DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA?
3. WHERE DID THEY GO TO COLLEGE DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA?
4. WHO PERSISTED IN COLLEGE DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA?

Significance of the Research

The research presented here addresses the existing gap in both the research and the literature concerning post-secondary outcomes of graduates from traditional and alternative pathways. The debate over alternative assessment in New Jersey and nationally has centered on how to provide and ensure equitable education in public schools. The heart of the exchange involves how we determine retention and promotion. On one side of the argument are those who believe that high-stakes examinations as the determinative unit of measure of success for all students is most equitable and effective. On the other side of the argument are those who believe that high-stakes exams short change children, particularly poor and minority children because they marginalize and isolate cultural knowledge and abilities. The latter proponents advocate alternative assessment as an additive and holistic means of accurately measuring what children know. Where the literature is largely silent is on whether there are differential expectations, opportunities, and practical post-secondary experiences for those students graduating under one program or the other.

Given the number of students in New Jersey, especially in the Abbott districts¹, who have graduated via the SRA/AHSA, calls for the elimination of alternative assessments and adoption of one uniform standard of exiting high school are premature without a longitudinal examination of the post-secondary effects of graduating via one route (HSPA) or the other (SRA/AHSA) and ultimately incorporating dropouts for analysis. A study of the post-secondary effects in terms of life experiences including education, family, employment, and criminality is not only timely but responsible and necessary.

As Fine et al.(2007) argued, if the research demonstrates that there are no significant differences between HSPA and SRA/AHSA, the elimination of the SRA/AHSA would not only be problematic but counterproductive. If, on the other hand, there are significant post-secondary differences in terms of college matriculation, college type and persistence between HSPA and SRA/AHSA (favoring HSPA), then the legitimacy of the SRA/AHSA in its current form as a tool of academic assessment could be seriously questioned. If there are significant differences in terms of post-secondary outcomes, this might argue for serious reform and or elimination. In addition, the incorporation of dropouts into the analytical framework would also be relevant in assessing the overall importance of assessment type. This research provides empirical evidence so that responsible actions and decisions can be made.

The research discussed here contributes theoretical, practical and pedagogical knowledge to the ongoing debate of the proper method of assessing what students learn in secondary educational settings. Responsible schooling dictates that before we make significant changes in educational policy, changes which have the capacity to affect tens of thousands of young people's lives, we have as much knowledge concerning the experiences of those undergoing the assessment and those having gone through the assessment. This research contributes what the literature does not: empirical evidence of what happens to students after leaving high school under the HSPA and SRA/AHSA.

Methodology

This report describes the post-secondary experiences of NPS high school students who graduated via either the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) or the Special Review Assessment (SRA) route. The analyses presented in this report employ data from six cohorts of NPS high school graduates (2003 through 2008). These data were pulled from three different data sources:

- A list of all graduates from the NPS's 10 comprehensive high schools (traditional neighborhood and magnet) for the years 2003-2008 (N=12,229).
- HSPA data from NPS high school students from Fall 2003 through Spring 2008.
- Post-secondary matriculation information on the NPS graduates as maintained by the National Student Clearinghouse.

¹ Abbott districts refers to the 31 urban districts covered by the New Jersey Supreme Court Abbott v. Burke decisions. Although technically these districts were eliminated by the court's School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) decision in 2008, we continue to use Abbott to describe these districts, which include Newark. For a history and background of the Abbott lawsuit and resulting reforms, the New Jersey Supreme Court decisions, and a list of Abbott districts along with statistical profiles, see www.edlawcenter.org.

After an extensive data cleaning effort (Keeton, 2010), these three databases were merged using SAS software (Cary, NC). These operations yielded a final analytic dataset of 9,725, or 80% of all NPS graduates from 2003-2008. The 2,504 graduates who were not in the analytic dataset are individuals on the graduate list with no matching HSPA data. These non-matches could have occurred because: 1) HSPA data were available but these failed to merge with the graduate list because of data entry issues (e.g., misspellings, etc.), and 2) NPS graduates who were exempt from taking the HSPA exam. All New Jersey students are required to sit for the HSPA examination at least once, generally in the spring semester of their junior year in high school unless they are exempt. This exemption can occur for several specified reasons such as: Special Education, English Language Learner (ELL) status, and other discrete reasons (Alphone et al, 2007; Keeton, 2010). An unknown proportion of students on the graduate list were exempt from sitting for the HSPA.

Key Findings

This study tracked high school graduation pathways and enrollment in post-secondary institutions for 9,725 Newark, New Jersey high school graduates who graduated either through HSPA or SRA from 2003 and 2008. Key findings for the participants in the study include the following:

WHO GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL IN NEWARK, NJ DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA

- Of the district graduates tracked in this study, 60% completed the SRA assessment as opposed to the HSPA assessment.
- Economically disadvantaged students are 16% more likely to graduate through the SRA assessment program.
- Blacks are the only racial and ethnic minority throughout the district graduating a majority of students through the SRA; however, blacks are 26% more likely to graduate through the SRA and Hispanic Latinos are 23% more likely to graduate through the SRA.
- The data show that 55% of those graduating through the SRA pass neither HSPA Language Arts nor HSPA Math, whereas 40% pass HSPA Language Arts and no math, and 5% pass HSPA math and no Language Arts.
- Both males and females throughout the district graduate a majority through the SRA assessment, though females are 7% more likely than males to graduate via the HSPA than males.

WHO WENT ON TO COLLEGE DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA

- Of the 9,725 students tracked in this study, 51% or 5,001 enrolled in post-secondary institutions.
- Traditional comprehensive high schools send more SRA graduates to post secondary institutions whereas magnet schools send more HSPA
- 53% of all students going on to post secondary institutions were HSPA graduates whereas 47% were SRA graduates.
- 34% of those going on to post-secondary study through the SRA pass neither HSPA Language Arts nor HSPA Math, 49% going on to post-secondary study pass HSPA Language Arts and no math and 45% pass HSPA math and no Language Arts.

- 68% of all HSPA graduates enrolled in post secondary institutions
- 40% of the SRA graduates enrolled in post secondary institutions.

WHERE DID THEY GO TO COLLEGE DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA

- 75% of SRA graduates enrolling in post-secondary institutions enrolled in 2 year colleges as their first post secondary institutions.
- 67% of HSPA graduates enrolling in post-secondary institutions enrolled in 4 year colleges as their first post secondary institution
- The large majority of all HSPA and SRA students going on to post-secondary study enroll in public/colleges and universities; however, HSPA graduates are more likely than SRA graduates to enroll in private colleges/universities.

COLLEGE PERSISTENCE: DISAGGREGATED BY HSPA AND SRA

- Through the first 2 semesters of college enrollment, SRA graduates enroll in post-secondary institutions in greater numbers than HSPA graduates
- Through the first 4 semesters of college enrollment, HSPA and SRA graduates enroll in post-secondary institutions at similar rates.
- After the fifth semester HSPA graduates enroll for subsequent semesters in post-secondary institutions in greater numbers than SRA graduates.

HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT: HSPA AND SRA IN NEW JERSEY

The Public School Education Act (PSEA), passed by the New Jersey State Legislature in 1975, was instituted as a means of providing all New Jersey school children an educational opportunity which would prepare them to fully function in a democratic society. To facilitate the dual goals of (1) providing a quality educational opportunity, and (2) creating civic minded youth, the Legislature amended the PSEA to establish minimum standards of achievement in basic communication and computational skills. This standardized program of assessment became known as the Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) program for reading and mathematics. This statewide assessment was administered from 1978 through 1982 and was applicable to third, sixth, and ninth grade students (NJ DOE, 2006).

In 1976 New Jersey began to apply the use of an exit exam as a graduation requirement (NJ DOE, 2006). Using the MBS program as a mechanism to prepare students, in 1981-82 New Jersey began to require all ninth grade students to pass the Minimum Basic Skills Test (MBST) as a requirement to receive a high school diploma. This was the first use of an exit examination as a requirement for graduation from a New Jersey high school (NJ DOE, 2006). Prior to this, the Minimum Basic skills program had been administered as more of a multiple assessment program or “portfolio” program whereby students would need to demonstrate reading and mathematics mastery through a series of benchmarks, but would not necessarily be retained if not passing the exit examination.

In 1983-84, New Jersey adopted the High School Proficiency Test 9. This examination was a more rigorous test of minimum basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics for ninth graders. The examination was not administered as a graduation requirement until 1985-86. In 1988, the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) again modified their assessment program by establishing the High School Proficiency Test 11 (HSPT11) and Early Warning Test (EWT8) (NJ DOE, 2006). The EWT8 was initially designed as a benchmark assessment; a tool for placement and planning. However, in 1991 the HSPT11 replaced the HSPT9, effectively moving the HSPT from 9th to the 11th grade. In 1993, the HSPT11 and EWT were both used as promotion/graduation requirements (EWT was used to promote from 8th to 9th grade and the HSPT11 was used as the high school graduation requirement). In this year, the HSPT11 was first administered to regular eleventh grade students as a graduation requirement.

The New Jersey State Board of Education adopted the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS) in 1996. The CCCS was created to “clearly define what all students should know and be able to do at the end of thirteen years of public education” (NJ CCCS, 2006). As constructed, the CCCS was not designed to be an inflexible curriculum guide, but a set of standards benchmarked at the 4th, 8th, and 11th grade years. The CCCS is meant to provide guidance to local districts creating their own curriculums while using the standards to provide some uniformity of what students are learning across the state. The CCCS is an attempt by the DOE to comply with the 1875 New Jersey Constitutional provision of “thorough and efficient” education as interpreted by the New Jersey Supreme Court in the historic case of *Robinson v. Cahill*, 303 A.2d 273 (1973). In *Robinson*, the NJ Supreme Court found that the New Jersey Constitution requires that all New Jersey students receive a “thorough and efficient” education. To this end, the Court found that New Jersey’s funding scheme (heavily reliant on property taxes

to fund education), monitoring systems and educational programs violated the 120 year old constitutional provision of “thorough and efficient” (*Robinson, 1973*). *Robinson* was followed by the *Abbott v. Burke* decisions (I-XVII) in which the Court ordered, amongst other things, “parity” funding, or additional state funds to bring per-pupil expenditures in the Abbott districts up to the per-pupil expenditures in the state’s wealthiest districts (*Abbott, 1994*).

Pursuant to the “thorough and efficient” constitutional requirements and the attempts to define exactly what “thorough” education is, the CCCS is applicable to *all* New Jersey students and is reviewed every five years (NJ CCCS, 2006). Thus the CCCS attempts to make sure that each of the over 600 local school districts align their curriculum to achieve the ultimate goal of creating students prepared to participate socially, politically, and economically in a democratic society.

In 1998, the New Jersey legislature enacted legislation in the form of the New Jersey State Assessment program (N.J.S.A. 18A: 7C-6.2). This legislation provided for the replacement of EWT but more profoundly for the replacement of HSPT11 with the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). The HSPA is meant to align and embody the math and language standards in the CCCS in one examination which will be required by all eleventh graders prior to graduation from a New Jersey high school.

The HSPA examination was first administered to those students entering 11th grade on or before September 1, 2001. The HSPA tests achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics as required by the CCCS. The examination is given in March of the 11th grader’s junior year. If failed, the HSPA is re-administered in the fall and spring of the student’s senior year (NJ Assessment, 2006). The districts receive individual student reports (“ISR”) indicating the proficiency of each student in specific content areas. Prior to the reform of the alternative assessment, those students failing to demonstrate proficiency, (defined by the HSPA as a scaled score of 200+ in either Language Arts Literacy or Mathematics) were eligible for the Specialized Review Assessment (“SRA”). Students failing the HSPA were required to demonstrate proficiency via a CCCS and HSPA aligned SRA assessment measure. New Jersey Statute (N.J.S.A. 18A:7c-3) and Administrative Code (N.J.A.C. 6.8-7.1) provided for the alternate assessment known as the Special Review Assessment (SRA).

New Jersey is one of 26 states requiring high school graduates to complete a high-stakes state graduation assessment in order to graduate. The Center on Education Policy indicates that New Jersey is also one of 19 of those 26 to offer an alternative assessment to the traditional high-stakes exit examination. However, it should be mentioned that both the HSPA and the SRA could both arguably be considered high-stakes assessments due to the requirement that students pass one or the other in order to graduate. Both require that students meet all non-exit examination graduation requirements to receive a diploma. However, the traditional exit examination (HSPA) and the former alternative exit assessment (SRA) were very different in form and administration if not content. The alternative assessment and the HSPA both reflect the New Jersey Curriculum Content Standards. Further, in a paper issued by the NJDOE for the New Jersey Board of Education, the DOE stated:

“Furthermore, almost no informed person questions the validity of the SRA assessment tasks themselves: they are developed by the same state test vendor and test development process that

produces the HSPA. In that sense the SRA is actually very strong; it is the credibility of the SRA scoring that is under suspicion...”(NJDOE, 2008)

The SRA²

The SRA was based on the recognition that some students are “test phobic”. These students were defined as those having high-stress and anxiety and failing to perform well on high-stakes standardized tests under pressured (time constrained) situations. In addition those students with special needs (English language deficient, cognitive deficiencies) were allowed to demonstrate proficiency on state graduation standards via the SRA. Though both groups were believed to be a small minority, it was for these students that the SRA was initially developed (NJ SRA White Paper, 2003). Further, according to the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), the original intent of the SRA was to provide a way for students to meet CCCS and HSPA proficiency requirements under less stressful circumstances (NJ SRA White Paper, 2003).

Thus, the SRA assessment was administered as an alternative assessment “to those students meeting all graduation requirements (120 credits, passage of all core courses, and meeting all local graduation requirements) except a demonstration of proficiency in all content areas of the HSPA (Librera, 2004). Those students scoring < 200 in either Language Arts Literacy (LAL) or Mathematics in one of three testing periods (Spring of Junior Year, Fall/Spring of senior year) were deemed SRA eligible. However, it is nonetheless important to recognize that though the SRA assessment program was created for specific students to meet graduation requirements, in 1991 the New Jersey administrative code was changed to allow for all those failing to demonstrate proficiency on the HSPT11 (now the HSPA) to have an opportunity to meet proficiency on the SRA.

The SRA process began upon receipt of an Individual Student Report (ISR) which gave specific information about proficiency results for each student who takes the HSPA. New Jersey high school students have three chances to demonstrate proficiency on the HSPA — the spring of their junior year, the fall of their senior year, and the spring of their senior year (Davy, et. al., 2006). In addition, students who transfer into a school district during their senior year were encouraged to begin the SRA process immediately to the extent they had not passed the HSPA. These students continued to sit for the HSPA, but in the event of continued non-passage, the SRA provided a way for them to satisfy graduation requirements for a June or summer graduation (Davy, et al., 2006).

The SRA was aligned to the content requirements of the CCCS and the HSPA such that those students demonstrating SRA proficiency were said to satisfy HSPA requirements as well. For example, as Education Commissioner Lucille Davy said, “the SRA was never intended to be used as a lower standard, but rather a different means of measuring the same standard.” (*New Jersey Senate Budget Committee Testimony*, April 16, 2007) In addition, students were allowed an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in a “familiar” setting. This means that the exam was administered as a series of mathematics and language arts literacy Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs) administered to individual students (non-group testing) (Librera, 2004). Fine, et

² As will be discussed in more detail below, the SRA was reconceptualized and administered as the AHSA examination beginning in January 2010.

al. (2007) states, “According to the NJDOE, the difficulty or ‘rigor’ of the PATs is comparable to HSPA questions” (Fine et. al., 2007 quoting Doolan & Peters, 2007).

Though the SRA was originated as a limited assessment tool available to only those “test-phobic” students, the assessment program became generally available to all those failing to demonstrate proficiency on the HSPA in 1991. In 2006 the state of New Jersey reported that over 13,000 New Jersey high school graduates received their high school diplomas by using the SRA to meet state standards. This number constituted approximately 12 percent of all New Jersey graduates and about one-third of all graduates in the urban districts (Fine et al., 2007 quoting NJDOE SRA 2006 Annual Survey). However, the SRA was designed as an educationally equivalent assessment.

The SRA envisioned remedial coursework and SRA administration. For example, after receipt of an Individual Student Report (ISR) in the spring of the student’s junior year, proficiency had either been met ($p \geq 200$) or not ($p < 200$). School personnel reviewed the ISRs to see if the student had demonstrated proficiency on the language arts literacy and on the mathematics sections of the HSPA. A student whose scaled score was below 200, considered partially proficient, in the HSPA language arts literacy and/or mathematics content areas was expected to complete all state and local high school graduation requirements for a June or August graduation (Davy, et. al., 2006). A student who’s ISRs reflected partial proficiency was immediately eligible for the SRA process.

The school was to begin remedial coursework soon after receipt of the HSPA scores focusing on that content area (language arts literacy or mathematics) indicating weakness (Librera, 2004). The administration of the SRA provided for individualized assessment of proficiency of the HSPA content areas. After failure of a HSPA examination, the student was given intensive instruction on the weak content area. Prior to taking the SRA PATs, students participated in an individual school-designed SRA instructional program for that content area. The SRA instructional program would begin in September of the student’s senior year of high school. In this regard, school district staff was encouraged to use creativity and innovation as they designed and implemented the SRA process. For example, according to Davy, et. al. (2006):

“One approach would be to involve the SRA Panel in designing the student’s instructional program since the SRA Panel selects the PATs that the student takes. In mathematics, the PAT item number indicates the strand and the cumulative progress indicator (CPI) that the student should know in order to be successful on that PAT. For example, Standard 1/Strand A PAT 12 AO2-123S corresponds to Number and Numerical Operations and to CPI #2 which states, “compare and order rational and irrational numbers.” With this information, the SRA Instructional Program teacher can instruct the students in these areas” (pg.9).

When the student and instructor deemed the student ready, Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs) were administered in one or both areas.

For each student deemed partially proficient in one or both content areas (LAL/Math), a two person panel certified in that HSPA content area was appointed. In addition, for each panel, a secondary certified English and mathematics teacher was appointed. Should there be a disagreement of more than a point in scoring between the two panel personnel, a third HSPA

certified teacher might be added (Davy, et. al., 2006). Through the administration of locally administered but state developed SRA Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs), the students were allowed to demonstrate proficiency of HSPA content areas. For each part of the HSPA in which a student failed to demonstrate proficiency, the student had to successfully complete two PATs from the same cluster of skills measured by the HSPA. For mathematics, the PATs were administered in clusters (specific mathematics content areas) and for LAL the PATs were administered and scored according to a criterion based “holistic” rubric which focuses on the “writer’s ability to convey an intended message to a given audience” (Librera, 2003 and 2004).³

Upon completion of the required number of PATs (dependent on the weak content area), the student was deemed to have demonstrated HSPA proficiency. That is, the student who has satisfied graduation requirements in every other way (GPA, credits, attendance) will be deemed to have satisfied New Jersey’s CCCS requirements as well. Through the series of PATs, the SRA was meant to test the totality of a student’s knowledge rather than the ability of the student to recall memorized information in a time sensitive atmosphere.

The selection of SRA PATs, made by the SRA panel, was based on the results of a students’ first HSPA administration. As stated earlier, a student’s first contact with the HSPA examination is generally the spring semester of their junior year in high-school. Where partially proficient ($p < 200$), students were required to complete two SRA PATs in each content area cluster or standard. For example, in Language Arts Literacy (LAL) there are two clusters. A student demonstrating partial proficiency must have successfully completed a reading and a writing cluster: one (1) persuasive reading PAT, one (1) narrative PAT, and two writing PATs for a total of four SRA LAL PATs.

Whereas LAL had two clusters for a total of four PATs, mathematics has four (4) standards which required completion of two PATs each for a total of eight (8) PATs (Davy, et. al., 2006). The PATs consisted of “one to six open-ended parts derived from a common stem; reading and writing for LAL and “number and numerical operations, geometry and measurement, patterns and algebra, and data analysis, probability and discrete mathematics” for Math (Davy, et al., 2006). Failure on a specific PAT did not doom the student’s chances at passing the overall SRA as long as the student retook the PAT in that cluster area. The student was not allowed to retake the same PAT; rather another PAT in the cluster group was administered. For example, a student taking a reading PAT attached to a specific narrative would not be allowed to take the same PAT. However, that student would be allowed to take a different PAT attached to that narrative as the SRA panel created several PATs linked to each narrative in advance. Likewise, the same held true for the Math PATs (Davy, et al., 2006).⁴

According to Davy, et al., the PATs were designed to be completed in one single untimed session (pg.7). However, students were allowed additional time to complete PATs if it were

³ It is important to note here that through amendments adopted by the State Board on June 17, 2009, the name of the process which performs the function of the SRA has been changed to the AHSA (Alternative High School Assessment). The procedures outlined here are those in place prior to the first administration of the AHSA in January 2010.

⁴ These procedures reflect the administration of the SRA previous to the new AHSA.

needed. However, no notes or PAT materials were allowed to leave the proctored area with the student(s) and all materials were required to be submitted for scoring (Davy, et al., 2006).

Prior to administration of the SRA PATs, mandatory instructional programs were required in either the Math or LAL content areas. After failing to meet proficiency in either Math or LAL in the spring of the junior year, instructional programs began in September of the senior year. As stated, students continued to sit for the October administration of the HSPA and would have been prepared for the retake by intensive instruction in the deficient areas (Davy, et al., 2006). However, the SRA process continued before and after the October exam until the student was deemed prepared to succeed on the SRA PATs.

Alternative assessment advocates argued that the SRA was nothing more than a different means of measuring the same content. Though allowing for more personalized, supplemental instruction and in some instances additional time to complete PATs, the content of the two examinations (HSPA/SRA) was of comparable difficulty. Alternative advocates argued that the SRA was a better indicator of what had actually been learned as the SRA allowed for individualized instruction and intensive remediation in areas in which the student's failure of the HSPA had highlighted some weaknesses. Further, the SRA appeared to provide in hindsight, that instruction which should have been made available to the students throughout their high-school instruction. There seemed to be little in the way of "special" accommodation as that word is pejoratively applied in the context of assessment due to the fact that the student was required to demonstrate the exact same content knowledge, albeit through a less high-stakes method of testing, as those students initially passing the HSPA.

Critics of the SRA pointed to the widespread use of the alternative assessment tool. For example, in the years covered by this study (2003-2008), 11,000 to 15,000 New Jersey students annually had been meeting graduation requirements via the SRA (NJDOE School Report Card and SRA Annual Survey). Critics argued that rather than keeping them on track to post-secondary success, these numbers indicated a culture of lowered expectations which shepherded students through. Critics further highlighted, ironically, the disproportionately negative impact these types of exams have on poor students and students of color. Rather than the SRA being a little used tool for a small minority population, all students who did not score proficient on the HSPA were eligible for the SRA. For critics of the SRA, this element could not be too little emphasized because the fact that in 2004-05 some jurisdictions graduated $p \geq 50\%$ of students under the SRA program is troubling (NJSRA, 2004-05). For example, according to published SRA graduation data, 2004-05 saw Paterson City, Pleasantville City, Newark City and City of Orange TWP, graduating 50% or more of their students under the SRA program rather than the traditional program. More specifically, Paterson City graduated in excess of 60% and Newark City, the most populated school district in New Jersey, graduated 52% (NJSRA, 2004-05). Critics argued that the HSPA, which is the primary standardized measurement tool in New Jersey, should be the measurement tool under which the large majority if not all (excepting some special education exceptions) of New Jersey students graduate and anything else is both a disservice to the students and the uniform system of standards and assessments.

Critics of the SRA argued that the HSPA was not only the primary standard, but a more valid standard which is more strongly correlated to predictive validity in terms of post-secondary

college/university success, post-secondary academic achievement, and financial/economic success. Yet, until now, there has been no empirical support for these claims as there had been no study of the post-secondary experiences by HSPA and SRA graduates. Therefore, claims of illegitimacy have been spurious at best.

However, it is important to emphasize that both the HSPA and SRA (now AHSA), because one or the other must be passed to graduate, could be considered “high-stakes”. The difference between them lies not in the ultimate consequences placed on passing/not passing, but in the form of administration. The untimed performance tasks of the SRA, administered in clusters, were argued to allow for demonstration of mastery and skills through greater variety. The use of PATs required the application of critical thinking skills and gave the students an opportunity to demonstrate mastery in ways consistent with academic and cultural environments.

Martha Foote (2007) has questioned the validity of graduation exams as markers of post-secondary success. Foote points out that students in states administering standardized high stakes exams, spend a great deal of time in remediation courses, or enter college with lower skill sets from those seen in previous entering classes. Foote also argues that performance based assessments used in New York Performance Standards Consortium (a coalition of 28 small, diverse public high schools across New York State), results in post-secondary success due to the inquiry based pedagogical model which encourages engagement and critical thought (Foote, 2007). Thus, the debate between the SRA/AHSA and HSPA in New Jersey is a subset of the much larger debate on whether graduation exams validly measure knowledge and skills necessary for post secondary success, or whether they simply act as barriers to advancement by black, Hispanic/Latino and poor students. Because education credentials (degrees, certificates, licenses) remain critical to the access of jobs, the attainment of these credentials is increasingly important. This is even truer for those black and Hispanic/Latino students coming from economically and socially depressed backgrounds. Because these students often lack the initial affluence and social/cultural capital necessary to gain entrée to well paying jobs via cronyism or social networks, education becomes their key resource for social and economic advancement.

The SRA was scored according to state supplied scoring rubrics. The “item-specific” scoring rubrics provided the means by which SRA administrators on the local level objectively evaluated and scored student performance. In addition, the PATs were independently scored by two certificated panel members. The two ratings were required to agree or be within one point of each other. The final score was obtained by taking the mean of the two independent scores. To the extent the scores disagreed by more than one point, a third member stepped in, independently evaluated the PAT, and the mean of the two highest contiguous scores was the PAT score. If there was still lack of agreement within one point, the student must complete another PAT (Davy, et al, 2006). As the student successfully completed the PATs, the SRA panel members affirmed proficiency of HSPA content areas.

New Jersey is one of 26 states currently using a high school exit examination as a requirement for graduation. In New Jersey, the HSPA is the primary standardized assessment tool in New Jersey. As originally developed, it does allow for multiple sittings of the examination in recognition of the high-stakes inherent in failing the exam. One major issue for New Jersey and those endorsing high-stakes testing and uniform standards is that the existence of

an alternative scheme of which more and more New Jersey students are taking advantage, serves to undermine the original assessment tool.

The SRA was also unique in that it translated the exam into other languages for Limited English Proficient (“LEP”) students. The critics of the SRA cited this as an example of the further undermining of the exam. The critics argued that LEPs should be made English proficient and be made to take the exam in English with native speakers. According to the critics, the allowance of translated exams for satisfaction of graduation requirements further undermined not only the primary assessment tool, but the original intent of the SRA.

The attack on public school and public schooling directly pits those who advocate for uniformity and high-stakes testing against those advocating for alternative assessments and less emphasis on single exams as the measure of what a child has learned upon attempting to exit the secondary schooling arena. Uniform standards advocates would argue that the existence of the alternative assessment is yet another example of the failure of progressive education. Uniform standards advocates would argue that the alternative assessment is exactly the reason the achievement gap exists and the public schools are failing: the failure to hold all children to one high standard. The critics of that movement would argue that uniformity is illusory and fails to account for differences in rates and styles of learning.

To buttress this argument alternative advocates would point to the fact that students who, by the end of their senior year, are still not proficient (≥ 200) in all HSPA content areas and have not successfully completed the alternative process must continue the alternative process as a regular, vocational, or alternative high school student (fifth-year student or retained twelfth grader) or as an adult high school student. If these students choose not to enroll in a regular, vocational, alternative, or adult high school, then they may not continue in the alternative assessment process but may continue to take the HSPA as non-enrolled “returning students” at their high school. These alternative processes demonstrate that all students in New Jersey schools are expected to meet state mandated academic criteria in order to receive a state diploma. No diplomas are issued unless every student has demonstrated proficiency of New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). (Davy, et. al, 2006)

On March 19, 2008 the NJ State Board of Education passed a resolution to retain and reform the SRA (Special Review Assessment) by an 8-0 vote. The resolution provided that the SRA as currently constructed would stay in place through the 2008-2009 school years. The resolution additionally instructs the NJDOE to revise the alternative route to high school graduation modeled on the SRA. The new assessment program is targeted for implementation in the 2009-2010 school years.⁵

The decision to retain and reform the SRA reflected the ambivalence of education policy makers in New Jersey. Despite the pressure to eliminate the SRA by the business community, some in the academic community, and most especially politicians, there was an immediate recognition (particularly on the heels of the Fine et. al report of 2007) of the dire consequences of eliminating a pathway to graduation relied upon by upwards of 15,000 high school graduates

⁵ The Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) modeled on the SRA was first administered in January of 2010. Though substantially similar in form, the administration of the exam was not successful.

annually. What would happen to these students, some of whom may persist taking the HSPA, should the SRA be eliminated? It is highly likely that many of them would drop out of high school. The possibility of more than 50% and upwards of 70%, 80% or 90% of students formerly relying on the SRA dropping out of high school clearly influenced the board's decision to retain and reform rather than eliminate.

ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENT (AHSA)

On March 19, 2008 the NJ State Board of Education passed a resolution to retain and reform the SRA (Special Review Assessment) by an 8-0 vote. As stated earlier, the SRA alternative assessment program in New Jersey had been used by 11,000-15,000 students to graduate high school on an annual basis. The re-conceptualized SRA exam resulted in the Alternative High School Assessment exam or AHSA.

According to a publication released by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) in December 2009 titled *ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL ASSESSMENT (AHSA) ADMINISTRATION MANUAL 2009–2010 SCHOOL YEAR*, the substance of the exam remains substantially the same as the former SRA examination. For example, according to the NJDOE, the AHSA, much as the SRA was, “is aligned to the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) test specifications to ensure that students who demonstrate proficiency through the AHSA have demonstrated the same knowledge, skills and performance levels as students who are proficient on the HSPA.” Additionally, like the SRA, “the AHSA consists of untimed performance assessment tasks (PATs)...” (NJDOE, 2009:4) This carry over in form and substance from the SRA was no doubt meant to give the impression that the new AHSA exam was providing consistency in transition from SRA to AHSA in what was tested but not in the way knowledge and skills were measured. Therefore, as the content of the examination did not change, what explains the dismal performance of the students sitting for the first administration of the exam?

The AHSA was presented as a remedy for the much maligned SRA examination which was criticized as a form of lowered expectations and a back-door means of earning a high school diploma. The AHSA was presented as a more valid, less attenuated measure of the knowledge and skills possessed by those students failing to demonstrate proficiency on the HSPA examination. This new more valid measure, according to the Education Law Centre, resulted in demonstrations of widespread errors by the NJDOE and failures by New Jersey high school students. Suggesting that though the content of the AHSA does not differ substantially from the content of the former SRA, the administration and scoring of the exams differs significantly. For example, the Education Law Center reports that the results of the first administration of the January in 2010 AHSA examination during the first administration window (January 6-28) resulted in 9,500 students taking the math test, but only 3,240 or 34% passing. The Center further reports that of the 4,500 students taking the language arts test, only 430 or 10% passed. Further, in 120 districts administering the new alternative assessment, no students passed the language arts exam and in 40 districts no students passed the math assessment (ELC, 2010; NJDOE, 2010).

Additionally, the numbers released for the April administration of the exam, though better, reflect significant issues with the administration and scoring of the examination. The NJDOE reports that the April administration of the AHSA resulted in 2,230 students taking the math test and 1,059 or 47% passing. The Center further reports that of the 3,057 students taking the language arts test, only 1,055 or 35% passed (NJDOE, 2010). Though the number of students passing the exam increased from January to April, the number of students sitting for the

exam decreased significantly; particularly for the math section of the exam. Additionally, the pass rate for each exam remained below the 50% mark.

The new AHSA assessment has not resulted in the validity assured by the NJDOE. Through a series of errors in implementation, administration and scoring, the AHSA has created greater uncertainty for NJ high school students and resulted in wholesale failures and denial of diplomas to thousands of students who were otherwise eligible to receive them.

After the NJDOE voted to re-conceptualize the former SRA examination, the New Jersey commissioner convened a group of state educators, stakeholders and department personnel to advise on the reformation. According to reports, the commissioner rejected the advice of the commission and implemented the AHSA program without considering short and long term consequences for doing so. The result has been the gross failures spoken of earlier. According to the Education Law Center, they included:

- (1) Failure to pilot test the exam itself;
- (2) Failure to “field test” the scoring;
- (3) Failure to allow certified New Jersey education professionals and teachers to score the assessments instead contracting with a commercial vendor who in turn contracted with non-professional out-of-state employees;
- (4) Failure to adhere to the NJDOE’s stated rationale for having an alternative assessment: ACCOMODATION FOR THOSE STUDENTS TRADITIONALLY PERFORMING POORLY ON STANDARDIZED EXAMS.
- (5) Failure to allow NJ certified teachers to choose the PATS most appropriate for their students and drastic reductions in the number of PATs available to teachers and students.
- (6) Failure to provide the multi-language, translated PATs widely available under the previous SRA.
- (7) Failure to consider the impact of the AHSA on English Language Learners and high need districts.
- (8) Failure to supervise the rubric and protocols used by the commercial vendor hired to oversee the AHSA scoring.
- (9) Failure to provide greater flexibility in the preparation and administration windows of the assessment program (ELC, 2010b)

As the Education Law Center contends, the above list of errors made by the NJDOE is by no means an exhaustive list. Many districts recount the various ways in which the NJDOE failed to supervise the implementation and administration of the AHSA assessment. Whereas the SRA provided an opportunity for qualified, certified teaching professionals to evaluate their student’s preparedness for the exam, the AHSA provides three (January, April and July) static windows for the administration of the exam (NJDOE, 2009). With the exception of a limited appeals process, this has resulted in thousands of New Jersey students meeting every requirement for the receipt of a high school diploma yet receiving no diploma. This process increases dropouts, decreases graduation rates and denies eligible students the opportunity to go on to post secondary study.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of our analyses, which address the following questions: (1) who are HSPA and SRA graduates, (2) at what rates do HSPA and SRA graduates enroll in college, and (3) to what extent do HSPA and SRA students persist in post-secondary education?

A. Who are the HSPA and SRA Graduates?

Table 1 shows 59% of NPS high school graduates failed to pass the HSPA exam and instead graduated via SRA. Of these 5,760 students, more than half (55%) failed to pass both the Language Arts *and* Math portions of the HSPA. Another 40% failed the Math exam, but passed the HSPA Language Arts exam. Lastly, 5% passed HSPA math but not Language Arts (see **Table 1**). *Two-thirds of students (67.4%) passed at least a portion of the HSPA exam.*

Table 1 Number and percent of Newark Public School graduates by SRA and HSPA

		N	%
SRA	Neither Math nor LAL	3,172	32.6
	Math Only	306	3.1
	LAL Only	2,286	23.5
	All SRA	5,760	59.2
HSPA		3,965	40.8

Table 2 shows SRA and HSPA status by gender, ethnicity and economic disadvantage. For both females and males, SRA was the most common route to graduation. Boys were slightly more likely to graduate via SRA than girls, but this difference was not statistically significant. **Table 1** also shows SRA graduation by *economic disadvantage*, which in this study refers to eligibility for free or reduced school lunch (although all or nearly all of these students are economically disadvantaged in a broader sense). A large majority of the NPS graduates (74%) were eligible for free or reduced school meals, and these economically disadvantaged students were 16% more likely to graduate via the SRA assessment route than students who did not qualify for subsidized meals.

The Newark Public Schools are largely attended by students from various racial and ethnic minorities. Together, Hispanic and Black students comprised 84% of NPS graduates (Hispanic: 28%; Black: 56%), while Whites (15%) and Asians (1%) constituted much smaller proportions of the high school graduate population. The category *White* mostly consists of low income, ethnic white immigrants or their children. However, a substantial proportion of graduates do not have race/ethnicity data. **Table 2** shows approximately half of graduates identified as Hispanic or Black used the SRA route. In contrast, less than a third of Asian and White students graduated via SRA. As compared to White students, Blacks were 54% more likely to graduate via the SRA route; Hispanic graduates were 46% more likely than Whites to graduate via SRA. Asian graduates, a very small proportion of NPS graduates, were more likely

than Whites, Blacks and Hispanics to graduate via HSPA and were 6% less likely than Whites to graduate via SRA.

Table 2 Likelihood of graduating by SRA by Gender, SES and Race/Ethnicity

		N	SRA (%)	Relative Risk
Gender	Female	5,452	58.0	1.00
	Male	4,273	60.8	1.04
Economic Disadvantage	Not Subsidized	2,570	52.8	1.00
	Subsidized	7,155	61.5	1.16
Race/Ethnicity	White	834	32.7	1.00
	Asian	49	30.6	0.94
	Hispanic/Latino	1,629	47.9	1.46
	Black	3,198	50.3	1.54
	Missing	3,992	77.1	2.36

B. Who Engaged in Post-Secondary Study?

Table 3 shows enrollment in the post-secondary study by graduate cohort. The data show a much smaller number of graduates from 2003 as compared with subsequent years. This is largely due to non-matches with the HSPA data, although a number of graduates are “missing” from Central High School. As would be expected, a steady decrease in post-secondary matriculation rates is evident from 2004 to 2008, the result of students who took a break between high school and post-secondary study, but who ultimately pursued higher education. Up through the spring of 2008), half of Newark public high school graduates (51%) had enrolled for at least one semester in a post-secondary institution.

Table 3 Likelihood of post secondary enrollment by graduation cohort

Year of graduation	N	% with post-secondary enrollment
2003	898	44.9
2004	1,593	59.4
2005	1,723	53.6
2006	1,822	55.5
2007	1,778	51.5
2008	1,911	41.8
TOTAL	5,001	51.4

Table 4 shows post-secondary enrollment by SRA and HSPA status. More than 2/3 of HSPA graduates subsequently enrolled in an institution of post-secondary education. In comparison, just 40% of SRA graduates engaged in post-secondary coursework. However, the gap between the HSPA and SRA graduates narrowed when the SRA students passed at least one part of the HSPA exam—as did up to 49% of SRA graduates. For example, SRA graduates who

passed the Language Arts exam were just 27% less likely to attend than HSPA graduates. In comparison, graduates who failed both the Math and Language Arts HSPA were half as likely (50%) to attend a post-secondary institution as the HSPA graduates.

Because NPS HSPA graduates are more likely to attend a post-secondary institution than SRA graduates, one might mistakenly conclude that few Newark SRA graduates engaged in post-secondary education. However, SRA graduates comprised almost half (47%) of all NPS students who pursued post-secondary education: this was because a substantial majority of graduates followed the SRA route, and because almost half the SRA graduates had passed a part of the HSPA exam and these were fairly likely to go on to post-secondary study.

Table 4 Likelihood of post-secondary study based on HSPA or SRA

		Post Secondary (%)	Relative Risk
SRA	Neither Math nor LAL	34.0	1.00
	Math Only	45.0	1.32
	LAL Only	49.0	1.44
HSPA		67.5	1.98

C. Where Do Newark Public School Graduates Attend Post-Secondary Study?

Table 5 shows the types of post-secondary institutions that were attended by Newark public school graduates. HSPA students who attended a post-secondary institution generally attended a 4-year college (2 out of 3 students). In comparison, most SRA graduates (74%) who went on to post-secondary education attended a 2-year college. Both SRA and HSPA graduates were very unlikely to go to a vocational or trade school. Newark graduates generally attended public institutions (SRA: 86%; HSPA: 78%).

Table 5 Types of post-secondary institutions attended by HSPA and SRA graduates

	HSPA/SRA	N	(%)	Relative Risk
2-yr.	SRA	1,734	74.5	1.00
	HSPA	871	32.6	0.44
4-yr.	SRA	524	22.5	1.00
	HSPA	1,778	66.5	2.96
Vocational/Tech	SRA	68	2.9	1.00
	HSPA	26	0.9	0.31

D. Persistence in College/University

The following describes persistence in post-secondary education among the 5,001 Newark Public School graduates who attended college/university. Persistence is defined here as the number of terms of enrollment.

Figure 1 shows attrition among those NPS graduates who first attended a 2-year college. Both SRA and HSPA graduates left 2-year colleges in large numbers. By the beginning of the second term, 41% of HSPA graduates and 35% of SRA graduates had already left the 2-year colleges. By the fourth term, 74% of HSPA and 73% of SRA graduates had left. The pattern of attrition among SRA and HSPA graduates was essentially the same.

Figure 2 shows attrition among those NPS graduates who first attended a 4-year college. In comparison with the 2-year schools, attrition occurred more steadily and much less rapidly. By the beginning of the second term 19% of HSPA graduates and 21% of SRA graduates had left the 4-year schools. By the fourth term, 46% of HSPA graduates and 43% of SRA graduates had left. As with the 2-year schools, the pattern of attrition among SRA and HSPA graduates was essentially the same.

Figure 3 shows combined enrollments at 2- and 4-year colleges/universities by term of enrollment. The figure shows HSPA students tended to persist longer in college than SRA students. This reflects the lower rates of attrition in 4-year schools, which 2/3s of HSPA students attended –if they went to a post-secondary institution vs. the higher attrition rates of 2-year schools, which 3/4 of SRA students attended if they began post-secondary study. *In summary, the results suggest that SRA students are the equal of HSPA students in terms of persistence—providing they can gain admission to a 4-year school.*

These attrition analyses have three important limitations:

- these results contain information from some cohorts with relatively little follow-up. As a result, some of these graduates likely attended terms beyond those documented here. In other words, some persistent graduates appear to “drop out” when they were in fact continuing students. *Therefore, the results tend to exaggerate attrition among persistent graduates—particularly those from more recent graduation classes.*
- these results do not take into account the conferral of degrees. Therefore, some persistent graduates may appear to “drop out” when in fact they completed all requirements for a post-secondary degree or certificate. *As above, the results will tend to exaggerate attrition among persistent graduates—particularly those from earlier graduation classes.*
- these results do not take into account transfers. *Therefore, transfers will appear to be attrition when they are not.*

Despite these limitations, the analyses are useful for documenting short term academic persistence and for comparing attrition among SRA and HSPA students.

Figure 1 Attrition at 2-year colleges and universities: percent still enrolled by the number of terms

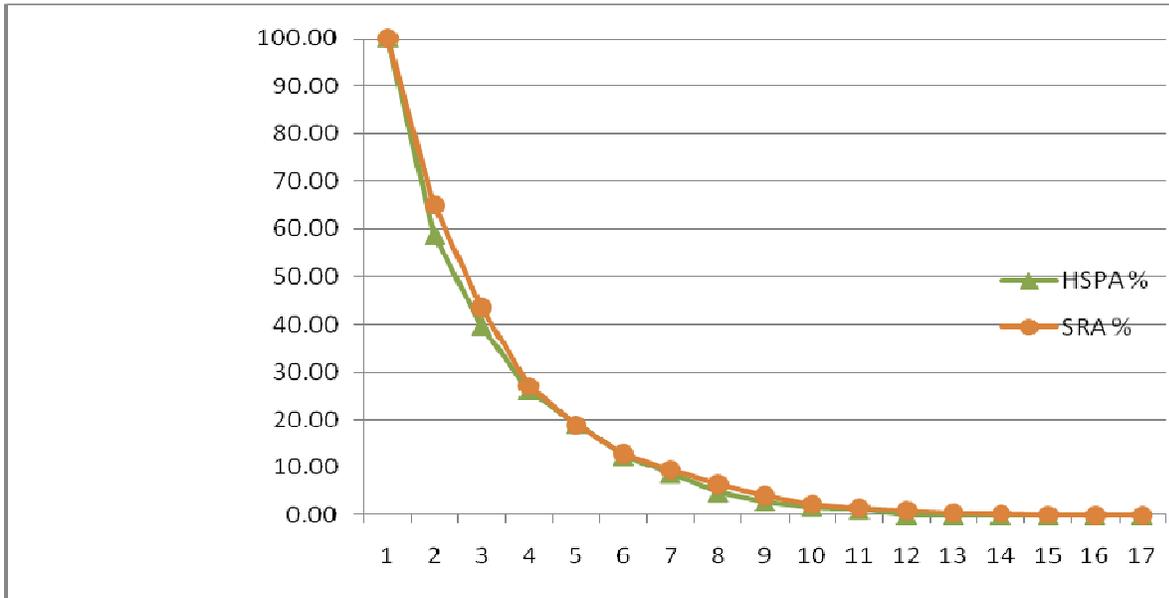


Figure 2 Attrition at 4-year colleges and universities: percent still enrolled by the number of terms

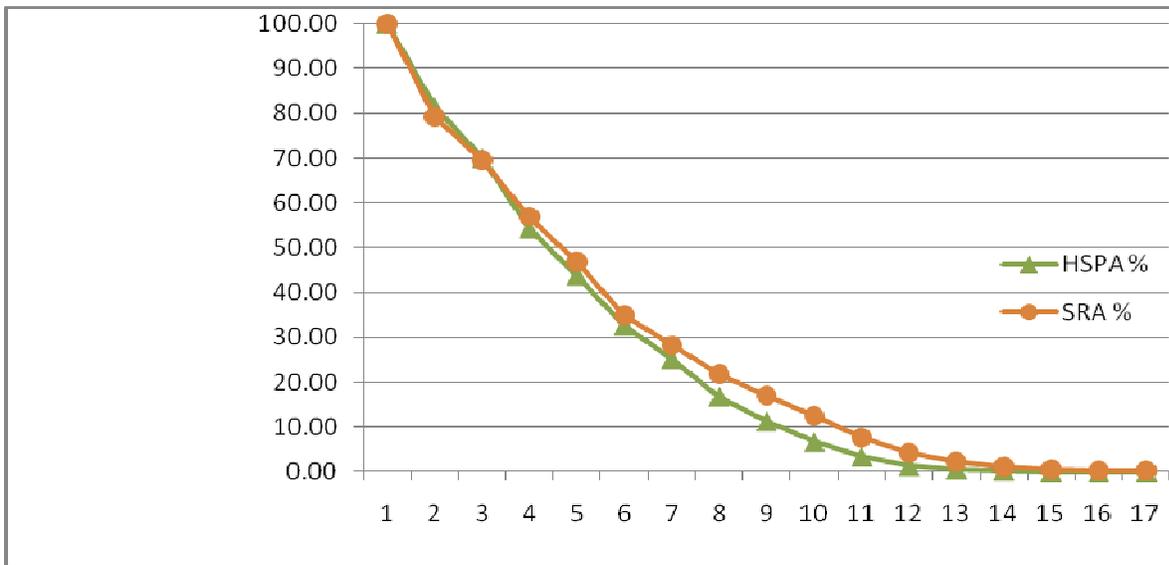
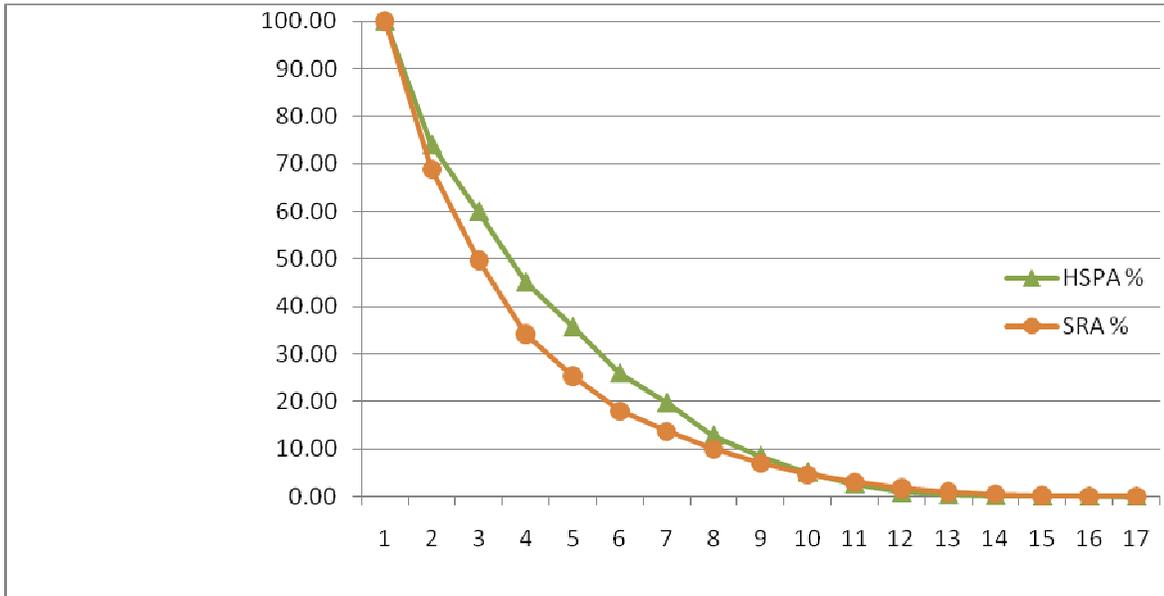


Figure 3 Attrition at 2- and 4- year colleges and universities combined: percent still enrolled by the number of terms



DISCUSSION

The analyses reported here show some real differences in the post secondary outcomes of HSPA and SRA graduates. These data suggest men, racial/ethnic minorities, and the economically disadvantaged graduated disproportionately more often via the SRA than the HSPA. Further, economic disadvantage-measured here as receipt of free or reduced lunch-played a great role in determining who graduated via SRA as those economically disadvantaged students were 16% more likely to graduate SRA as compared to the HSPA whereas those not designated as economically disadvantaged have an almost equal chance of graduating HSPA as SRA.

Blacks are the only racial/ethnic group for which a majority of their students graduated via the SRA. Hispanic/Latinos were slightly more likely to graduate via the HSPA than black students in the district, but only slightly. The other groups graduated healthy majorities of their students via HSPA as compared to SRA. The elimination of an alternative assessment route would disproportionately penalize blacks and Hispanic/Latinos for graduating via the alternative assessment program. These attempts would further penalize them for the social context in which they find themselves. Being poor and a racial/ethnic minority was a strong indicator of SRA graduation in this study. The majority of all groups represented in the study are economically disadvantaged-essentially resulting in comparing “working poor” to “poorer”. However, due to the disproportionate representation of blacks and Hispanic/Latinos in the study, and the racial isolation of these groups relative to the other groups in the study, blacks and Hispanic/Latinos were disproportionately poor, disproportionately isolated, and disproportionately more likely to graduate SRA as compared to HSPA.

The data further show, that SRA graduates disproportionately attended 2-year colleges and public colleges as compared to HSPA graduates who attended 4-year colleges/universities (public and private) at greater rates. According to Keeton (2010), SRA graduates disproportionately attended racially isolated public schools as compared to HSPA graduates who disproportionately attended and graduated from specialized magnet high schools.

Despite the differences in graduation and matriculation found in this research, it is extremely important to note the extent to which SRA graduates went on to post-secondary schooling. For example, though SRA graduates comprised 60% of all graduates represented in this data, they also comprised 47% of all postsecondary college/university enrollees, and 40% of all SRA graduates went on to post-secondary study. Though this figure is significantly less than the 68% of HSPA graduates going on to postsecondary study; the SRA graduated approximately half of all high school graduates pursuing postsecondary educational goals in 2-year, 4-year, public/private, national, regional, historically black college/universities and some of the most selective schools in the country (Keeton, 2010). Despite the aforementioned findings, SRA graduates continue to persist to college and obtain degrees. This persistence is significant as college attendance and degrees earned are key components to access to higher paying jobs.

It is also important to again emphasize the extent to which many if not most SRA graduates persisted to postsecondary attendance despite significant economic, academic, social and linguistic obstacles. The analyses presented here demonstrate that SRA graduates persisted despite the existence of structural forces militating against them. Naturally students from

economically and socially depressed backgrounds would find high school and college environments difficult to navigate. SRA graduates' achievement in both high school and college exemplify the very reason an alternative assessment must be maintained. Increasingly employers use years of college and college degrees to determine skills and ability. Thus, higher education can be viewed as an economic decision; a key means of access not only to higher paying higher skilled jobs but personal mobility. The opportunity to demonstrate mastery of state standards by the use of multiple measures begins to provide substantive opportunity to negate the vast academic, social and economic disadvantages suffered by a large percentage of alternative assessment takers. Many SRA graduates have gone on to college and will have children who go on to college thus opening doors and increasing opportunities that one single exam cannot do.

Based on these findings, we can infer what the educational landscape in New Jersey would look like if there had been no SRA during the periods covered by this study:

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the 2007 *Education Week* state graduation estimate of 83% would likely have fallen precipitously. As 11,000-15,000 New Jersey high school graduates relied on the SRA for graduation, a significant percentage (conservatively ½ of this number) would likely drop out of high school.

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the 2006 estimate by the *Education Trust* of 53% of New Jersey high school freshmen going on to college within four years would likely fall exponentially as so many of the high graduates going on to college are SRA graduates.

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the 2007 *Diplomas Count* estimates ranking New Jersey first in the high school graduation of Hispanic/Latino students and fifth in the graduation of black students, would no longer have been the case. The graduation rates for both historically marginalized groups would have declined by significant rates.

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the increasing reliance on the SRA by New Jersey high school students would have placed New Jersey in a very precarious position nationally. Not only would the already disproportionate gap in achievement and post-secondary attendance be widened in the state, but the large number of dropouts would have resulted in increased negative health, criminogenic, and economic consequences.

Over the course of the period examined in this study, women were the consistent majority in terms of overall population, high school graduates, and postsecondary enrollees. This is consistent with gains made by women in eliminating the achievement gap with respect to men over the past two decades in the language arts and social studies and high school and college graduation rates. However, men continue to outperform women academically in terms of majors chosen, degrees earned, graduate studies pursued, and participation in the job market in mathematics and sciences. Additionally, black women outperform black males in all of these categories (Education Trust, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

Based on the data, we can speculate on what the consequences of eliminating the SRA as a graduation vehicle might have been:

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the 60% of district graduates relying on the assessment to graduate high school from 2003-2008 in this study would have been at high risk of dropping out of high school.

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, blacks, Hispanic/Latinos, women and the economically disadvantaged would have been even more dramatically represented among the ranks of dropouts than is presently the case.

IF THERE HAD BEEN NO SRA, the 40% of SRA graduates who enrolled in post-secondary institutions from the district for the years 2003-2008 in this study would likely not have enrolled.

In light of these data, it would appear to be poor public policy and/or social policy to remove an alternative assessment program which has resulted in such a great number of New Jersey high school graduates going on to post-secondary study. Using one single high stakes exam rather than multiple measures of assessment to make decisions detention, promotion and graduation seems counter-intuitive especially as it has been demonstrated that success on a single high stakes assessment does not necessarily correlate with greater academic achievement nor post secondary schooling (Foote, 2007). However, the use of an alternative examination merely because students have come to rely on it, without positive measurable outcomes, does not increase the legitimacy of the assessment tool. The SRA proved to be an effective tool used by students throughout the district not only to graduate high school but to attend and persist in post secondary study. The legitimacy of the tool as a measure of whether students graduate and go on to post secondary study is no longer debatable.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Educational reform and the emphasis on high stakes exit exams as a means of enforcing accountability correlates with the unpopularity of public schools and public education. Darling-Hammond (2007) has stated, “Perhaps the most adverse unintended consequence of NCLB, which encourages high stakes testing, is that it creates incentives for schools to rid themselves of students who are not doing well, producing high scores at the expense of vulnerable students’ education...” (p. 16).

The most significant impact of these unintended consequences is felt in communities of color and immigrant communities. In these communities dropouts rates are higher, graduation rates are lower and enrollment in GED programs are disproportionate (Amrein and Berliner, 2002). Attewell and Lavin (2007) have commented extensively on the extent to which black and Hispanic/Latino students are more likely to be held back a grade, and the extent to which black and Hispanic/Latino students are two and four times more likely to drop out of high school than whites. Additionally, students receiving “free or reduced lunch” are significantly less likely to pass state exit exams. McDermott (2007) has written that when forming and implementing policy, “we must keep in mind that the schools currently most challenged by standards based reform implementation are the same schools that were not previously educating all students to high standards and that those schools serve the students who have been most harmed by racial and socio-economic inequality. To change schools, the state must not only direct its power against them, through sanctions, but also build the power of all educational institutions to do their work better; otherwise, aspirations to expand the moral boundaries of educational governance will continue to degenerate into policies that appear to blame victims for their own injuries” (p.111).

The Newark results show it is more important to, as McDermott says, “build the power of all educational institutions to do their work better” (p.111). The racial and economic disparities seen are not only consistent with the data, but reinforce the notion that racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by the use of high-stakes exams. The research shows that alternative assessments more so than the HSPA is crucial as a graduation vehicle for racial/ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged. Alternative assessments simply graduate more students of color and economically disadvantaged students than does the HSPA. The data suggest that eliminating the alternative might result in denying high school diplomas to a substantial population of the district’s students or condemning them to drop-out status or GED certificate holders. Statistics indicate that students dropping out of high school and students achieving GED certificates have similar poor outcomes in terms of un/under employment, low-skilled workers, low-wage earners and economic standing in comparison to high school graduates. Eliminating alternative assessments would clearly have significant educational and economic implications.

Fine et al. (2007) referencing a longitudinal study by Cameron and Heckman (1993) suggest that not only are GED recipients “*not* the labor market equals” of high school graduates, but more importantly “they are closer to drop outs in terms of economic standing” (p.54). According to Tyler, Murnane, and Willett (2000), “while the GED remains a highly sought

credential, the lack of socialization components, thinking skills and equitable economic benefits” (p. 463) renders the GED a distant cousin of a four-year high school career.

Thus, if the alternative assessment were eliminated and those students previously having graduated with a traditional high school diploma via the SRA were graduated with a GED certificate that change would not result in the same social and economic outcomes for GED certificate holders as we now see for traditional high school diploma holders. Further, though GED recipients have the expected increased access to post-secondary education—compared to dropouts—the GED fails to adequately measure cognitive skills, critical thinking skills and the ability to adapt to societal norms. This actually places the GED closer to high stakes standardized tests than alternative multiple compensatory exams which tends to measure both cognitive and thinking skills. The data have demonstrated that not only did a substantial majority of the district’s students graduate via the alternative assessment, a significant percentage of these graduates go on to postsecondary educational institutions.

Additionally, it is important to point out here that additional research must assesses the outcomes of dropouts. Because of the transient nature of dropout students and the inability of schools to track students who officially dropout, the comparison of SRA graduates to dropouts is extremely difficult. However, these group comparisons must be made. As this research has demonstrated, irrespective of the ability to compare dropouts at this time, SRA graduates are extremely diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, first generation immigrants, ELL (English language learners), test phobic students, students with poor math preparation, etc. Thus, though there is great difficulty in assessing outcomes of dropouts at this time, the great variety among SRA graduates themselves for purposes of comparison is extraordinary.

If the fundamental question is whether graduation via HSPA made a difference, the answer is clearly that “Graduating under the HSPA program *did* make a difference” in terms of post-secondary educational outcomes. HSPA graduates went on to college at greater rates than SRA graduates.

SRA to AHSA

This research has argued for the retention and improvement of a rich and holistic multiple compensatory alternative assessment program in the district. The presence of an alternative assessment alongside the traditional standardized assessment program can only increase graduation rates and further capture talent and skills missed by the single measure. A diverse population in which students are possessed of diverse learning styles and diverse abilities should be met with a rich differentiated program of assessment. The continued offering of the HSPA must be balanced with a richer multiple compensatory alternative. Strengthening the alternative by (1) increasing transparency, (2) implementing a system of uniform scoring and (3) providing ongoing professional development to districts and teachers will continue to provide a diverse population with a more valid and reliable means of educational opportunity.

The most consistent criticism of the SRA was the lack of transparency in scoring the student portfolios. Implementing a standardized system whereby the student portfolios are scored by highly qualified trained individuals would go a long way towards allaying the concerns

of all. Removing discretion from individual districts and replacing these districts with state supported regional centers staffed by trained and certified New Jersey education professionals rather than commercial vendors would be most appropriate. In this regard, decisions most affecting the most vulnerable of New Jersey's students would be made by those who are intimately familiar with and sensitive to New Jersey, discrete district/regions, and New Jersey's student population.

The elimination of the alternate graduation pathway (SRA/ASHA) would be tantamount to ridding our schools of those whom we believe are underperforming by disproportionately succeeding on the alternative assessment. However, the Newark data indicate that the SRA graduates in the sample have gone on to postsecondary study at significant rates. Criticism of the alternative SRA/AHSA equates to blaming students for succeeding on the alternative assessments and progressing through high school and going on to post-secondary study. This criticism of the SRA/AHSA presupposes a "dumbed down" high school curriculum based on nothing more than evidence that the student has graduated high school through a method other than the presumptive "better" assessment method. To the contrary, this is evidence of nothing more than adherence to an educational system which has traditionally failed those racially/ethnically diverse students coming from economically depressed backgrounds. Though there is certainly a discrepancy in graduation, there is an opportunity to rectify that discrepancy by improving and expanding the definition of educational assessments.

Attewell and Lavin (2007) indicate that one of the unique features of the American education system is the proliferation of "second chance schools". Though Attewell and Lavin focus on those students who drop out of high school and earn a GED as being "second chance" students, the same concept arguably applies to those students who graduate via the alternative SRA examination. The SRA/AHSA provides those students who have performed poorly on the HSPA with an alternative means of proving mastery of skills. By focusing exclusively on a single measure of knowledge and skills we may do a great disservice to graduates as college/university study will require them to think conceptually and critically. Stale curricula, rote memorization, and teaching to the test will not benefit district students in their pursuit of postsecondary education; they will merely find themselves falling further behind. Additionally, the alternative assessment allows students to continue to progress towards greater social and economic attainment.

These data suggest that the elimination of the SRA/AHSA might result in increased dropout rates, lower graduation rates and larger numbers of students (disproportionately students of color) experiencing future adverse health, economic and criminal justice consequences. Further, focusing on high-stakes examinations to the exclusion of more holistic exams has been shown to sacrifice critical thinking and complex analytical skills to rote memorization and "teaching to the test". Forcing teachers and students to concentrate on lessening sanctions rather than increasing knowledge and skills is poor public and educational practice (Center on Education Policy, 2005, 2007).

Firestone and Mayrowetz (2000) have shown how single high stakes examinations may "primarily promote short term accommodations but not deeper learning" (20). Whereas Coleman (1998), has persuasively argued that "policy makers and the education community must

work to guarantee that the establishment of high stakes standards for all students does not unfairly result in the denial of educational opportunity for any one student (82).

Failing to finish high school affects the future economic, health and criminal justice aspects of young people's lives (Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison, 2006). Additionally, these affects disproportionately affect students of color (Fine, et al., 2007). The disparity in earning potential, the increase in incarceration among black males (Mincey, 2006), and the high mortality rates (Molla, Madans and Wagener, 2004) among those without high school diplomas all point to the same fact: those without high school diplomas and/or commensurate formal education suffer from pervasive negative social consequences.

The research reported here shows that the SRA provided a significant pathway to graduation for 60 percent of high school graduates included in this study, and 40 percent of those SRA graduates went on to post-secondary study. The research further shows that though SRA graduates did not attend college at the same rates as HSPA graduates, and disproportionately attended 2-year over 4-year and public over private institutions, SRA graduates comprised a large percentage of all of the college bound students in the district. Elimination of the SRA/AHSA could foreclose graduation and college attendance for nearly half of the college bound population. Surely public policy supports sustaining and improving this alternative pathway rather than eliminating it.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this report provides important findings on the differential effects of the SRA and HSPA on postsecondary outcomes of Newark Public School graduates from 2003-2008, longitudinal research on postsecondary graduation rates—both Associates of Arts and Bachelors of Arts—of these graduates is vital for providing a more comprehensive picture of what happens to these students after graduation. Given the fact that for low-income students, six-year rather than four-year graduation rates are considered more appropriate, it is now the time to analyze the postsecondary graduation rates. We are in the process of collecting these data from the National Student Clearinghouse and a subsequent report will analyze these findings. However, even without these data, our findings remain important, as research has indicated that attendance in college, even without graduating, has significantly positive attitudinal, cognitive, economic and occupational effects (Attewell and Lavin, 2007).

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