

# New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?

A POLICY BRIEF

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# Introduction

“We have the highest high school graduation rates in the nation...Whatever we do, we must keep and enhance the nation’s best school system.”

– Governor Jon Corzine, *January 2007 State of the State address*

Ordinarily, one might expect that an alternative education program that encourages thousands of secondary students to stay in school and remain on track to earn a high school diploma would have broad support. However, New Jersey’s “special review assessment” or SRA, has been the subject of longstanding and, at times, contentious public debate. Detractors of the SRA have called it a “backdoor diploma” that “hurts the very students it seeks to help.” Supporters assert that the SRA is a legitimate alternative to the state’s more traditional exit test, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), and has even “saved lives” by providing struggling students with an alternative that keeps them from dropping out of school and the resulting well-documented negative personal and social consequences.

Yet despite much talk in education circles about data-driven reform, there has been little research on the role of the SRA in allowing students to satisfy New Jersey’s graduation standards. Aside from aggregate totals of the numbers of students graduating through HSPA and SRA, little information has been made available to date on the demographic characteristics or educational experience of these students, their access to opportunities to learn and their post-secondary outcomes compared to other graduates or dropouts. This report is an attempt, in part, to help fill this gap and to supply information that can help to inform policy decisions that will affect thousands of New Jersey’s students and hundreds of its communities. This study:

- > Reviews the history of the SRA policy and debate;
- > Reports findings of a multi-method study undertaken to document the potential impact of SRA elimination on secondary students in New Jersey, with a particular emphasis on the implications by race, ethnicity, social class and community;
- > Places New Jersey policy debates about graduation policy and secondary reform in national context;
- > Identifies a set of policy considerations for a variety of constituencies; and
- > Offers recommendations on how New Jersey might strengthen the rigor of its graduation requirements without losing ground on its impressive graduation rates.

# Frequently Asked Questions about the SRA

## **What is the Special Review Assessment or SRA?**

The SRA is a way for students who have not passed all sections of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) to meet New Jersey's high school graduation requirements. It is a series of performance assessment tasks (PATs) designed by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) as "an alternative assessment that provides students with the opportunity to exhibit their understanding and mastery" of state graduation standards "in contexts that are familiar and related to their experiences." (NJDOE Website <http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/index.shtml#sra>)

## **How does the SRA differ from the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)?**

The HSPA is a traditional paper and pencil standardized exam that uses multiple choice questions, open-ended, short-answer questions and a writing sample to assess student skills in math and language arts. It is administered in a formal testing environment under timed, secure conditions on dates specified by the state. The HSPA is created and scored at the state level by a commercial vendor hired by the New Jersey Department of Education.

Typically, students pursue the SRA after they have failed to pass one or more sections of the HSPA. The SRA requires students to successfully complete a series of performance tasks that are aligned with state standards and created by the same commercial vendor who creates the HSPA. However, the SRA is administered locally on a flexible schedule in less formal, untimed settings. Students may be given multiple opportunities to complete the performance tasks which are scored by local educators who have been trained in the use of scoring rubrics provided by the state. The SRA is also available in Spanish, Portuguese and Gujarati, while the HSPA is given only in English.

To earn a diploma, both HSPA and SRA students must also accumulate at least 110 credits, pass all core courses required for graduation, and meet other local requirements.

## **How does the content of the SRA compare to the content of the HSPA?**

The SRA and the HSPA are designed to be educationally equivalent assessments. "The SRA content is linked to the HSPA test specifications in order to ensure that students who are certified through the SRA process have demonstrated the same skills and competencies at comparable levels as students who passed the written HSPA test." [<http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/index.shtml#sra>] As Education Commissioner Lucille Davy has 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)

For each part of the HSPA that a student does not pass in the regular testing environment, he/she must successfully complete two PATs from the same cluster of skills measured by the HSPA. According to the NJDOE, the difficulty or "rigor" of the PATs is comparable to HSPA questions. (Doolan & Peters, 2007) In fact, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University, a nationally-recognized expert on high school assessment issues, has described the SRA as the type of alternative test that "measure[s] students'

skills and knowledge in a more dynamic way that can better inform ongoing instruction and provide a more thorough assessment of students' learning.” (Darling-Hammond et al, 2006)

### Why is there an alternative high school graduation test?

The Center on Education Policy reports that of the 25 states that currently require an exit test for high school graduation, 17 provide some sort of alternative to the traditional test. The SRA is one such alternative. Just as students learn in different ways, students may demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways. Educators and professional organizations of experts in educational measurement agree that multiple measures of student learning are the most reliable and that no single high-stakes test should be used to make important decisions about a student's future. (See pages 26–27.)

### Who is eligible to take the SRA?

Since 1991, the SRA alternative has been available to all students who do not successfully pass one or more portions of the HSPA. The number of students using SRA has risen steadily over the years, including significant increases between 2002 and 2003 when the state replaced the High School Proficiency Test with the more challenging High School Proficiency Assessment. In 2006, the state reported that over 13,000 New Jersey graduates received their high school diplomas by using the SRA to meet state standards. (NJDOE SRA 2006 Annual Survey. *Note: State data on the number of SRA graduates varies according to the source used. For example, New Jersey School Report Card data indicate a total of just over 11,000 SRA graduates.*)

### What do we know about SRA students?

Unfortunately, not as much as we should. There is little information available to policymakers or the public about the educational experience or the post-school outcomes of SRA students. Accordingly it is difficult to know whether SRA students have had access to sufficiently rigorous course sequences and high quality instruction from fully-certified educators that might have better prepared them to meet HSPA requirements or how the post-school life outcomes of SRA graduates compares with either dropouts or HSPA graduates in terms of college participation, employment, health, and criminal justice encounters, etc.

The importance of gathering such data to make informed policy decisions that impact thousands of students and hundreds of communities is a strong argument for moving cautiously in this area. It is also another reason for creating the oft-mentioned longitudinal, student-level database needed to track the progress of New Jersey students through the K-12 system and beyond.

### What does the limited amount of available data about SRA students reveal?

In 2006, about 12 percent of all New Jersey graduates and about one-third of all graduates in the urban Abbott\* districts used SRA to meet state graduation requirements. (New Jersey Department of Education, SRA graduation rate from 2005-06 School Report Card; number of graduates from 2005-06 Fall Survey.)

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\* Abbott districts are the 31 poorest urban districts in New Jersey that receive resources, programs and services under a series of New Jersey Supreme Court rulings known as *Abbott v. Burke*. 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](http://www.edlawcenter.org).

Among the state's 31 Abbott districts, rates of SRA use vary widely, from single digits to over 50 percent. Similar wide variation exists among high schools inside Abbott districts. The state has not conducted any studies that might help explain these variations, although such a study was explicitly called for in the Abbott regulations (N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-3.2 (e) 6).

To be sure, students from Abbott districts are over-represented among SRA graduates. While just 15 percent of all New Jersey graduates come from Abbott districts, Abbott students account for 42 percent of SRA graduates. Still, a majority of all SRA graduates, 58 percent, are from non-Abbott districts. Over the past ten years, rates of SRA use have increased more rapidly in the non-Abbott districts, while rates in Abbott districts have stabilized, albeit at much higher levels.

By an almost 2 to 1 margin, more students use the SRA to satisfy the required mathematics standards than the language arts standards according to the New Jersey Department of Education SRA 2006 Annual Survey. This raises significant issues about the state's math curriculum and about opportunities to learn, including access to certified math teachers and high quality instruction.

### **Is the administration and scoring of SRA consistent across districts?**

No. While the state is responsible for developing and supplying the content of the SRA and the PATs, districts and schools are responsible for organizing the administration of the SRA, providing supplemental instruction to SRA students, and scoring SRA portfolios in accordance with general state guidelines. SRA student portfolios must be submitted to the County Superintendent's offices. However, the growing numbers of students using SRA has long exceeded the capacity of County Offices to review and monitor the SRA process closely. Some limited oversight and spot-checking of the process by the NJDOE does occur. However, the lack of consistency and transparency across districts with respect to SRA administration and evaluation appears to be a major factor undermining the SRA's credibility as an assessment tool in some quarters.

### **If the SRA and HSPA are of comparable educational rigor, why do so many students fail one, (HSPA) but pass the other (SRA)?**

This is another question that has not been adequately researched. Since the content of the two examinations is similar and of comparable difficulty, it is important to determine why students who seem unable to pass the HSPA ultimately pass the SRA. Is it a matter of differential academic preparation or support, test anxiety, timed vs. untimed testing situations and/or scoring differences? Several possible explanations, both positive and negative, have been offered, including:

- > Inconsistency and the lack of review in scoring SRA portfolios may dilute state standards, allowing more students to pass;
- > Students may perform below potential on HSPA because they know the SRA alternative exists; or
- > Given the particularly high failure rate on the mathematics portion of the state examination, many believe that SRA students have had inadequate access to rigorous mathematics curricula and/or qualified mathematics educators.



On the other hand, the SRA program may be producing positive results by:

- > Providing ongoing, in-school support and personalized, supplemental instruction to SRA students;
- > Providing additional time to complete PATs;
- > Allowing for flexible scheduling of SRA administration, providing more opportunities for students with attendance issues;
- > Using “mastery learning” approaches that provide multiple opportunities to succeed; or
- > Providing a less intimidating, more supportive environment than formal, standardized testing situations which often include:
  - The use of “distracters” among possible responses
  - Complex instructions which may impede optimal performance, and
  - Cultural- or class-based references in test material that may reflect differential life experiences or background knowledge.

A national survey of alternative assessment practices found that “These concerns are especially important for students with learning differences who may require different formats to demonstrate their knowledge.” (Darling-Hammond et al, 2006, p. 16)

### **What would be the impact of eliminating SRA? Who would be most affected?**

Available research and the experience of other states indicate that eliminating the SRA would significantly reduce high school graduation rates and increase the number of dropouts, particularly among students in low-income districts, as well as African American, Latino and immigrant youth. Since nearly 60 percent of SRA graduates come from non-Abbott districts, it is clear that these effects would be felt statewide and would almost certainly affect New Jersey’s long-standing record of having one of the nation’s best overall graduation rates and one of the best graduation rates for students of color. (See page 8.) A detailed analysis of graduation data from three urban districts also suggests that the following student groups would be most vulnerable to negative consequences:

- > English Language Learners;
- > males more than females;
- > students who have had limited opportunities to learn in terms of course work and/or access to qualified math educators;
- > students who entered the New Jersey public schools during their secondary years;
- > students with highly mobile families;
- > immigrant youth;
- > students who have difficulties with timed tests; and
- > students with disabilities, especially undiagnosed disabilities.

**What are some arguments in favor of retaining SRA?**

Supporters of the SRA note that in recent years, between 11,000 and 15,000 New Jersey students have earned high school diplomas annually through the SRA. (New Jersey Department of Education, School Report Card and SRA Annual Survey) They argue that it is in the best interests of these students, their communities, and the state to keep them in school, on track to graduate, and eligible to pursue college or other post-secondary options. Eliminating the SRA would raise dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately affect students of color. This would, almost by definition, constitute bad public policy and would not help improve schools. Supporters also note that the SRA performance assessment tasks cover the same subject matter as the High School Proficiency Assessment. If there are problems with the consistency and reliability of the SRA process, these problems should be fixed without eliminating it.

**What are some arguments in favor of eliminating SRA?**

Critics argue that the SRA is a form of low expectations that allows students to get a diploma without meeting the high standards needed for success in college and careers. Some also contend that the SRA administration and scoring process are too inconsistent and too poorly monitored to be a reliable measure of proficiency for state graduation standards. They believe that eliminating the SRA would be a step toward raising expectations and standards for all New Jersey students.

**What alternatives are there to eliminating SRA?**

In May, 2007 the NJDOE presented several options to the New Jersey State Board of Education for improving the consistency and reliability of the SRA process. These options included moving the scoring of SRA portfolios away from schools and districts, where they may evaluate their own students, to regional centers where educators, trained in using the state's scoring rubrics, would evaluate SRA performance tasks on a blind and more technically verifiable basis. This could improve the reliability and transparency of the SRA process and increase its credibility as a measure of proficiency of state graduation standards. Districts and schools with a high number of SRA students would also be required to develop plans to reduce those numbers.

There are other alternatives to placing greater reliance on a single high-stakes exam that can be drawn from the experience of the 17 other states that currently provide alternatives to high-stakes exit tests. These alternatives include reporting exit exam scores on high school transcripts without using those scores to deny diplomas to students who successfully meet other graduation requirements; using multiple measures, including standardized tests, course grades, and attendance requirements, to make graduation decisions without any using any single measure to determine the decision; and developing performance assessment options for demonstrating proficiency on state standards that are open to all students, not just those who fail parts of the exit exam. (See page 9.)

**How is SRA related to other secondary reform issues?**

While the debate over SRA raises specific issues about New Jersey's high school graduation policy and assessment practices, in many respects it is a subtopic of a much broader discussion about secondary reform that is now taking place at both the state and national levels. The larger issue is what combination of policies, programs, and reforms can effectively address the challenge of closing achievement gaps

while simultaneously raising expectations and achievement levels for all students. New Jersey has begun to publicly discuss and debate these challenges with ambitious reform efforts such as the High School Redesign Steering Committee, the American Diploma Project, and the Secondary Education Initiative. These efforts are still in the early stages of developing a coherent plan for implementation at the state, district, and school levels. The SRA debate presents policymakers with the challenge of aligning changes in the SRA with these larger reform initiatives in ways that improve their prospects for success. (See Appendix F.)

### **What is the timeline for revising or replacing the SRA?**

In August 2005, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted a resolution that proposed phasing out the SRA beginning with the freshman class that entered in September, 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in September 2007 for math. However, the State Board deferred final action on this tentative timeline and directed the Department of Education “to develop alternative opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of high school graduation requirements...[and] to present these alternative opportunities to the State Board of Education for approval prior to the State Board of Education taking any action to amend the Statewide Assessment System requirements in N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1.” With the proposed timeline for replacing SRA now upon us, the State Board is faced with another round of decision-making.

However, the delay in reforming or replacing the SRA process has led to considerable uncertainty about its current status. This fall both freshmen and sophomore students and their teachers will return to school uncertain about the availability of the SRA option as they approach graduation. Schools and districts face similar uncertainty about sustaining their supplemental instruction programs for potential SRA students (some of which involve early identification of students in 9th and 10th grades). Schools and districts will also need ample lead time to prepare for any new or alternative SRA process, as assessment calendars, instructional programs, and current testing practices will need to be reviewed and changed.

Another significant consideration is the timeline for implementing the state's Secondary Education Initiative (SEI), a major secondary reform effort currently underway to introduce college preparatory curriculum, small learning environments and improved family/student supports to all Abbott middle and high schools. Current regulations call for implementing the SEI in Fall 2008. [See page 29.]

As the data presented in this report shows, more than a third of Abbott graduates currently receive their diplomas through the SRA. Eliminating the SRA before significant and demonstrable improvements are made in secondary programs and supports could have a major negative impact on graduation rates, dropout rates, the SEI reform effort, and the prospects for broader reform.

## The SRA and New Jersey Graduation Policy

In national comparisons, New Jersey has consistently ranked among the states with the highest graduation rates. The most recent survey by *Education Week* put New Jersey second, with an estimated graduation rate of 82.5 percent, more than 10 points above the national average (Diplomas Count, 2007). The Education Trust estimates that New Jersey ranks among the top five states in the number of high school freshmen who go on to college within four years, with 53 percent compared to 37 percent in New York State (Education Trust, 2006). The National Center for Education Statistics (Chapman and Hoffman, 2007) indicates that New Jersey's percentage of dropouts, 1.8 percent, for public school students in grades 9-12 in 2003-04, was the lowest in the nation with Connecticut.\*

New Jersey's graduation rates for students of color are also among the highest in the nation although still well below that of their White peers. A recent survey by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation ranked New Jersey first for Hispanic graduation rates and second for African American students (Fordham Report, 2006). *Education Week* ranks New Jersey first for Hispanics and fifth for African Americans (Diplomas Count, 2007).

Despite this impressive record, New Jersey's successes have not been spread evenly across its communities or across racial, ethnic and social class categories. Graduation rates in the state's urban Abbott districts are typically well below state averages. Business and university leaders have expressed concern that past levels of success are not adequate to meet future challenges. Increasing numbers of high school graduates require remediation to perform college level academics and many forecasts project a mismatch between high school preparation and available jobs. Accordingly, the state has embarked on an ambitious effort at "High School Redesign" that seeks to raise expectations and close achievement gaps for middle school and high school students across the state. This includes participation in the American Diploma Project, a national business-government partnership that seeks to significantly increase the requirements for earning a high school diploma, and the Secondary Education Initiative, a reform framework that grew out of the state's Abbott school funding litigation and calls for implementing more challenging college preparatory curricula and improved student supports in the state's urban middle and high schools.

These reform efforts are driving changes in the state's assessment system. The federal No Child Left Behind Act has mandated increases in annual standardized testing, and the aforementioned secondary reform efforts include development of end-of-course exams in core courses required for high school graduation, as well as tentative attempts to introduce innovative performance assessments into the state's

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\* There is an active debate over the measurement of graduation rates and a great deal of variation in the ways in which states report them. With the exception of a true cohort rate calculated with student-level data, all measures are estimates. *Education Week* and the Education Trust both rely on the "cumulative promotion index" developed by C. Swanson (2004) of the Urban Institute which estimates graduation rates and takes into account current grade-to-grade promotion rates. New Jersey reports "leaver rates," another estimate method that relies on dropout data.

As Miao and Haney (2004) have argued, there are multiple ways to calculate graduation and dropout rates and substantial controversy over the most accurate approach. In "High school graduation rates: Alternative methods and implications," they review this controversy and meticulously assess national and state-by-state graduation rates using these alternative methods. It is important to note that across methods, New Jersey emerges consistently as the state with the highest graduation rates, or among the top five states.

Alternate Paths for General Education Students to Obtain a Diploma, 2006 <sup>†</sup>							
State	ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF EVALUATION, WAIVERS, OR APPEALS					Accommodations for General Education Students	Alternative Diploma or Certificate
	Alternate Assessment	Substitute Test	Course Grades	Classroom Evidence	Criteria-based		
Alabama		✓					
Alaska							
Arizona			✓	✓	✓		
California							
Florida <sup>1</sup>		✓					✓
Georgia				✓	✓		
Idaho		✓					
Indiana			✓	✓	✓		
Louisiana							
Maryland	✓	✓					
Massachusetts					✓		
Minnesota						✓	
Mississippi <sup>2</sup>			✓	✓	✓		
Nevada							✓
New Jersey <sup>3</sup>	✓						
New Mexico							✓
New York		✓	✓				
North Carolina		✓					✓
Ohio					✓	✓	
Oklahoma <sup>4</sup>							
South Carolina <sup>5</sup>							✓
Tennessee							✓
Texas							
Virginia		✓					✓
Washington		✓	✓	✓			

<sup>†</sup>From Center on Education Policy August 2006 report, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year."

<sup>1</sup>General education students in Florida, under circumstances described in that state's profile, may use a substitute test as an alternative method of evaluation to obtain a diploma. In addition, Florida provides a certificate of completion under specific conditions for students who do not meet the requirements for a regular diploma.

<sup>2</sup>Mississippi uses an appeals process whereby students may submit course grades, classroom evidence, or other criteria as evidence that they have mastered the subject being tested (Mississippi Department of Education, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>New Jersey's Special Review Assessment is being phased out for incoming freshmen. As of July 2006, the state had not yet determined either an alternate appeals process or a timeline for this phase-out.

<sup>4</sup>Oklahoma has not yet determined which specific alternative methods it will use.

<sup>5</sup>Although South Carolina did not address the issue of certificates in its survey response, the state does give a certificate of attendance to students who do not pass its exit exam, according to correspondence between CEP and a state official.

DATA SOURCE: Center on Education Policy exit exam survey of state departments of education, June 2006, item 13.  
Table reproduced with permission from Darling-Hammond, et al. (2006), p. 11.

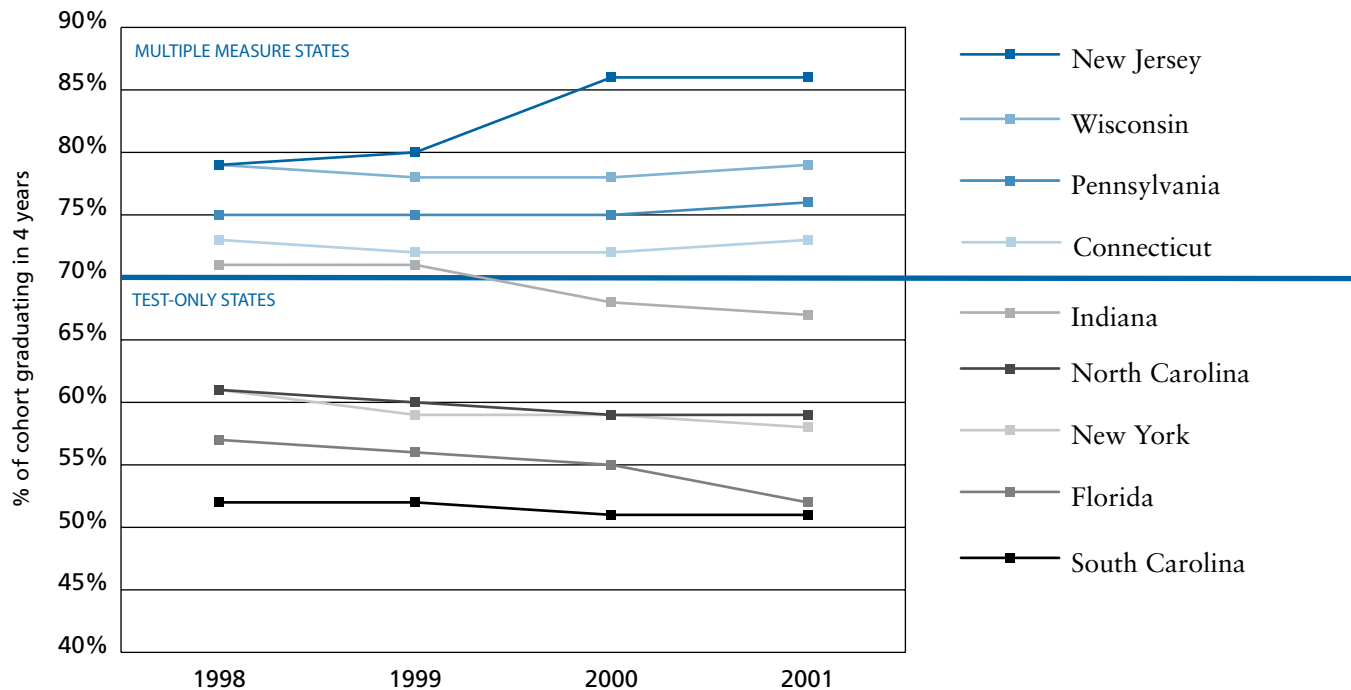
testing program. Together these initiatives have led to renewed debate about New Jersey's Special Review Assessment or SRA.

New Jersey is one of 25 states that currently require high school graduates to successfully complete a high-stakes state assessment to earn a diploma. It is also one of 17 of those same states that have adopted alternatives for students who do not pass the traditional "exit exam." (See chart, page 9.)

There are two primary ways of satisfying New Jersey State graduation requirements: the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) and the Special Review Assessment (SRA). Both the HSPA and the SRA can be considered high-stakes exit examinations since students are required to pass one of these examinations to graduate. Both also require that students successfully accumulate at least 110 course credits aligned with state standards and meet other local district requirements, and both require passing grades in required courses in order to earn a high school diploma.

Originally conceived as an alternative way for students with special needs to demonstrate proficiency on state graduation standards, use of the SRA has steadily expanded since it was made available to all students in 1991. In 2006, over 12 percent of all New Jersey graduates and 34 percent of graduates in New Jersey's urban Abbott districts earned their diplomas by passing the SRA instead of the HSPA. (New Jersey Department of Education, 2005-06 School Report Card and 2005-06 Fall Survey)

**Graduation Rates in States Requiring Multiple Measures Approaches to Graduation Prior to 2001 Compared to Test-Only States**



Data from National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. Graduation rates are calculated as the number of graduates divided by the size of the 9th grade cohort 3.5 years earlier.

From Darling-Hammond, et al. (2005) Multiple Measures Approaches to High School Graduation; Table from Darling-Hammond et al. (2006) p. 19.

The growing use of SRA has spurred debate about its appropriateness as an alternative pathway to a New Jersey high school diploma. Some have questioned the SRA's legitimacy as a measure of proficiency on state graduation standards. Others have challenged the reliability and consistency of SRA administration and scoring across districts. Still others have suggested that the higher percentage of urban students of color earning their diplomas through SRA amounts to a form of institutionalized low expectations.

At the same time, supporters of the SRA option argue for multiple pathways to graduation, including a performance assessment strategy. They cite evidence that states with performance alternatives have higher graduation rates and lower drop out rates than those states with only a high stakes standardized examination. (See graph on previous page.)

Other SRA supporters defend the rigor of the SRA's state-created performance assessment tasks and its essential equivalence to the HSPA and cite problematic issues associated with standardized tests, like the HSPA. (See Appendix A for samples of the SRA Performance Assessment Tasks.) They also emphasize the importance of high school graduation as a key rite of passage for young people and a powerful indicator of post-secondary outcomes in the areas of employment, health, civic participation, and encounters with the criminal justice system. They stress the significant role of the SRA in keeping students in school and on track towards graduation.

SRA practices vary across schools and districts with regard to the calendar window for administering SRA, the instructional preparation students receive for it and the conditions under which the SRA is given to eligible students. Technically, a student becomes eligible for SRA after failing one or more portions of the HSPA in the Spring of his/her junior year. After HSPA scores are returned, schools are required to give appropriate instruction to students who score below proficient levels on any of the test's three sections. Students must re-take at least twice all portions of the HSPA they have not completed successfully, while they simultaneously prepare for and complete the SRA's performance assessment tasks.

While the content of both the HSPA and SRA are prepared at the state level, the school and the district are responsible for designing and providing the required supplemental instruction for students who do not pass HSPA and therefore pursue SRA. These supplemental instructional programs vary substantially across districts. In addition, some districts use other assessments, including the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) tests, for early identification of potential SRA students. Some districts make remediation or other forms of test preparation part of the regular educational program, while others require SRA students to attend after-school and/or Saturday programs. Many districts use various forms of grade retention to restrict the pool of students eligible for the graduation test. These approaches all raise significant educational issues that have less to do with the technical reliability of the SRA or the HSPA than with broader issues of secondary reform.

In August 2005, former Education Commissioner William Librera asked the New Jersey State Board of Education to eliminate the SRA option as a way of satisfying state graduation requirements. In response the State Board adopted a resolution calling for phasing out the SRA on a tentative timeline that would "limit the provision of the SRA process in language arts literacy to those students entering the ninth grade prior to the 2006-2007 academic year" and "limit the provision of the SRA process in mathematics

to those students entering the ninth grade prior to the 2007-2008 academic year.” (New Jersey State Board of Education, August 3, 2005)

In passing this resolution the Board acknowledged concerns about the rigor and reliability of the SRA process, but also about the potential impact of eliminating it and of increasing reliance on a single high-stakes exit exam. The State Board deferred final action and directed the Department of Education “to develop alternative opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of high school graduation requirements...[and] to present these alternative opportunities to the State Board of Education for approval prior to the State Board of Education taking any action to amend the Statewide Assessment System requirements in N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1.” (New Jersey State Board of Education, August 3, 2005) With the tentative timeline for replacing SRA now upon us, the State Board is faced with another round of decision-making.

Despite much discussion of this topic, there has been little research on the role of the SRA in allowing youth to meet New Jersey's graduation standards. Aside from aggregate totals of the numbers of students graduating through HSPA and SRA, little data have been gathered on the demographic characteristics or educational experiences of these students, their access to opportunities to learn and their post-secondary outcomes compared to those of high school dropouts. There has been no longitudinal study of the educational careers or the comparative post-secondary outcomes for HSPA graduates, SRA graduates and dropouts. One obstacle to data-driven policy analysis has been the long-noted absence of a statewide, student-level database, which makes tracking student progress through New Jersey's K-12 system impossible. A telling example of the limitations this puts on informed policy-making can be found in recent SRA history. In an attempt to answer some specific questions about the educational experience of SRA students, and to determine to what extent their inability to pass one or more parts of the HSPA was related to their high school course-taking patterns, state regulations since 2005-2006 have required Abbott districts to submit:

“...a study of all students who graduated by Special Review Assessment (SRA)...The study shall include a review of the courses taken in grades 9-12, with the grades achieved, and the attendance record for each year. There shall be a determination of the proportion of SRA graduates who satisfactorily completed the courses required for graduation and their scores on the HSPA tests in each discipline and for each time the test was taken.” [N.J.A.C. 6A:10A-3.2 (e) 6 Secondary Education Initiatives]

Despite this regulation, an Open Public Records Act request for such reports reveals that they were never collected or compiled by the NJDOE. Although reliable information about the comparative outcomes and educational experience of students leaving high school without a diploma, through SRA, and through HSPA would seem to be a necessary ingredient for informed public policy-making in this area, such information is not readily available to either the public or state policy-makers.

In the following section, we provide a synthesis of research we have gathered and undertaken to illuminate the political and educational issues the SRA has raised.



# The SRA Research Project

In the Fall of 2006, a group of university researchers, educators, school district personnel, central office staff and educational advocates gathered to consider how we might participate in the graduation policy deliberation by providing some policy-relevant data. With generous support from the Schumann Fund for New Jersey, we designed a research project to study current HSPA and SRA practices, document the potential consequences of elimination of SRA and review the national literatures on exit examinations and alternative assessment strategies. University researchers from the Graduate Center, City University of New York and Rutgers University joined with the Education Law Center and Project Grad to investigate four empirical questions:

- 1. Who graduates via HSPA and SRA?**
- 2. What are the possible ramifications, in terms of disparate impact by race, ethnicity and social class, on children and districts if the SRA were to be eliminated?**
- 3. Why do students pursue the SRA?**
- 4. To what extent do HSPA and SRA graduates, and high school dropouts, have different post-secondary outcomes in the areas of higher education, work, health outcomes and involvement in the criminal justice system?**

To investigate these questions we undertook a multi-method research design that included:

- > Review of NJDOE data sets containing historical and current information on the SRA, including analysis at the level of district, school and race/ethnicity of individual students;
- > Interviews with Superintendents (seven Abbott and two non-Abbott district), central office staff (five from Abbott districts and three from non-Abbott districts) and educators from Abbott and non-Abbott districts (nine);
- > Substantive meetings with four senior administrators at NJDOE;
- > Interviews with students and graduates of the SRA process and the HSPA process (n = 20);
- > A detailed cohort analysis of academic outcomes of juniors in three school districts and the subgroup among them who graduated via SRA by race/ethnicity, gender, academic history\*; and
- > A comprehensive review of professional and scholarly analyses of exit examinations and alternatives, and the economic and criminal justice outcomes for young adults who do not have a high school diploma.

Interview data are introduced throughout the findings.

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\* A report containing the complete findings of a detailed analysis of the demographic characteristics and course-taking histories of SRA graduates in three school districts will be posted on the Education Law Center website in the coming months (Fine, M. et al., forthcoming).

## Findings\*

### I. Who graduates via HSPA and SRA?

*Note: Data on New Jersey graduates and SRA are drawn from two NJDOE data sources that are not entirely consistent with one another, the New Jersey School Report Cards and the NJDOE's Annual SRA Survey. For example, New Jersey School Report cards provide a slightly lower total of just over 11,000 SRA graduates for 2006 while the SRA Survey data indicate that there were over 13,000 SRA graduates in 2006. (Sources of this inconsistency include different reporting streams [e.g., self-reported district and school data for School Report Cards vs. County Office reports for the Annual SRA Survey] and differential application of definitions.) In describing SRA trends below we reference both sources.*

New Jersey School Report Card data indicate that for the academic year 2005–2006, New Jersey graduated 89,858 students (New Jersey Department of Education, 2005–06 School Report Card and Fall Survey). Of the total graduating class of the state, 11,053 were SRA graduates according to School Report Card tallies and 13,535 according to the 2006 Annual SRA Survey.

According to state documents, approximately 12.3 percent of all students graduate via SRA: 34 percent in Abbott districts, 15 percent in other poor districts, eight percent in middle income districts and three percent in the most affluent districts.

The rates of SRA graduates per district vary, from 4.6 percent of all graduates in Long Branch to 53.4 percent in Irvington, 53.6 percent in Pleasantville and 56.8 percent in East Orange. (New Jersey Department of Education, 2005-06 School Report Card.) However SRA use has increased recently among all New Jersey districts, and in fact, at a higher rate in non-Abbott districts. (See chart opposite.)

Historically, the numbers of youth graduating via SRA have almost doubled in seven years, rising from 7,925 in 1999 to 15,669 in 2005, and then declining somewhat in 2006. (NJDOE 2006 SRA Annual Survey: Comparative Tables) There was a noticeable increase in 2002 when the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) was replaced by a somewhat more challenging HSPA. While a popular misconception persists that most of these students are English Language Learners or special education students, NJDOE data reveal that for the 2006 cohort, the great majority, 87.2 percent, are “general education” students, 8.5 percent ELL/LEP and 4.4 percent in special education. (NJDOE SRA Annual Survey) Clearly the SRA has been growing significantly as an alternative pathway to a high school diploma for students in the state of New Jersey. While over 40 percent of all SRA graduates come from Abbott districts, the majority of SRA graduates, 58 percent, live in non-Abbott school districts.

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\* In this section we have analyzed official state SRA graduation data for the state, for Abbott vs. various levels of non-Abbott districts and for varied groups within districts. Abbott districts are the 31 poorest urban school districts subject to a series of court-ordered remedies. Other Poor Districts belong to categories “A” and “B” in New Jersey’s district factor groups (DFGs) reflecting their predominantly low-income populations. Affluent Districts belong to the two wealthiest DFGs; Middle Income Districts include all of the remaining public school districts.

SRA Graduation Rates by District Grouping, 1997-98 to 2005-06										
District Grouping	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	Change
Abbott	18.8%	24.7%	31.1%	26.7%	27.8%	41.0%	42.8%	37.5%	34.0%	+80.5%
Other Poor	7.6	9.0	12.5	10.2	10.2	20.8	20.4	18.4	15.1	+99.0
Middle Income	3.6	4.1	4.8	4.7	4.4	10.3	10.8	10.4	8.0	+124.2
Affluent	1.2	1.9	2.2	1.6	1.6	3.7	3.3	4.3	3.0	+144.0
New Jersey Total	6.1	8.0	9.8	8.6	8.7	15.4	15.8	14.9	12.3	+101.2

SOURCE: New Jersey Department of Education, 1997-98 through 2005-06 School Report Cards.

As the chart above reveals, there was a sharp increase in the percentage of SRA graduates beginning in 2002–2003 when the state shifted graduation examination from the HSPT to the HSPA. The largest percentile growth in SRA graduates by district type has been in the *non-Abbott districts*.

As we scan the historic patterns, it is important to note that the HSPA failure rates are disproportionately high for the math section of the exam. Close to twice as many students complete their *mathematics standards* via SRA as Language Arts, suggesting more serious failure of the HSPA section of mathematics. (SRA 2006 Annual Survey)

One community advocate we interviewed explained the situation as follows:

“In many of the Abbott districts, math departments have vacancies that are not filled. In our district, at present, we have four vacancies out of 13 positions. Students are being taught by non-certified educators in mathematics or long term subs.”

A research administrator interviewed in an Abbott district added:

“Students are taking the mathematics portion of the HSPA prior to taking sufficiently difficult courses. Basically they are taking a test on material they have never learned. It’s no wonder that they don’t pass.”

**2. What are the possible ramifications, in terms of disparate impact by race, ethnicity and social class, on children and districts if the SRA were to be eliminated?**

In addition to our review of SRA use across the state, we worked closely with a number of Abbott and non-Abbott districts to determine more specifically who graduates via SRA and therefore whose diploma might be threatened were SRA eliminated. Three districts undertook detailed analyses of students’ pathways to graduation. The following summary of this work across districts provides consistent evidence of disparate graduation pathways by race, ethnicity, class and community and the differential impact of possible elimination of the SRA. While we identify key groups of youth who would be most affected, it is clear that these groupings overlap.

- > **Race, ethnicity and poverty.** Students who graduate via SRA are disproportionately low income, English language learners, African American, Latino and/or immigrant students.
- > **Students in Special Education and those with undiagnosed disabilities.** Students with disabilities, diagnosed and not, are most vulnerable if the state moves toward a single graduation examination.

A child study team member from an Abbott district told us:

"I used to test the students who failed the HSPA twice and then the SRA. Nine times out of ten these youngsters had undiagnosed learning disabilities. It's a shame to say they have failed. They persist, keep trying and struggle through the work and finally succeed. And we're going to take that away from them? They didn't fail, we did!"

- > **Students who are overage.** Students who have been retained in grade at least once and are therefore overage for grade level appear to be disproportionately likely to graduate via SRA.
- > **English language learners.** Students for whom English is a second language are far more likely to fail the HSPA than students raised and educated with English as their primary language. Moreover, while SRA performance tasks are available in several languages, the HSPA is not offered in native languages other than English. (Accommodations are made for translating HSPA directions, but not the test itself.) Thus, without the SRA, a substantial proportion of ELLs (English language learners) would have significantly reduced options to leaving high school without a diploma.

An Abbott Superintendent explained:

"If the SRA were eliminated, sure a small portion would pass the HSPA. But given that a substantial majority of our students are Hispanic [and] largely immigrant, if SRA were eliminated — the ELL population, Hispanics, Eastern Europeans, they are academically able...We are an immigrant society — it would be more detrimental. Even if they exit out of ELL, they are not proficient by their junior year, not in content areas. How can we give a kid who has been here for three years the same exam as the kid who has been raised in the U.S. speaking English and attending school for 12 years?"

- > **Students deprived of opportunities to learn.** Across the state, we find that those students who attend schools in which they have been taught by long-term subs, or less than fully-certified educators, are most likely to fail the HSPA. That is, students who have been deprived of opportunities to learn, indeed reveal these deprivations on standardized tests.

An SRA teacher was asked what she would recommend to the State Board of Education about SRA and she offered:

"I would say retain the SRA and don't lock people out of a chance for an education, and a chance to get out of the working poor class. Don't be so high and mighty and look down on others. The goal now is to get people out of the working poor and giving decent paying jobs and one way of doing that is to ensure that they have a high school diploma. I don't think we can afford to be selfish...That's the minimum. If somebody wants to work hard enough and do it, then why deny them that opportunity....because of your uptight middle class values. Just because you have a degree, a house, give somebody else a chance to have a little bit of something...it's very narrow minded, because you think someone should sit in high school for four years...I'd rather have someone have a high school diploma than a gun."

An educator from an Abbott district told us:

"We can't blame students for what they haven't been taught."

A week later, a junior attending an Abbott high school, who had already passed the HSPA admitted:

"I never had Algebra 1. I don't know how I passed the HSPA — I had a substitute teacher who used to cry every day and then she left. I just never took it...and now I'm going to be a senior."

- > **Students whose families are mobile.** Our cohort analysis from the three districts indicates that students who enter a school district during high school are more likely to graduate via SRA than those who have been stable within district.

An Abbott educator explained:

"A kid arrives from a mediocre school in the 9th grade — he can't be sent directly to Algebra 1. He needs a year, takes geometry. Then he fails HSPA. Summer school can't do it in six weeks. But he has tried and ultimately succeeds? We're going to tell him he doesn't deserve a diploma?"

- > **Students who do not perform well on timed tests.** There is an extensive literature on test anxiety, stereotype threat and the conditions that undermine some students' performance on timed, standardized examinations (see Appendix C).

A number of educators commented upon the SRA as a safety net for these students. As one educator noted:

"Some of the high performing districts can't afford to let the SRA go — they have students who can't pass the HSPA...and they aren't all special ed kids. Everyone needs a valve to get students out of high school. Those districts that have 87 percent passing and the 13 percent who don't pass... a percentage of those are good students who might even know the material but didn't pass the test [HSPA] because of their test-taking skills or because they can't function well under that time constraint and stress."

An Abbott district superintendent summarized the words of his colleagues when he said:

"No SRA? That would just punish the kids. We are responsible for this mess. My kids come two years behind in kindergarten. We have to serve them well. And SRA does that. SRA kids have done well. Why should high school limit students' options? Is it their fault I can't find a biology teacher? Should they pay the price?"

\* \* \*

As noted above, three Abbott districts undertook detailed analyses of their students' graduation rates, with a close look at who graduates via HSPA, SRA and who drops out. The three school districts were all Abbott districts, urban, district factor group A, with large numbers of students who are African American, Latino and/or immigrant, living in families with incomes below the poverty line. Substantial numbers of students from these districts graduate via the SRA process and hence are stakeholders in any decision regarding possible elimination of SRA. All three districts have made special efforts to reach out to at-risk students.

The three school districts provided data from each district's electronic student database and its State of New Jersey Department of Education HSPA Reports. Student identifying information (name, DOB, district ID number and demographics — gender, ethnicity, ELL and/or special education status) from the district databases was cross-referenced to test scores in Math and LAL for the Spring 11th grade, Fall 12th grade and Spring 12th grade HSPA reported in the NJDOE reports. The district databases were

also used, wherever possible, to obtain additional information, such as dates of entry into the district, whether the student graduated the following year and what Math and English courses s/he completed. (See Appendix B for methodological details.)

Looking across the three districts, a number of patterns are evident:

1. For all three districts, passing rates on the first administration for both the Math and Language Arts Literacy subtests were much lower than those rates state-wide. These low first-time passing rates are characteristic of the Abbott districts.
2. At the first administration, general education students had the highest passing rates on both Math and Language Arts Literacy subtests of the HSPA. Special education and ELL students had passing rates that were as much as forty percentage points lower in Math and sixty percentage points lower in Language Arts Literacy. While the HSPA grants students in these subgroups special accommodations (e.g. extended time, one on one testing, use of a translation dictionary), their academic disadvantages are manifest.
3. All three districts had high percentages of students officially considered to be juniors (34–40%) who did not pass the HSPA and therefore entered the SRA process.

We were able to undertake even more detailed analyses in one of these Abbott districts where we found that SRA takers were disproportionately Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, overage for their grade, and had not successfully completed Algebra II by the end of their junior year compared to their HSPA graduating peers.

These data reinforce the statewide evidence available through the New Jersey Department of Education SRA Survey. Whether we consider the data available statewide or within district, it is apparent that the SRA provides an opportunity for English language learners, overage students, poor and minority youth, students who move into the district while in secondary school, and students under-prepared in mathematics to graduate by satisfying state standards with proficiency. In the next section, we hear why these young people persist despite their academic disadvantages.

### **3. Why do students pursue the SRA after having failed the HSPA?**

We conducted interviews with a sample of SRA graduates, educators and parents, as well as a number of HSPA graduates and educators, in an effort to understand how students and faculty perceive the SRA and why they might pursue the SRA as a pathway to graduation (see Appendix E on the GED alternative to assess why students pursue SRA over GED).

The responses from the SRA students and their teachers fell into three categories:

- > a sense of pride and accomplishment;
- > a resource for economic mobility; and
- > a credential necessary for pursuing higher education.

**Seeking Opportunity and Accomplishment: A desire for something better than “hell”**

A young woman attending an alternative educational program in New Jersey, who has been working toward her SRA, spoke about the racialized stigma of being denied a high school diploma:

“African-American youth are already labeled as drop outs, and going to jail, and you know, living in ghettos, and stuff like that, and then if they take our diploma away from us, then how is everyone going to view us now? Like you could say we’re already at the bottom of the list. If you take that diploma away you might as well say we’re going to be in hell. Because that’s how everyone is going to look at us...like we’re the devil’s kids....By them doing that’s just making us look lower than how people already look at us.”

An SRA educator echoed these sentiments in describing her SRA students:

“Once they finish, their whole world expands. Once they reach success on this level, it’s an opening for higher visions...they’re now thinking, ‘Maybe I am smart, nobody told me I could do this. Maybe I can go farther...I’m not going to stop here...I think I’m going to get my certificate for medical technology, or a dental assistant...now I want to go to Mercer.’ It opens up a whole system, a door for a lot more possibilities that most of these students never thought about because they assumed they were on the bottom, and they were going to stay on the bottom.”

Other SRA students spoke about the sense of joy, accomplishment, pride and freedom attendant to graduation — for them personally and for their family:

“Graduating? I’ve been talking about this forever. It’s a relief to me because school hasn’t been all good for me throughout my years. For me to be graduating the year I’m supposed to, and just getting out, that’s a relief and I’m just so happy. I was always worrying I’m not going to graduate when I’m supposed to but I made it.”

“Actually the diploma is personal. I did all of these years, I put in all this time, I want my diploma...just to say that I did it, I’ve done been through school...”

“Now that I do [have] the knowledge, it would mean freedom. It would mean a lot to my family. At first it didn’t mean nothing to me, a diploma was just a diploma. Freedom means out of here, out of this environment, but even if I get out of this environment, everywhere is like this, it’s freedom of the mind. Like I’m stuck here doing the same thing forever, having a diploma you can go different places. Even though it’s the same, it’s different.”

Educators agree:

“For the recipient, the SRA is a saving grace, it’s about building self-esteem that the high school diploma gives them. They’re not thinking the SRA is a joke. They have to work for it, take the time, make their way to take it.”

**Seeking Economic Mobility: “Why a diploma?”**

Some SRA students are simply pragmatic. They know that they need a diploma to move ahead economically or pursue higher education. Stated most simply,

“Why a diploma? What can you do without one?”

Others were distressed to hear that the SRA was in jeopardy. A young person told us:

"I heard that the SRA was maybe gone. My teacher was saying next year if you fail the HSPA you're going to get a certificate not a diploma. That doesn't make any sense to me. It's not fair...Being fair means giving everyone an equal opportunity.... I would feel better about myself getting a diploma vs. a certificate. I want to get my [advanced degree] Most places require a high school diploma. What if I only have a certificate? What if I want to go to college?"

The diploma marks a launching pad, whether students have big dreams...

"My high school diploma is the first step for me owning my own business and being successful"

...or more modest goals:

"I thought they were supposed to be building us up, we're supposed to be the future, but they're not, if they take that diploma away. How can we go anywhere in life without a diploma? I don't think you can work at McDonalds without a high school diploma. I think that you have to have a high school diploma to work at McDonald's. Where can we get a job at? Nowhere. So that high school diploma is a lot."

One young person told us:

"I definitely know from my short experience with work, a diploma helps you get places. Like a lot of the places will ask you at the minimum for a high school diploma, otherwise you're going to be stuck with \$7 an hour, \$8 an hour jobs."

And a number of the SRA graduates are determined to go to college:

"I can't even go to college without a high school diploma so that's a lot."

While young people are assessing their future economic and educational potential, so are their teachers. An educator in an alternative program predicted dire consequences if the SRA were eliminated:

"Either they have to have the SRA or come up with another alternative test...A lot of kids are already going through the unemployment line." A colleague added, "These kids have got to get a high school diploma. You have to ensure that they're going to make enough money to live decently — medical care, housing, food."

### **SRA as Educational Persistence: "I have learned a lot about picking myself up."**

A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with students participating in a college-bound scholarship program, in order to understand the reasons behind and motivations of students who pursue SRA. The five young women and men are all headed to college at NJIT, College of Fashion, West Virginia University, Rutgers–Newark and Bloomfield College. Three needed to pass the SRA in math in order to graduate (those attending the College of Fashion, Rutgers and Bloomfield).

Interestingly, the two who graduated via HSPA had taken trigonometry and pre-calculus, while the three SRA graduates took Algebra and Geometry. More important, however, is that despite the different curricular pathways, all five students exhibit high levels of persistence and commitment to higher education and a deep sense of responsibility for their own learning.



When asked about how well prepared they are for college, the two HSPA grads indicated high levels of confidence, while the SRA grads were somewhat ambivalent about their levels of preparation:

"I am not as ready as I should be"

"Some of the classes have prepared me, some have not"

But all five students felt compelled to give positive advice to incoming ninth graders:

- > Get serious. Study, study and study some more. (HSPA graduate)
- > Do not play around. The grades they get from the beginning count... you will have to work extra hard if you get a low GPA first year. (SRA graduate)
- > Don't just sit back; work to get the best grades you can from the start. (HSPA graduate)
- > Try your best, never give up on yourself. Self-confidence can go along way to help you keep going even when things get tough. (SRA graduate)
- > There are some people (teachers and others) who will help you. It may be rough but you can make it. I did and I am. (SRA graduate)

The SRA graduates in particular spoke with a kind of wisdom about the importance of overcoming tough times and persisting against the odds. Kelly is headed to Rutgers–Newark in nursing, but in reflecting on her past she admitted:

"I should have known more when I took the HSPA. I had not studied and worked as hard as I should... [but] I had a lot of ups and downs in these four years. I have learned a lot about picking myself up. I also learned that there are people who really care."

Likewise Khaburr, heading to Bloomfield College to study criminal justice, explained:

"I was surprised that I did not pass [the HSPA]. I thought I was prepared... [but] I learned that I have to work and put forth real effort. I will take the total four years [in the Newark high school] and use it to help me at Bloomfield."

At the intersection of low preparation for mathematical rigor and a relentless desire to complete high school and pursue higher education, these young women and men testify to the drive to achieve, even in difficult circumstances.

An administrator in an alternative school reflected on the persistence exhibited by these students:

"The students I see go through the SRA process really put a lot of effort into it. It's not like they've been given the thing and they mysteriously made it through....I've seen students take 90 minutes to get satisfactory results that might take someone else 15 minutes but the perseverance and determination they show I think means more than it does for someone passing the HSPA."

Similarly, an urban parent described the role of SRA in preparing her son for graduation:

"I like the fact that they want you to be proficient at something so you know what you're doing. You don't want anybody given anything. My son graduated yesterday and it was very nice. It was hard work. He came from a Catholic school for 9th and 10th grade and public school for 11th and 12th. He had to do everything

in a rush, so when he took the HSPA the first time he took it in the 11th grade and he missed it by five points so he had to take the SRA.

I encouraged him to take the SRA because it was actually helping him, it was actually groundwork for the HSPA. The summer of 11th grade he went into an enrichment course in SRA so he would know what he was doing so I think that's what helped him pass....He was taking the SRA during the school time, he was getting reinforced left, right and center, which I thought was a good deal...For the SRA, he even went to school on Saturdays to help him pass this test. When it got close to the time, they started doing every Saturday. He was going 45 minutes before school, and 3:30-4:30 after school. He clocked in a lot of hours. You got to be willing to do it.

He knew if he didn't pass this course he wasn't going to graduate and he knew that graduation was very important. And this helped him, a kid that wasn't planning to go to school, and now he's going to Essex County College...."

#### **4. How do HSPA and SRA graduates, and dropouts, fare on post-secondary outcomes in the areas of higher education, work, health and involvement in the criminal justice system?**

Critics of the SRA have argued that the HSPA is a more valid standard with stronger predictive validity in terms of college-going and economic success. Yet, in the absence of a longitudinal student database that can track student progress through graduation and beyond, these contentions are without empirical substantiation. For graduation policy to be fully data driven, it is critical that New Jersey establish a database that can be used to document the post-secondary consequences of the HSPA diploma, the SRA diploma and dropping out. At this point, New Jersey has no technical capacity for assessing any post-secondary outcomes even though many presume that the HSPA would predict better life trajectories. In fact, for young people graduating from the same districts, we really don't know if HSPA graduates fare better, worse or the same as their SRA peers.

New Jersey graduation policies should be informed by comparative data on the course-taking patterns of HSPA grads, SRA grads and dropouts and by longitudinal data on post-secondary outcomes for these groups. With such data, policymakers and the New Jersey Department of Education could map the geographic and racial/ethnic/class distribution of opportunities to learn, graduation pathways and post-secondary outcomes by race, ethnicity, immigration status, community, etc.

Such analysis is necessary to document why some students graduate via HSPA or SRA and why others drop out. It could also shed light on why many end up in remedial courses in college and help determine if the courses taken by students influence different pathways to graduation and dropping out. Such a database would enable policy makers, community members, educators and researchers to assess who takes Algebra I and II, and at what point in his/her career. Who does and doesn't have access to certified mathematics instruction? Science instruction? Foreign language? To what extent does access to opportunities to learn vary by race, ethnicity, community and type of school?

Such a research design would allow policy makers, educators, parents, employers and community members to know whether or not the HSPA is actually a stronger predictor of academic success or economic well being than the SRA. After many years of delay and preparation, plans are reportedly

in place to begin assembling such a longitudinal student-level database. Given that it will be several additional years before the relevant data described above will be available, in the interim it would be prudent to move cautiously in making graduation policy changes with high-stakes consequences for students and school communities.

The case for caution, especially with regard to adopting policies that may increase dropout rates, is underscored by what is already known from national studies and databases. (See Appendices C & D for a review of this literature.) It has been well documented that becoming a high school dropout has significant negative impact, particularly for poor and/or immigrant young adults who are African American or Latino. Decades of national research chronicle the serious adverse consequences of dropping out on young adults, particularly young adults of color, in terms of economic, health and criminal justice outcomes. We know that young people who are poorly educated and without a high school diploma have little chance of economic success and substantial chance of incarceration, particularly if they are African American or Latino (Petit and Western, 2004). It is fair to conclude that high school dropouts in New Jersey, as in the nation, have far worse life outcomes than either HSPA or SRA graduates.

A deeper look at comparative outcomes for HSPA and SRA graduates could also shed light on the impact of different forms of educational assessment. While the existing SRA may have only some features of a fully developed performance assessment system, there is a growing body of research and experience indicating that performance assessment systems may have substantial potential for improving student achievement and outcomes at the secondary level — particularly for urban students of color.

In a recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* (Foote, 2007), Martha Foote traces the post-secondary effects of performance assessment graduation policies on students who attend and graduate from a series of small public high schools in New York. Foote reviewed the college transcripts of 666 graduates from fifteen New York State public high schools involved with the Performance Standards Consortium. These schools received a state variance to use their own system of performance assessment in lieu of New York State's Regents exams. In order to graduate from any Consortium high school, students must complete a rigorous series of performance assessment tasks and defend them to a panel of external assessors including teachers, university professors, community members and other students. Consortium schools, on average, have more students of color, more students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, more students receiving special education services, and more entering ninth- and tenth-grade students scoring below the state standard on reading and mathematics tests than the average New York City high school. According to Foote, these schools also have far lower dropout rates and higher graduation and college-going rates than the New York City average.

Foote's longitudinal analysis involved a review of college transcripts, trying to assess the predictive validity of a performance assessment diploma. The results reveal that 77 percent of the students who graduated via performance assessment went on to attend four-year colleges, 19 percent two-year colleges and four percent attended vocational or technical schools. Across institutions, while persistence rates were slightly higher for students attending four year than two year colleges, a full 78 percent enrolled for a second year of college and maintained an average GPA of 2.7. When comparing Consortium students to New York City's high school graduates, the performance assessment graduates were more likely to

graduate, go onto college and persist into their sophomore year than demographic peers who attended Regents-based schools where they have to pass five high-stakes standardized examinations in order to graduate. Further, Consortium students (depending on high school) were, on average, less likely than their demographic peers to be mandated to remedial coursework once they arrived at a college campus — particularly in the area of Writing. Foote finds that the Consortium's emphasis on in-depth performance assessment, in fact, prepares students for the rigors of college by simulating the kinds of tasks they will need for college success.

A critical feature of accountability within the Performance Standards Consortium schools is the longitudinal tracking of students' attendance and persistence in higher education. (See Appendix C for details.) The Consortium schools systematically collect data to reflect on student performance and the performance of their schools over time and into higher education. Foote argues that "Proof of an assessment system's predictive validity [requires] data correlating the passage of specific assessments with subsequent performance in school, college or the work force." (Foote, 2007)

While we cannot necessarily equate the SRA performance tasks with the Consortium schools accountability system, Foote's analysis is significant in two respects. First, the research demonstrates that the predictive validity of a performance assessment diploma may be equivalent to, or in some cases superior to, that of a diploma based on a standardized exit examination. Second, and as important, Foote's work signifies the importance of longitudinal, student-level databases for informing accountability decisions.

## New Jersey Policies in the National Context

“If we eliminate the SRA, we will have more dropouts. No doubt. And after the fact we’ll look back. We can’t have regrets on the backs of these young people.”

— a New Jersey District Superintendent

As of 2006, 25 states have moved toward implementing exit examinations, although variation among these policies is great. Some exams are pitched at the minimum competency level, while others are more rigorous. Some are embedded in coursework and others are independent of course content. In a systematic review of exit exam policies, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) reports that with few exceptions, over the past few years states that have been implementing exit examinations are moving toward greater flexibility and multiple options.

The research shows that states which require high stakes exit examinations (HSEEs) tend to have disproportionately high rates of English Language Learners, students who are Latino or African American, and students who are low income. We summarize the effects here and review the literature systematically in Appendix C. Across sites and studies, the implementation of single high-stakes exit examinations has been found to produce a series of unintended but extremely problematic outcomes:

- > Rapid rise in drop out and push out rates, disproportionately for students of color, English language learners and students who have not received adequate opportunities to learn;
- > Swelling of 9th grade enrollments, with students held back numerous times;
- > Selective admission, rejection and push out of students with academic difficulties;
- > Diverted resources and attention paid primarily to students identified as “close to passing;”
- > Schools, particularly low-performing schools, organize themselves toward administrative compliance rather than improved instruction;
- > Decreased instructional time and increased testing time, often at the expense of electives, internships, music and the arts; and
- > Narrowed curricula with a decreased focus on critical thinking and inquiry projects.

These consequences tend to be more pronounced in low-performing high schools and more adverse for students growing up in poverty who are African American or Latino.

The long-term negative consequences, both individual and social, of decreased graduation rates and increased dropout rates are equally well-documented. In the absence of more detailed data about New Jersey youth, we summarize here the national studies about the impact of the so-called “diploma penalty,” reflecting the crucial links between a high school diploma and outcomes in education, economic status and mobility, health and criminal justice status. (Appendix D offers a more detailed account of this literature.)

In brief, there is a substantial literature documenting:

#### **Economic consequences associated with a high school diploma**

- > Students who do not graduate from high school earn annually an average of \$9,200 less than high school graduates (Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison, 2006), equating to approximately \$270,000 earnings over a lifetime.
- > Students who do not graduate from high school, compared to graduates, are significantly more likely to receive public assistance, to have children who drop out of high school, and to become “discouraged workers” who do not participate in the legitimate labor force at all.
- > These outcomes are substantially worse for African Americans and Latinos than for White young adults.

#### **Health outcomes associated with a high school diploma**

- > Young adults who do not graduate from high school have far worse health outcomes than peers who do graduate, in terms of early death, accidents, communicable diseases and chronic illness (Molla, Madans and Wagener, 2004; Fiscella and Franks, 2004); high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, cancer, obesity, and having a low-birth-weight baby; and are more likely to become parents during their teen years (Fine and McClelland, 2006).
- > Young adults who do not graduate from high school have worse health outcomes and are far more dependent on public health insurance — or have no insurance at all.

#### **Criminal justice outcomes associated with a high school diploma**

- > Young adults who do not graduate from high school are far more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system than those who graduate; this is particularly and strikingly so for African Americans.
- > In 1999, White men without high school diplomas had a 14 percent cumulative risk of death or incarceration by ages 20–34, compared to 62 percent of African American men without high school diplomas (Petit and Western, 2004).

Whether we consider educational, economic, health or criminal justice outcomes, the absence of a high school diploma has significant adverse consequences on young women and men — particularly on African American males. (See Appendix D for detailed review.)

In response to these adverse outcomes, the Center on Education Policy has found that many states, now “require districts to use a state- or district-developed exam as *one factor* in deciding whether students graduate from high school, *but failing that test alone does not prevent a student from graduating.*” (Italics added.) To cite a few examples, Arizona, Washington and Maryland have recently added alternative paths, with Arizona for instance allowing students to augment their test scores by using course grades.

Beyond state and district trends toward multiple measures, there is a long-standing and well-documented professional consensus warning against the singular use of standardized tests to make high stakes decisions about students and schools. Joining the chorus of national organizations voicing concerns about

the deleterious effects of high stakes assessments, the National Research Council concludes: “Scores from large-scale assessments should *never* be the only scores of information used to make a promotion or retention decision....test scores should always be used in combination with other sources of information about student achievement.” (Heubert and Hauser, 1999, p. 286). So too, the American Psychological Association, along with the American Educational Research Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education argue that single assessments constitute unstable measures and should not be used as a sole determinant for major decisions such as promotion, retention, tracking, or graduation. Specifically, the American Psychological Association states that:

“Tests, when used properly, can provide the most sound and objective ways to measure student performance. *But testing is only part of the formula for quality learning. Testing ought to be part of a system in which broad and equitable access to educational opportunity and advancement is provided to all students.*”

Turning to the research literature on high stakes exit examinations (reviewed in Appendix C), in a comprehensive review of empirical studies of high stakes exit examinations, Warren, Grodsky, Lee, and Kulick (2005) find that:

...there appears to be powerful support for the assertion that state HSEEs [High School Exit Examinations] are independently associated with rates of high school completion. Completion rates (however measured) are simply much lower in states with HSEE policies. For example, for the graduating class of 2000 the median state high school completion rate...was 73 percent for states with no HSEE but only 61 percent in states with HSEEs. (p. 9, italics added)

Further statistical analysis indicates that the number of high school-aged students who attempt the GED is also affected by state HSEE policies. According to this analysis, states with high-stakes high school exit examinations have lower graduation rates and greater reliance upon the GED than states without high stakes exams or states with alternative examinations in place.

Warren et al. argue that states that typically adopt HSEE policies ironically worsen the very conditions they are attempting to resolve. For instance, states with higher unemployment rates and greater ethnic/racial population compositions are more likely to implement HSEEs than more homogeneous states, presumably in order to improve their economic circumstances and educate a diverse student body. Yet, with advanced statistical analyses, Warren and colleagues “find no evidence that state HSEEs impact rates of unemployment or labor force participation among 20 to 23 year-olds with no post-secondary schooling” and “no significant net association between HSEE policies and earnings” (ibid., p. 38.) To the extent that HSEE policies do help educate a more diverse student population, Warren and his colleagues have found that, after an extended period of research:

“...the strength of the *negative* association between state HSEE policies and high school completion rates *increases* as poverty rates increase and as the demographic make-up of the state comes to include more racial/ethnic minorities.” (p. 39, italics added)

That is, in districts that are predominantly low-income and serving students of color, HSEE policies are associated with lower high school graduation rates.

Finally, in studies that attempt to determine the impact of HSEEs on actual student achievement (actual growth in subject matter knowledge) (Grodsky, Warren, and Kalogrides, 2005; Warren et al., 2005), Warren et al. conclude that there is *no viable evidence* that, in the 1990s, HSEEs have significantly improved student knowledge of reading, mathematics or science.

The New Jersey administrators and educators whom we interviewed for this study varied in their views of the HSPA and the SRA, and yet came to the same conclusion as Warren and colleagues: that testing must be only one feature — and not solely determinative — of graduation decisions.

A high-ranking DOE official told us in an interview:

*“The children have the knowledge, it’s just that they don’t demonstrate it on the HSPA. Performance assessments are a much more valid indicator for so many of our children. There must be an alternative way.”*



## The SRA and New Jersey Secondary Reform

The debate over the SRA reflects larger national and state debates about secondary reform. At the same time that New Jersey is considering changes in high school graduation policy, it has launched two ambitious secondary reform initiatives.

One, led by the High School Redesign Steering Committee, is the American Diploma Project (ADP), a national effort by business, university, and political leaders “to restore value to the high school diploma by raising the rigor of the high school standards, assessments and curriculum and better aligning these expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and work.” The ADP reflects growing concerns of business and higher education leaders about the readiness of high school graduates for success in college and careers.

The other reform effort, the Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) grew out of New Jersey's Abbott process, which established state constitutional standards for equity in school funding and educational opportunity. SEI was developed by a collaborative workgroup of educators, NJDOE officials, academic experts, and community stakeholders in response to an Abbott X mediation agreement that required a new program of secondary reform to address gaps in student achievement and educational opportunity. The SEI framework is currently part of Abbott regulations governing 31 of the state's poorest urban districts and requires that by Fall 2008, all students in Abbott districts in grades 6–12 have access to college preparatory curriculum aligned with state standards, small learning environments including teacher teams paired with a cohort of students over multiple years, and a system of family/student advocacy to personalize school experience and provide increased academic and social supports for all students.

These reform initiatives involve numerous challenges and raise many educational issues that go beyond the scope of this paper. (See Appendix F.) However, the SRA debate shows clearly that overlapping reform initiatives with related goals must be part of a coherent policy whole if they are to complement, rather than conflict with each other.

For example, the proposed timeline for phasing out the SRA begins with the freshman class that entered in September, 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in September, 2007 for math. Yet current Abbott regulations set a target of fall, 2008 for implementing SEI's key elements: college preparatory curriculum, small learning environments and improved family/student supports.

As the data presented in this paper show, more than a third of Abbott graduates currently receive their diplomas through the SRA. Eliminating the SRA before significant and demonstrable improvements are made in secondary programs and supports would be a major disconnection. 2009 and 2010 would see the first graduating classes without access to SRA. Yet these students will not have had the anticipated benefits of the SEI reforms. Instead, all indications are that graduation rates would decline and dropout rates would increase just as the SEI reforms are being put in place—with the attendant misimpression that the reforms—rather than the end of SRA—are the source of these developments. Such incoherence in reform policy and implementation would not only be punitive to students and have a disproportionate

impact on immigrant youth and youth of color, it could also negatively affect the climate for reform and undermine the prospects for success for both SEI & ADP by addressing elements in isolation that need to be well-integrated into a coherent set of policies.

"If they do away with SRA before the secondary reform takes hold, we will see a large increase in drop outs, especially in the poorest districts in the state. We have to reform the system before we hold the children accountable.... Or else they are just trying to sink and discredit the Abbott districts."

— Abbott district administrator

"There are just too many strikes against these kids. This is part of a larger attack on the Abbott decision, Abbott districts. These kids can't pay a price for a political fight. They have paid prices all their lives."

— Abbott district superintendent

"SRA and Abbott are saving lives. SRA has helped us. I don't want kids to think it's the easy way out. In our district, they need to go to after school and Summer school. Now I have more kids in after school and summer school they are dedicated and committed to graduating."

— Abbott district superintendent

The larger issue is what combination of policies, programs, and reforms can effectively help to close achievement gaps while simultaneously raising expectations and achievement levels for all students and building capacity for educators. With the HS Redesign and Secondary Education Initiatives, New Jersey has begun to publicly discuss these challenges. But policymakers are still in the early stages of developing a comprehensive plan to address them equitably within and across districts.

It is important that these secondary reform efforts go forward. But it is doubtful that they would be well-served by starting with the elimination of a program that keeps thousands of young people in school and helps them graduate. To be effective, equitable, and realistic, changes in graduation standards and assessment practices must be closely tied to deeper changes in instruction, curricula, professional practice, school capacity and climate. Otherwise there is a danger that narrow versions of "standards-based reform" may substitute changes on paper for the changes in practice needed to produce better outcomes for students in real schools, especially struggling urban schools.

As Michael Cohen, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education and currently president of Achieve, Inc., and Adria Steinberg, president of Jobs for the Future, have written in *Education Week* (3/13/02):

"The crisis in urban high schools can't be solved simply by setting high standards and then trying to push a larger number of students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them. The problem is that by the time young people reach high school, growing numbers of them are so alienated and disengaged from school that higher expectations and more challenging curricula — the primary tools of standards-based reform — are necessary but far from sufficient to engage or motivate them. In fact, some recent evidence on dropout rates points to the possibility that these strategies may cause more students to give up on school altogether."

Everyone we interviewed agrees that much needs to be done to strengthen our middle and high schools. However, given that New Jersey is just beginning comprehensive secondary reform efforts, the overwhelming majority of educators, administrators and community members whom we interviewed agreed that it would be logically inconsistent and morally unjustifiable to simply eliminate SRA. That

policy decision, in and of itself, would *not* improve the schools, would be most costly in terms of dollars for remediation and loss of student bodies, and would in the end punish the most vulnerable student populations. The social and educational costs could be staggering.

"We absolutely need a safety value! To shut them out, after four years of learning, is a horrendous act for our state and our nation."  
—Abbott superintendent

"[T]he SRA process open[s] the doors of opportunity associated with a high school diploma...It is imperative that New Jersey continue its commitment to providing all students with the opportunities necessary to realize their full potential, including continued access to the SRA process...The SRA provides an important opportunity for students to demonstrate that they are in fact proficient on the Core Curriculum Content Standards. However, the SRA process must be significantly reformed in order to achieve its goal of offering students meaningful opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in a valid and reliable manner."

—New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Promoting Multiple Pathways to Graduation

The weight of evidence and experience at both the state and national levels supports the recommendation that New Jersey should continue to offer multiple assessment routes to graduation. Accordingly, we recommend that New Jersey retain and improve existing elements of its assessment system and consider additional options for districts, schools, and students. These options should include:

- > Continued administration of HSPA;
- > An improved performance assessment alternative (a revised and strengthened SRA);
- > Opportunities for districts to develop local performance assessment systems that would be externally validated by the state, and
- > An appeal procedure for individuals who need an additional review.

Such a menu of assessment strategies would assure that all graduates meet New Jersey Core Curriculum Requirements without insisting on one-size-fits-all. Validation and scoring for all four assessment pathways should be transparent and consistent. Students' diverse learning styles should be supported through rigorous but highly differentiated teaching, learning and assessment policies.

Each of these assessment systems should be externally validated and scored systematically. Further, for the purposes of public accountability, all districts should report annually on percent of graduates who have satisfied the HSPA, SRA, local PA and/or appeal. Finally, we recommend that the New Jersey Department of Education strengthen and fast-track development of a statewide, student-level database, and conduct and disseminate ongoing research about course-taking patterns and post-secondary outcomes to understand how assessment systems align with opportunities to learn and predict post-secondary success.

### Strengthening the SRA

In light of the national and state evidence, we agree with the NJDOE that appropriate steps can be taken 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.

On May 16, 2007, Dr. Jay Doolan, Assistant Commissioner, Division of Educational Standards and Programs, outlined several options for the New Jersey State Board of Education that would revise and improve the reliability of the SRA without eliminating it. These recommendations included:

- > Establishing an annual SRA administration window;
- > Standardizing the scoring and evaluation of SRA portfolios across districts, substituting scoring by schools or districts of their own students with regional scoring centers;

- > Continuing availability of translated PATs in Spanish and 2–3 other languages;
- > Continuing supplemental instruction and retesting for those who “fail” SRA/HSPA; and
- > Requiring districts with high SRA rates to report annually on plans for reducing these numbers.

We support these tentative proposals, with the following qualifications:

1. We believe the direct involvement of school-based educators in implementing high quality assessment practices is critical to the success of such practices. Therefore, we think it is essential that regional scoring of SRA performance tasks and portfolios be done by certified New Jersey education professionals, including teachers from urban districts that are among the more frequent users of SRA, and not by commercial vendors. Providing New Jersey educators with professional development and experience in rigorous assessment of performance tasks could improve the SRA and also develop expanded capacity to use performance assessment in other areas. We also have concerns about the reliability and appropriateness of using commercial vendors and uncertified personnel to make high-stakes decisions that impact student graduation.
2. Any “annual window” for administering SRA should be flexible and developed in conjunction with districts and educators experienced in administering the SRA in large districts and schools. While a calendar “window” may help regularize SRA administration across districts and assure timely scoring and return of results, it should not be so narrow as to restrict access to SRA for eligible students (especially in districts where demand, and therefore burden on SRA educators, is high).
3. Schools and districts should have ample lead time to prepare for a new SRA process. The extended debate and uncertainty around SRA’s continued availability makes this especially relevant, as school calendars and past practice will need to be reviewed and change. It would seem reasonable to work collaboratively with districts over the 2007–08 school year to develop a timeline and a plan for an “administrative window” and regional scoring by teams of teachers for implementation in 2008–09. Students, families and educators need to be alerted immediately about the state’s plans for elimination, revision or maintenance of the SRA.
4. Two other options discussed by the State Board at the May 16, 2007 meeting were a “waiver option” and “an appeals procedure.” These proposals were not sufficiently articulated as fully-formed recommendations. In general, however, we do not support a “waiver option” that would establish additional criteria with respect to student eligibility for gaining access to SRA. We think that existing district and state requirements for high school graduation in terms of accumulated credits, attendance, service, etc. more appropriately serve that purpose.
5. Many State Board members were explicit, however, in their desire to create an appeals procedure for those students who have not passed HSPA or SRA but have met other requirements for graduation. We support this option in principle and recommend that the state instruct districts to define an appeals process that could be administered locally but approved by the state.

## Issues in Need of Policy Attention

The research presented here indicates a need for increased policy attention to a number of issues in New Jersey's secondary schools and in particular within Abbott districts.

- > **Math.** There is an urgent need for professional development and recruitment of highly-talented mathematics educators and a need to eliminate “watered down” mathematics curricula to students who are below grade level. There is also a need to identify more clearly and implement more thoroughly the specific academic supports needed to sustain more challenging mathematics standards and higher achievement levels across secondary schools and districts.
- > **Targeted support for specific groups of students.** There are specific group-level needs for students to have access to rich opportunities to learn, particularly for English language learners, students in high-poverty schools, African American and Latino students, students living in poverty, overage students, and students whose families move frequently across districts.
- > **Better integration of New Jersey's secondary initiatives.** New Jersey's secondary policies must be coordinated in substance and timing, so that SEI and ADP are not implemented at cross purposes. Adoption of more challenging standards and state assessments must be matched by the programs, professional development and resources needed to achieve them successfully.
- > **Accelerated and expanded development of a longitudinal student database.** The State of New Jersey needs a systematic student-level database that can track student progress throughout their years in public education and on to post-secondary outcomes. Access to such information is key to determining the long-range implications of course-taking patterns, the quality of opportunities available and completed, and the links between rigorous education and economic, health and criminal justice outcomes.
- > **State support for performance assessment alternatives to support rigorous secondary reform for a diverse student population.** New Jersey should explore the use of challenging, research-based performance assessment practices for all students, well beyond those who may have failed parts of more traditional standardized tests. Such “authentic assessments” have been implemented successfully by New York State's Performance Assessment Consortium Schools and the State of Nebraska among others, and have shown promise in providing multiple pathways for students to demonstrate proficiency on state standards, building professional capacity among educators, and fostering collaborative relationships with community partners and institutions of higher education.

## Recommendations for Research

The research we have undertaken and presented here represents only a beginning of what needs to be studied and evaluated in New Jersey's public education system. High quality educational policies and programs depend on the ability to understand how proven opportunities to learn are distributed and accessed in the state and how distinct graduation pathways correlate with post-secondary outcomes for distinct groups of students.

Given our state's impressive graduation rates and the well-documented impact of the Abbott funding on early childhood and elementary achievement levels, it is crucial that the state's developing efforts at secondary reform be supported by a robust research agenda, including multi-level longitudinal, student level research on the educational pathways of our youth through elementary, middle, high school, and beyond secondary, with an analytic eye on race, ethnicity, class, language and community

Thus, we strongly urge the New Jersey Department of Education to accelerate development of the longitudinal database and undertake statistical, longitudinal analyses of:

- > Students' pursuit of curricular offerings and their graduation outcomes by race, ethnicity, social class, gender and community (including the specific study of the educational experience of SRA students called for in the Abbott regulations.)
- > Students' access to rigorous coursework and highly qualified educators in core areas (e.g. mathematics, history, language arts, science)
- > Students' post-secondary outcomes — for SRA graduates, HSPA graduates, and dropouts — across domains including income, higher education, health and criminal justice.
- > The impact of any changes made in the SRA process, including tracking changes in use rates, passing rates, and demographic characteristics of participating students.

We also recommend that these data be widely available to the public so that educational policy making in the state of New Jersey can be data-driven, transparent, and democratically engaged by multiple constituencies.

## Closing Thoughts

The debate surrounding SRA potentially foreshadows larger debates about who among New Jersey youth is entitled to a high school diploma and who is not. It is clear that the weight of professional opinion nationally recognizes that no single examination should be sufficient to deny a student a diploma. Decades of research findings confirm that students' high school records and GPAs — even with wide variation — better predict college going and persistence than standardized test scores. (Haney, 2007) No college has ever relied upon a single measure to determine admission. Educators, parents and students agree that New Jersey should maintain and improve alternatives to traditional standardized testing and should not move to a dual degree system that would increase educational stratification and inequality.

As our state moves more deeply into comprehensive secondary reform efforts, it is important not to confuse "assessment reform" with educational improvement. The proper purpose of educational assessment is to improve teaching and learning and to support better outcomes for the greatest number of students. Reform efforts should strengthen this fundamental purpose and resist tendencies to sort and label young people to serve external agendas.

The state of New Jersey has a strong and proud history of high graduation rates and a powerful commitment to finance equity that has already provided evidence of success and shows continued promise for the future. We need to build on these assets to strengthen our schools with a focus on teaching and learning, capacity building, innovative and multi-cultural curricula and a strong sense of community among educators, parents, and youth.

We submit this policy brief to promote dialogue among policy makers, researchers, educators, community members and students about the future of public education in the New Jersey and how best to reach these common goals.



# Appendix A:

## SRA Performance Tasks

### Sample SRA Performance Assessment Task for Mathematics Standard 4.4: Data analysis, probability, and discrete mathematics.

Mr. Johnson's science classroom has 4 fish tanks filled with the same type of fish. Each tank contains 4 fish that are the same age. One tank contains one-year-old fish, another tank contains two-year-old fish, another tank contains three-year-old fish, and the last tank contains four-year-old fish. The students measured the length of each fish and made the following chart comparing the age of each fish to the length of the fish in millimeters.

AGE (in years)	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4
LENGTH (in millimeters)	25	30	27	29	42	36	39	54	51	46	55	50	64	63	58	57

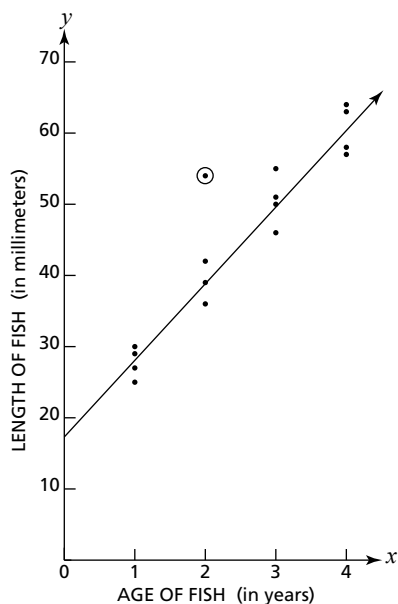
- Make a scatter plot of the data from the table.
- Sketch a line of best fit for the data.
- Find the slope of the line of best fit for the data.
- What meaning does the slope of the line of best fit have for this particular application?
- Mr. Johnson's students believe that one of the fish is in the wrong tank and therefore has the wrong age recorded. Circle the point on your scatter plot that represents this fish.
- What would most likely be the correct age for this fish? Explain how you found your answer.

#### Materials/Resources:

- Calculator
- HSPA Mathematics Reference Sheet
- Graph Paper

#### Sample Student Response for PAT, Math Standard 4.4

A), B)



C) 10, I had the points (1, 27) and (2, 37) on my line of best fit. The slope is

$$\frac{37-27}{2-1} = 10.$$

D) the number of millimeters the fish grow each year

OR

the yearly average growth rate of the fish

OR

the amount of growth per year

E) See graph above.

F) 3 years old. I sketched a line of best fit and the x-value for the y-value of 54 is 3.

OR

I noticed that the 3-year-old fish measured in the 50s.

#### Scoring Rubric for SRA PAT Mathematics Standard 4.4

- 3 Points** The student correctly answers all of the question's six parts, though there may be one or more minor errors. For part A, the scatterplot includes all 16 points (complete graphical precision is not necessary) and supports a positive relationship between age and length of the fish. In part B, the line is positively sloped and looks like it reasonably approximates the best fit line. In part C, the correct slope is found for the student's line of best fit. In part D, the response states that the slope shows the average annual growth of fish, in millimeters, even though it may not include the word "average." In part E, the circled point corresponds to the outlier, (2, 54). In part F, age 3 is correctly identified and an adequate explanation is given.
- 2 Points** Either an attempt is made to answer all 6 parts of the problem, or correct solutions to 4 parts are presented. The scatterplot may be sloppily drawn, the slope is incorrectly found despite an attempt to do so, or there may be other minor errors in the response.
- 1 Point** An attempt is made to answer at least 4 parts of the problem, and a correct solution to 2 parts is presented. There are major errors in the response, such as failing to correctly identify the relationship between length and age in part D, and/or drawing a best fit line that is flat or has a negative slope.
- 0 Points** The response shows insufficient understanding of the problem's essential mathematical concepts. The procedures, if any, contain several serious errors. The student has difficulty understanding the directions, there may be no explanation of the solution, or the explanation may not be understandable.

**Sample SRA Persuasive Writing Task****Writing Situation:**

*Studies show that the average American student watches television for more hours in the day than he or she is in school. That means that television likely has an enormous influence on a student, potentially more so than the education he or she receives in school.*

*You decide to write an article for the school newspaper on this topic.*

**Directions for Writing:**

Write an article for the school newspaper. Identify the effects of watching a lot of television. Discuss both long- and short-term effects of excessive television viewing. Provide evidence and/or examples to support your position.

**Materials/Resources:**

- Paper, pencil or pen
- Access to a word processor or computer, if desired
- Writing Prompt

**Techniques for PAT Scoring:**

New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric (a 1-to-6 point scale)

[<http://www.nj.gov/education/njpep/assessment/TestSpecs/LangArts/Scoring/RubricsNJwritingHolistic.html>]

## Appendix B:

### Methodological Details on Sampling Strategy for the Three District Cohort Analyses

CUNY and ELC selected three urban (Abbott) school districts to participate in a retrospective analysis of SRA graduates. The three districts were selected because of their involvement in the state's pilot efforts to convert to a student-level database. Data availability determined the selection of the sample, as all three districts had recently converted to different internal student database programs, a process that made access to archived information difficult. Two of the districts selected the junior class of 2003–2004 for analysis, while the third selected the junior class of 2004–2005. Each junior class consisted of students who had met state and local district requirements to be assigned to the junior class.

From this group a subgroup was drawn, “SRA takers,” consisting of those students who had failed to pass any of the three administrations of the HSPA (Spring 11th Grade, Fall 12th Grade, and Spring 12th Grade) in either LAL or Math, and who consequently completed the SRA process.

The timing of the SRA process requires students who fail a portion of the HSPA at the Spring 11th Grade and Fall 12th Grade administrations to enter the SRA process and submit an SRA profile by the following March in order to graduate by the following June. These students still must take, and may still pass, the Spring 12th Grade HSPA, the results of which are not received until June. Students passing that last HSPA administration were removed from the subgroup SRA takers.

#### **Who is excluded from analysis?**

Out-of-district placement students were excluded from analysis. While these Special Education students took the HSPA, educational programs in private placements are unique and not amenable to comparison with those of in-district students. Furthermore, graduation of these often severely disabled students with their cohort is atypical and dependent upon the achievement of highly specialized Individualized Education Plans.

The Special Education students who were exempt from taking the HSPA (i.e., who took the Alternative Proficiency Assessment or APA) were not considered in this study.

The Special Education students who were exempt from passing the HSPA (i.e., who do not have to pass the HSPA as a requirement for graduation) were excluded from the testing data. Since they are exempt from passing the HSPA, they are also exempt from participating in the SRA.

#### **A note on data limitations**

The recent conversions of the districts to different student databases made collection of comparable sets of data difficult, as archived information could not be extracted. We include comparable analyses wherever possible.

A major data limitation is identification of the date of entry into the school district. In highly mobile districts it is not unusual for a student to enter the district, stay for a number of months or years, leave for a number of months or years, and subsequently reenter the district. In some cases the leaving and returning may occur more than once during a student's time in school. In this report, the earliest date of entry that could be found was used. Any subsequent leaving/reentering was ignored. Consequently, "Exposure to Instruction" data must be considered an estimate.

Tracking students at the second and third administrations was also difficult because of district mobility and absentee rates. Some students left the district after the first administration, missed the second, and reentered the district for the third. Some students were absent for one or both subtests at subsequent administrations. Although Special Education students must "sit" for the HSPA at the first administration, those exempt from the graduation requirement of passing the HSPA do not have to take subsequent administrations. Furthermore, a Special Education student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may be modified after the first administration such that he/she is made exempt from any or all subsequent administrations.

## Appendix C:

### Summary Literature Review on the Impact of High Stakes Testing on Secondary Schools and Students

Since the emergence of public schools, the use of high stakes testing as a policy tool has been fiercely debated, with support for and criticism of standardized testing articulated by varied interest groups (Kliebard, 1991). Testing advocates using a humanist perspective argued that standardized exams measured students' knowledge about classic concepts they ought to master. Developmentalists promoted the use of testing to track students' individual propensities and interests. Social efficiency educators encouraged testing, hoping it would reduce the costs of public education. However, not all educators agreed with the premise of testing. George S. Counts of the University of Chicago wrote extensively about the deplorable classification of students and the reduction of curricula into minute units of work provoked by testing (Kleibard, p. 162). In 1930, he argued that the “feverish and uncritical fashioning of tests in terms of the existing curriculum and in the name of efficiency has undoubtedly served to fasten upon schools an archaic program of instruction and a false theory of the nature of learning” (as quoted by Kliebard, p. 162).

As testing became more commonly practiced in schools, the purposes of the examination began to swell — from recognizing students' needs and strengths to signifying a uniform curriculum, justifying stratified or tracked curricula, validating the worth of a high school diploma, rationalizing admissions or graduation, solidifying a “harmonious” system of schooling, aligning skills with the work place or higher education, monitoring teacher quality, punishing schools and educators, and now defending (or undermining) the high school institution to taxpayers. When the Committee of Ten came together in 1893, Resnick (1985) tells us there was no agreed upon understanding of what should be taught, when, how or to whom. It was difficult to determine the significance of the high school. In this political and educational context, the impetus for the original exit exam developed.

Within the debate about the efficacy of the SRA, one can hear traces of these historic arguments about the use of testing to clarify unresolved schooling issues, including the expectations for graduates and the value of the diploma.

#### Current Literature

In public debate today, testing has been argued to identify talent, diagnose problems, motivate performance, end social promotion, raise academic standards, increase the quality of schools, undermine public education, reduce racial and ethnic gaps, improve our international competitive edge and measure achievement (Greene et al, 2004). But high stakes testing has also been widely criticized for narrowing curricula and instructional quality, diluting classroom learning, increasing drop outs and push outs, reducing graduation rates, encouraging cheating by educators and students, and penalizing students and teachers for the educational system's inequalities (see Heubert and Hauser, 1999; Linn 2000).

Across centuries and places, it seems clear that politics and education have been intensely inter-related. Nowhere is this braiding more evident than in the current “accountability” debates. As Dan Korentz has argued, as the political significance of test scores heightens, the likelihood of distortions, misuse and cheating rises in kind (1992). We find ourselves today in the heat of highly contentious debates about testing and public education. Below we review some of the controversies and the empirical evidence surrounding high stakes testing: its effects on teaching, learning, graduation and dropping out; questions of validity and reliability, and alternative accountability platforms.

### **Ninth grade retention, graduation and dropout rates: Who is most affected by high stakes examinations?**

“Perhaps the most adverse unintended consequence of NCLB is that it creates incentives for schools to rid themselves of students who are not doing well, producing higher scores at the expense of vulnerable students’ education. Studies have found that sanctioning schools based on average student scores leads schools to retain students in grade so that grade level scores will look better (although those students ultimately do less well and drop out at higher rates), exclude low-scoring students from admissions and encourage such students to transfer or drop out.” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 16)

High stakes exit exams have been consistently associated with decreased graduation rates, heightened dropout rates and reports of ninth grade retention. Many studies, summarized below, document an inverse relationship between high school graduation rates and the introduction of single-high stakes exit exams. Most significantly, the negative impact of standardized testing bears disproportionately adverse consequence for low-income students, students of color, and immigrant students. The Center on Education Policy reports that in 2006, 58 percent of White students but 76 percent of the nation’s minority high school students were enrolled in public schools in the 22 states with exit exams; by 2012, 63 percent of White students and 81 percent of “minority” (Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Native Alaskan) students will be required to pass these exams (Center on Education Policy, 2007a).

- > Haney (2000) demonstrates that the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) has had a particularly adverse impact on African American and Mexican American students, causing increased attrition rates and increased retention in the ninth grade. Haney also provides evidence that the exclusion of students with disabilities and students who dropped out of school in Texas helped produce “gains” in test scores.
- > Amrein and Berliner (2002) used an archival time series research design to look for changes in dropout rates, high school graduation rates and enrollment in GED programs after exit exams were introduced in 16 states. The researchers conclude that high school exit exams led to higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and increased enrollments in GED programs in the majority of states.
- > Warren, Grodsky, Lee, and Kulick (2005) find that completion rates (however measured) are simply much lower in states with High School Exit Exam (HSEE) policies. For example, for the graduating class of 2000, the median state high school completion rate was 73 percent for states with no HSEE but only 61 percent in states with HSEE’s.

- > The Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College has analyzed the negative consequences of Massachusetts' current graduation policy. According to Haney, et. al. (2007) Massachusetts bases graduation decisions on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Math and ELA test results, both norm referenced tests, despite the fact that the original Education Reform Act of 1993 called for multiple measures and criterion referenced tests. Haney et. al. argue that "students supposedly 'failing' MCAS have been shown to score well on national tests" (Haney, 2007) and, even more problematic from the New Jersey perspective, the attrition rates between grades 9 and 10 have increased sharply since 1997, particularly for Black and Latino students and those in low income urban districts.
- > Sandholtz et al. (2004) found that those districts in southern California that implemented high stakes exit exams to enhance student achievement and reduce achievement gaps took an "unanticipated turn, one that seemed to move away from the expressed purpose of setting uniform academic expectations and thus providing equality of educational opportunity" and instead created "standard gaps" which resulted in differentiated curriculum and instruction along "perceived students' academic abilities." (p. 1179)
- > The Center on Education Policy (2007c) finds that "gaps persist in high school exit exam pass rates" with a "persistence of gaps in initial pass rates particularly among English language learners and students with disabilities." Students who are "free or reduce-priced lunch eligible" were consistently and significantly less likely to pass state exit exams than "all students."
- > McDermott (2007) compared New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Connecticut's accountability systems and found that across systems the introduction of single high stakes exit examinations tends to constrict academic opportunities and diminish outcomes for the very groups of students the policies intend to help. McDermott writes that policy makers and policy implementers "need to 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)

### **Validity and Reliability: What is being measured?**

While most of the research on high stakes examinations has focused on unintended effects, a number of scholars have directed critical attention to the technical quality of high stakes testing, raising questions about validity and reliability. Some investigate the extent to which perceived gains on exit exams correlate with other measures of achievement. Others focus on controversies in scoring, cheating, interpretation and reporting of results.

- > Klein et al. (2000) join Haney and colleagues when they raise serious questions about the validity of gains in TAAS scores. They compare TAAS scores to scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Test (NAEP), and assess achievement gaps between White students and students



of color on the TAAS and the NAEP. They have found that: “According to NAEP, the gap is large and increasing slightly and according to TAAS, the gap is much smaller and decreasing greatly” (p. 16). The authors argue that the large discrepancies between TAAS and NAEP scores raise serious validity concerns about the TAAS scores.

- > In studies that attempt to determine the impact of High School Exit Exams (HSEEs) on actual student achievement (actual growth in subject matter knowledge) (Grodsky, Warren, and Kalogrides, 2005; Warren et al., 2005), research using NAEP achievement data and advanced statistical analyses have produced *no viable evidence* that, in the 1990s, exit exams have done anything to significantly improve student knowledge of reading, mathematics, or science. Previous research in this area (see Carnoy and Loeb, 2002) has relied on state NAEP data, which was available in only 41 states prior to 2003. Because state HSEE policies change frequently over time, the association between student achievement and state NAEP scores on the long-term is tenuous.
- > Cronbach et al. (1997) advise that agencies responsible for educational assessments should “make clear how uncertainty is associated with any score or summary, particularly with any report released to the public....” (p. 373). Given that student performances are part of larger measures of classrooms and schools, these authors emphasize that a standard error (SE) rather than a reliability coefficient “should be used to describe the uncertainty associated with scores for either individual students or schools...and should take into account constant as well as variable errors associated with tasks and scorers.” (p. 396)

### Compliance Behaviors: How do schools respond?

Interestingly, both critics and supporters of high stakes testing agree that strong external mandates and sanctions encourage schools to comply with testing policies. These effects are even more pronounced in schools serving poor children.

A number of empirical studies have found that externally imposed high stakes testing mandates tend to increase compliance often at the expense of many important elements of teaching, including critical thinking and creativity. For example:

- > Nichols and Berliner (2007) found numerous examples across the country in which teachers dedicate substantial time to test preparation. Gail et (1999) calculate that elementary teachers spent more than 20% of their time practicing for high stakes tests. Nichols and Berliner estimate that this is the equivalent of 36 days of test prep. Even more dismaying, the authors calculate that “28 percent of those teachers report spending more than 60 percent of their time practicing for state tests...or over 100 of 180 days of instruction spent in various forms of test preparation.” (p. 123)
- > Diamond and Spillane’s (2004) study of Chicago elementary schools found that lower-performing schools’ focus on sanctions led to cosmetic rather than real changes in classroom teaching, emphasized impressing external observers rather than improving instruction, and anchored efforts to improve the performance of certain students within “benchmark grades and in certain subject areas,” rather than all students.

- > In Texas, McNeil and Valenzuela (2000) found that the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) as a management system has encouraged teachers to aim school instruction at the lowest level of information and skills, at the expense of complex assignments and critical analysis. McNeil and Valenzuela found that teachers spend classroom time drilling on practice examination materials and reducing subjects to an artificial treatment of “isolated skills and fact fragments,” which do not necessarily “enable students to use these components in other contexts.” (p. 6)
- > Comparing the classroom cultures of two reading lessons taught by the same teacher, Valli and Chambliss (2007) found that as the class came to be dominated by test preparation, students were far less likely to engage in dialogue and the teacher was far less likely to scaffold student learning by connecting class work to students’ real-life experiences. Additionally, teachers were more likely to ask simple questions and students were more likely to respond with simple answers. (p. 16)
- > The Center on Education Policy (2005) conducted case studies in both Virginia and Maryland and found that exit exams appear to be increasing anxiety for both teachers and students, as well as detracting from instructional time. Particularly in Virginia, teachers reported feeling stressed about losing their jobs and the overall impact of exams on their practice. Students described the school atmosphere as intense, referring to teacher and administrator stress as well as to the rapid pace and repetition of material coverage.
- > The Center on Education Policy (2007) also published case studies on Austin, Texas and Jackson, Mississippi where teachers and students report, with enthusiasm, the frequent use of test-preparation strategies during class time. Data from interviews and surveys revealed that teachers are using common test-preparation strategies, including spending class time reviewing test-taking skills, using previous exit exam questions on classroom tests, and practicing sample test questions during class. In their press release, CEP researchers claim, “[A]ssessments appear to have increased instructional time in tested subject areas in both districts, often at the expense of other high school learning experiences and electives....Teachers at [schools serving greater numbers of lower-income and minority students] reported that the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [TAKS] had influenced every aspect of the curriculum, while their peers at a school serving greater numbers of higher-income and white students reported that the TAKS was an inconvenience.” (CEP, 2007b, press release)
- > Firestone and Mayrowet’s (2000) classroom observations conducted in England, Wales, Maryland and Maine, suggest that testing and the associated external pressures may facilitate changes in the content taught, but not in instructional strategies. Firestone and Mayrowet claim that single high stakes examinations may “primarily promote short term accommodations but not deeper learning.” (p. 20)
- > Coleman (1998) argues that “Tests, in short, should be instruments used by educators to help students achieve their full potential...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.” (pp. 82-83) To support student learning and assessment, Coleman argues that schools should establish compensatory or tutorial supports to ensure that all students have the same basic and fair opportunity to master the material tested; provide multiple opportunities for test takers to take the test, and consider academic factors in addition to the tests scores that may affirm or challenge the high stakes conclusions derived from the test scores.

## Accountability Loopholes

“[P]olicies that reward or punish schools have created a distorted sense of accountability, encouraging manipulations of student placements (including pushing students out) as well as encouraging staff to opt for school placements where school stability is higher and students are perceived more likely to meet score requirements” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 1).

Accountability policies anchored on single high stakes assessments often provoke the creation of “accountability loopholes.” (Vazquez, 2006) Shriberg and Shriberg (2007) note that under current policy, many schools “rather than supporting students who are otherwise making progress toward graduation, but who are for various reasons (such as language barriers, lack of exposure to test content, past history of low test scores, and so on) unlikely to pass proficiency exams...do better by encouraging students to drop out or transfer so that their test scores do not trigger draconian penalties” (2007, p. 80).

- > Booher-Jennings (2005) found teachers used data to facilitate what she calls “educational triage,” diverting additional resources and attention to students believed to be on the threshold of passing the test, in order to create the impression of improvement.
- > Valenzuela et al (2006) found that high schools that increased retention or disappearance of students in 9th grade were able to increase their exit scores. The overall disappearance rate more than doubled for ELL (English Language Learning) students.
- > Vazquez-Helig (2006) found that exit exams create incentives for schools and districts to utilize accountability loopholes, leading to an escalation of deleterious outcomes disproportionately impacting minority students including sharp increases in 9th grade student retention, associated with high levels of student dropout and disappearance. They also identify other practices such as disciplinary measures as a means to push out students, skipping students past key testing grades, and transferring students to non-traditional settings.
- > Jacob and Levitt (2001) developed an algorithm for detecting teacher cheating on standardized tests. Using data from the Chicago Public Schools Iowa Test of Basic Schools (ITBS) scores, the authors estimate that serious cases of teacher or administrator cheating occur in four to five percent of elementary schools each year. Moreover, the authors conclude that “teacher cheating appears quite responsive to relatively minor changes in incentives.” (p. 34) Their results suggest that introducing high stakes testing without appropriate safeguards against cheating would likely lead to widespread corruption.

## Deep Accountability Systems: Multiple Pathways to Graduation

Accountability expert Linda Darling-Hammond has written extensively on the corrupting influences of high stakes single-test accountability practices as well as designs for more valid and equitable accountability policies. In states and school districts that have focused on broad and deep accountability policies that are both valid and equitable, accountability reforms tend to be embedded in the practices of teaching and learning; assessment strategies are built into professional development and capacity building of educators; students are provided extra supports as needed and opportunities for revision in order to demonstrate their mastery of state standards. That is, *states and districts with strong achievement*

*and graduation rates typically have multiple assessment pathways by which students may satisfy graduation requirements.*

The Center on Education Policy, in *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*, (August 2006) has profiled some of these innovative states committed to high rates of achievement and graduation through multiple pathways. A few examples may help readers imagine how to combine valid and equitable assessment strategies with rigorous state standards:

- > In Connecticut, districts award diplomas based on a combination of local tests, student academic records, and state test results, but districts cannot deny a diploma solely on the basis of the state test. (Delaware, Maine, Rhode Island, and Wyoming have slight variations on this theme.) Students must pass some assessment requirements for a diploma, but there is flexibility in what these requirements are.
- > In Oregon, students in the class of 2007 and beyond will receive a regular diploma only if they demonstrate proficiency using some locally developed assessment components, most of which are portfolio-based assessments.
- > In Virginia, students can substitute scores from other tests such as Advancement Placement exams.
- > In 2006, Utah decided not to withhold diplomas from students who failed the state competency test.
- > Several other states leave it up to districts whether to make assessment results a factor in awarding diplomas or permit that as an option (i.e., Kentucky, New Hampshire, Kansas, Missouri and Wisconsin). New Hampshire places just one condition on districts' decisions: namely, that the state assessment cannot be the sole factor in awarding a diploma.
- > Nebraska has expressly created *no* statewide assessments, and instead encouraged the development of rich local assessments. Individual districts have the authority to decide the extent to which these assessments are factored into awarding diplomas. Teachers collaborate to craft assessments measuring students' mastery, pilot these assessments in their own classrooms, and meet on an ongoing basis to fine-tune them. This local model supports teachers in their expanding roles as instructional leaders, is woven into the curriculum, and mirrors the state's educational goals to deepen students' mastery.
- > The New York Performance Standards Consortium represents an impressive model of public schools dedicated to high standards, rigorous performance assessments and broad based accountability. The New York Performance Standards Consortium currently includes more than 20 public schools in New York City and State that have collaboratively generated and now implement a series of performance standards which students must complete in order to earn a high school diploma.

The history of the Consortium begins in 1995, when New York's former Commissioner of Education, Thomas Sobol, granted these schools a waiver from the state's Regents exams, supporting them in their commitment to develop and utilize a "transparent, externally-validated performance-based assessment system — reliable across schools — that would assure complex teaching and in-depth learning of the state standards and beyond." (Foote, 2007, p. 8) Today students in these schools must take and pass the Language Arts and Mathematics Regents examinations but beyond that the schools collaboratively generate inquiry based, student centered, in depth research projects for youth to pursue to satisfy their

graduation requirements. With a common metric implemented across schools, students craft intensive discipline-based and inter-disciplinary projects which are assessed by panels of educators, students and university professors.

With a rigorous set of performance tasks aligned with state standards and an extensive external review of the schools and student work by a panel of university based and secondary educators, the Performance Standards Consortium schools have a very strong track record of high graduation rates for students who might be considered “high risk.” Indeed, Foote has recently undertaken a follow up study of Consortium graduates to determine how they fare in higher education. Able to track a sample of 666 graduates from fifteen schools, Foote reports in *Phi Delta Kappan*:

“...77 percent of Consortium school graduates attended 4-year colleges, 19 percent attended 2-year colleges, and 4 percent attended vocational or technical programs. Further, after a year and a half of college, the average GPA for graduates in the sample was 2.6 out of 4.0, which is approximately a B-. For students attending 4-year colleges, the average GPA was 2.7. For students attending 2-year institutions, the average GPA was 2.2.

Of those in the sample who entered college within one year of high school graduation, 78 percent overall enrolled for a second year. Of those attending 4-year colleges, 84 percent enrolled for a second year. Of those attending 2-year institutions, 59 percent enrolled for a second year.” (p. 361)

The Consortium schools have designed performance assessments that are rigorous, embedded in the school curriculum and highly student centered. With this research, Foote has demonstrated, that this performance-based approach to teaching, learning and assessment has high predictive validity for post-secondary success. The results of the Consortium, like so many alternative assessment systems, assume that “real accountability is achieved when an assessment system demands excellence not only from students, teachers, and principals, but also from itself, with an oversight mechanism for external validation as well as ample evidence of student success beyond test scores...including proof of an assessment system’s predictive validity with data correlating the passage of specific assessments with subsequent performance in school, college, or the work force.” (p. 363)

New Jersey has long been in the forefront of achievement and graduation rates and can now be a model for valid and equitable alternative pathways to graduation. Policy makers invested in making policy, legislative, and programmatic changes necessary to help all students graduate from high school prepared for work and/or for further education can learn much from the significant research on the adverse consequences of high stakes testing and the well-documented alternatives to single high stakes exit examinations proliferating throughout the nation.

## Appendix D: The Individual and Social Costs of High School Dropout Rates

Given the national evidence correlating high stakes exit examinations with a rise in dropout rates, it is important to consider the potential consequences of eliminating the SRA for individuals and communities in New Jersey. We begin with some working assumptions: If the SRA were eliminated, it is estimated that a substantial number of prospective SRA graduates would drop out of high school. While it is impossible to predict what percent of the SRA cohort would ultimately leave high school without a diploma, and what percent would get it together to pass the HSPA, it seems clear that a significant number would exit high school with no diploma in hand. With this set of assumptions, we review briefly the economic, health and criminal justice outcomes for high school dropouts. For a full review see Fine and Ruglis, forthcoming.

### Economic consequences

Students who do not graduate from high school earn an average of \$9,200 less, per year, than high school graduates, equating to approximately \$270,000 less during their lifetime. The gap widens exponentially in comparison to college graduates, where high school dropouts earn roughly \$1 million less over their lifetime than college graduates. In general, high school non-completers are more than three times as likely to be unemployed as college graduates, more likely to live in poverty and receive public assistance (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006).

In fact, 40 percent of 16-24 year olds without a high school diploma receive government assistance (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Failing to graduate from high school also has significant intergenerational impacts. Children of dropouts are more likely to attend inadequate schools and to not complete high school themselves, ultimately contributing to social problems of communities at large (Orfield, 2004, p. 2).

It is important to note that lack of diploma intersects with race/ethnicity in troubling ways. That is, Blacks and Latinos who are without high school diplomas are in far worse shape than Whites without high school diplomas. Consider, for instance, these income data from the U.S. Census <http://www.census.gov.cps2004/> (on race/ethnicity, educational attainment and income. For 2004, a review of median income for men and women 18 and older reveals the following discrepancies.

### Median Income for Men and Women Ages 18 and Older: Census Data 2004

	< HS grad	HS grad	Some college	AA	BA
<b>White male</b>	16,665	28,174	30,600	38,885	50,500
<b>White female</b>	9,800	15,500	17,289	24,197	30,082
<b>Black male</b>	11,500	22,000	23,800	35,000	42,000
<b>Black female</b>	9,590	15,160	18,717	21,869	33,142
<b>Hispanic male</b>	17,000	22,000	26,417	29,263	37,083
<b>Hispanic female</b>	9,522	15,163	16,610	22,295	30,360

Source: <http://www.census.gov.cps2004/>

For every demographic group, people without high school diplomas earn significantly less than those with diplomas. At the same time, looking across columns and rows, White males without a HS diploma earn more than White, Black and Hispanic female high school graduates (and more than Hispanic females with some college). These data reflect the racial and educational gaps for those women and men in the labor force.

Ronald Mincy (2006) has undertaken an analysis of Black males who are no longer considered as part of the labor force. In 2000, 65 percent of Black male high school dropouts in their 20s were jobless, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated, according to Mincy. By 2004, that number had swelled to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of White and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts. These analyses, in combination with evidence available from the U.S. Department of Labor Census Bureau and Petit and Western (2004, see below), point to a simple but startling conclusion: Not having a high school diploma bears substantial and disproportionate impact on communities of color, in terms of employment, income and, as you will see below, health and involvement with criminal justice system. There is no safety net if public educational institutions turn their backs on poor communities, particularly African American, Latino and immigrant communities. Any educational policy that would precipitate a rise in dropout rates would have rippling effects in the economy.

### Health consequences

Not having a high school diploma affects not only the obvious outcomes of education and finances, but there is substantial evidence to suggest that levels of education also affect health outcomes and the likelihood of involvement with criminal justice. Fewer years of formal education predicts both early death (Molla, Madans, & Wagener, 2004) and a shorter life span (Fiscella & Franks, 2004). For example, in 2002, US residents aged 25-64 with less than 12 years of education had an age-adjusted death rate 17 percent higher than people who had completed high school and almost three times higher than people who had finished at least one year of college. Similar differences in mortality by educational attainment were observed for chronic diseases, injuries, and communicable diseases (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004). Young women without high school degrees are also more likely to get pregnant, stay pregnant and have a second child than high school graduates (Fine and McClelland, 2006)

Compared to those with more education, people with less formal schooling have been found to suffer from higher rates of a wide range of health problems including: heart diseases, high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, cancer, obesity, having low birth weight babies, higher mortality, higher health-risk behaviors (National Center for Health Statistics, 1998), disability, and activity restrictions/limitations (Molla, Madans, & Wagener, 2004; National Center for Health Statistics, 1998). Compounding these issues of physical health, education level is related to a person's ability to gain access to health information, facilities, resources, support, nutrition options, and food security.

### Involvement with the criminal justice system

People who do not graduate from high school are eight times more likely to end up in prison or jail and to be on death row than a peer with a high school diploma (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). While dropout status matters in terms of incarceration, again we see that educational level interacts with race/

ethnicity and geography. While only 12.6 percent of White males age 30–34 in prison are high school dropouts, a full 52.1 percent of African American men aged 30–34 are high school dropouts. These numbers have worsened over the last ten years.

As it currently stands, Blacks trail Whites and Asians in high school graduation rates — a trend that continues to be compounded and agitated by African American's lower National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores from fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade in math and science, compared to whites and Asians. The great majority of those entering jails and prisons do so without high school diplomas or their equivalents and are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities (Travis, et al., 2003). Drawing again from Ron Mincy's analyses (2006), in 1995, 16 percent of black men in their 20s who did not attend college were incarcerated. By 2004, this rate jumped to 21 percent. By their mid-30s, six in ten black male dropouts had spent time in prison. There is no economic safety net for Blacks (and Latinos) without education — except, perhaps, for the streets (Payne, 2005).

The impact of geography, that is, state policy, is also important to consider. Human Rights Watch has analyzed raw data from 37 states, drawn from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, for 1996. They have found that Blacks constitute 79 percent of all prison admissions in Maryland, 74 percent in Illinois, 73 percent in Louisiana and 72 percent in New Jersey. In Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, Black men are 15 times more likely to be in prison than White men. (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

Within particular parts of New Jersey, these same patterns are evident. Ethnic minorities make up a significantly disproportionate number of inmates. Essex County, for example, contains 18 percent of New Jersey's prisoners (even though the county itself comprises less than 10 percent of the state's population). The county has the highest portion of households making less than \$10,000 per year (13 percent), and the highest portion of households receiving public assistance (6.5 percent) (Travis, et al. 2003). According to an Urban Institute Study conducted from 1992 to 2002, prisoners in Essex County are overwhelmingly ethnic minorities, and originate disproportionately in Newark and its surrounding neighborhoods. Following similar patterns of racial incarceration, juvenile delinquents in New Jersey and nationally are disproportionately ethnic minorities — specifically African American. Data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) purports that, even though Blacks comprise only 16.1 percent of the total juvenile population, they represent over 60 percent of juvenile delinquents. Undoubtedly, in light of these dismal numbers, urban areas like Newark that house a significant percentage of ethnic and racial minorities are the sites where efforts devoted to preventing dropping out and providing a rich secondary educational experience (one that provides rigorous yet multiple means to show competency for graduation) are most needed.

While incarceration rates are clearly racialized, level of education makes an enormous difference in terms of likelihood of incarceration, and the intersection of race and education will again be apparent. To begin, being under-educated places women and men at heightened risk of facing incarceration. Fifty nine percent of all federal prisoners and 75% of all state prisoners do not have a high school diploma (Harlow, 2003).

And yet we see again the diploma denial bears devastating consequence for African Americans. A recent analysis by Petit and Western (2004) describes “the emergence of incarceration as a new stage in the life



course of young low-skill black men” (p. 151). Comparing the vast incarceration rates of black men to the generational impact of WWII and the GI bill, or the expansion of public education, Petit and Western argue that “going to prison was a marker of extreme deviance historically... but the novel normality of criminal justice sanction in the lives of recent cohorts of disadvantaged minority men is now widely claimed” (2004, p. 156). While they review the oft-repeated patterns of race and incarceration identified above, Petit and Western document how dramatically dropout status and race intersect to produce extremely high rates of death and/or incarceration for young Black males who do not have high school diplomas.

In an analysis of what they call “cumulative risk of death or incarceration by ages 30–34,” analyzed over time by education level and race, Petit and Western reveal shocking racial disparities that have worsened significantly since 1979:

**Cumulative Risk of Death or Imprisonment by Ages 30 – 34 for White and Black Men by Education Level, 1979 and 1999**

		Less than HS	High school	All non-college	Some college
White men	1979	7.8	3.5	4.9	1.5
	1999	14.0	5.5	7.7	1.7
Black men	1979	23.8	11.6	17.8	8.7
	1999	61.8	21.9	33.9	7.4

Source: Petit and Western, 2004

These researchers conclude that “imprisonment now rivals or overshadows the frequency of military service and college graduation of recent cohorts of African American men. For black men in their mid thirties at the end of the 1990s, prison records were nearly twice as common as bachelor’s degrees. In this same birth cohort of non-college black men, imprisonment was more than twice as common as military service.” (164). For Black men without a high school diploma, prospects for employment are extremely low and for early death and/or incarceration extremely high.

## Conclusions

Whether we review the data from economic, health or criminal justice outcomes, the patterns are the same. Young women and men without high school diplomas fare worse than their peers with a high school diploma. As significant, young women and men of color without high school diplomas fare significantly worse than White youth without a diploma. Any educational policy that would have the effect of increasing the proportion of high school dropouts in the general population would precipitate significant ripples in labor market activity, health outcomes, family structure, community safety, loss of tax revenue and increased rates of incarceration in the criminal justice system.

## Appendix E: The GED Alternative

The widespread administration, attempts at completion, and success rate of completion of the General Educational Development (GED) credential is documented substantively; it continues to provide a noteworthy number of adolescents across state lines with an alternative to pursuing and obtaining a traditional diploma granted from a public or private high school. In 2001, just below 20 percent of all “high school credentials” by state departments of education were GEDs. In a sample of 4216 former high school sophomores, nearly half of 553 who dropped out after that year obtained a GED within the decade (Murnane, Willet, and Tyler, 2000).

Yet, critical to one’s understanding of the implications of GED obtainment is the awareness that post-secondary prospects for GED recipients are still *significantly* limited compared to those possessing a traditional high school diploma. In a landmark study, Cameron and Heckman (1993) stated that their longitudinal data “strongly reject the hypothesis that GED recipients are the labor market equals of high school graduates”; and further, that “GED recipients lie between dropouts and graduates in their economic standing but are much closer to dropouts” (p. 24). Statistical findings indicate that

“...high school graduates earned 42 percent more than observationally comparable dropouts who completed nine years of schooling, and 32 percent more than permanent dropouts who left school after completing eleven years of schooling. On average, GED recipients earned 13 percent more than permanent dropouts without this credential who completed the same number of years of high school.” (Murnane, Willett, and Tyler 2000, p. 35)

Even when the GED test taker’s cognitive ability is taken into account, the “average earnings of GED-holders and observably similar permanent dropouts is small” (Tyler, Murnane, and Willett, 2000, p. 463, italics original). Although the GED is a highly sought credential, as has been stated above, the economic benefits rendered for a GED recipient have not been shown to be on par with those enjoyed by the traditional high school graduate. One of a group of viable explanations for this is that, because the GED lacks the “socialization” components required in the work place (e.g. cooperation, respect for authority, gender-appropriate attitudes, neatness, task-orientation, and ability to work effectively and efficiently with others), many employers may see the GED as it truly is: an identification of those with the *cognitive* skills—rather than thinking skills in conjunction with an internalization of workplace and many societal norms—who did not complete a normal, four-year high school career. Thus, while most GED recipients have internalized *education credential* norms, they may not have done so (in any *provable* way) with workplace norms. Because of this, GED recipients are placed in a kind of subordinate position where, even though they have successfully passed the test with the hope of a more financially sound future, skills highly valued by employers are masked and presumed to be barely- or non-existent. Research that has examined the earnings of high school graduates (see Sewell and Hauser, 1975) has shown cognitive ability and background characteristics (i.e., skills and qualities that go unmeasured by single high stakes high school exit examinations) account for *less than 10 percent* of variance in earnings. It has been

estimated (see Bowles and Gintis, 2002), that only approximately 20 percent of the effect of years of education is accounted for by measured cognitive skills; the remaining 80 percent involves attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics of one's personality.

Although a GED candidate has improved access to post-secondary education or training, as opposed to his or her permanent dropout counterpart, the findings on the extent to which GED recipients pursued such a post-secondary experience within about a decade are somewhat dismal. It was shown that about one third receive at least one postsecondary education credit. Though this is substantially higher than the eight percent of non-GED dropouts who did so, the figure is still belittled by the almost 70 percent of high school graduates who do so—and only six percent of GED recipients earned a credit at a four-year college. Instead, most GED recipients attended two-year, community college programs. Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (2000) show that “each year of completed college is associated with a four percent increase in earnings at age 27”; so, more broadly speaking (and also not surprisingly), “access to college is the primary mechanism through which the conventional high school diploma results in higher earnings at age 27” (p. 34).

In some ways like a single exit examination for high school, the GED is a highly singular measure of academic ability; it is a context that, partially because of the conditions under which it is taken, has limited potential to engage the student in authentic, performance-based tasks that reflect the higher order levels of thought and metacognition required to be resourceful and self-sufficient in the workplace. In addition, there are minimal (at best) preparation components for GED test takers, making the level of emphasis on curriculum and assessment and the degree of rigor in high schools, and that of the GED, highly incomparable.

In the larger perspective of the SRA, eliminating the potential it offers — and preventing it from being improved upon and implemented in a more rigorous and standardized manner — and instead giving credence to *only* a single high-stakes test measure (the HSPA), would simply drive a greater number of New Jersey students at all levels towards failure to complete high school. This would in turn produce a domino effect of students avoiding rich and meaningful secondary educational experiences, and thereafter being severely limited in their access to rewarding and challenging careers and to any kind of extended post-secondary learning or training. Students would be channeled to a greater extent towards the GED, which, as has been articulated above and substantiated by years of research and statistical analysis, tends to then channel students towards minimal college completion and approximately 30 percent less in average earnings than those who complete high school and finish with a traditional diploma.

## Appendix F: Finding Common Ground on New Jersey Secondary Reform

*Date:* March 26, 2007

*Re:* Finding Common Ground on New Jersey Secondary Reform

*To:* Members of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee

*From:* Members of the Secondary Education Advisory Group:

Mary Bennett, Executive Director, Project GRAD, Newark, NJ

Wilhelmenia Holder, President, Secondary Parents Council, Newark, NJ

Dr. Michelle Fine, Graduate Center, City University of New York

Stan Karp, Director, Secondary Reform Project, Education Law Center

Dear Colleagues;

We write as members of the NJDOE's Secondary Advisory Group and as educators, parents, and advocates with many years of experience with secondary reform at the school, district, and state levels.

Over the past four years, we have invested significant time and energy in supporting the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) as it moved from design by a collaborative workgroup in response to Abbott mandates to the early stages of implementation. We have also watched with interest, and at times some concern, as the High School Redesign Steering Committee launched its series of public conversations in support of New Jersey's participation in the American Diploma Project.

We understand that having completed its initial round of public meetings, the Redesign Committee is preparing a white paper summarizing its assessment of the challenges facing New Jersey secondary schools and its recommendations for moving forward. Accordingly, it seems an opportune time to share our own recommendations for addressing the shared goals of improving educational opportunity and outcomes for all New Jersey students. We hope this will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about secondary reform in New Jersey and to building the broad constituency of stakeholders and civic leaders that will be needed to turn hopes for reform into plans for effective action.

### **Background and context**

While we recognize that secondary schools in New Jersey face urgent challenges, we think it's important to begin any redesign effort by acknowledging the strong foundation New Jersey has established. New Jersey is a national leader in educational investment and in funding equity for poor urban schools. It has the highest high school graduation rate in the nation, and despite significant gaps across communities it has the highest graduation rates for students of color, as well as comparatively high levels of college participation and college graduation in four and six years.

There are problematic aspects to each of these achievements, but they are not small accomplishments. We cite them not to minimize the serious challenges our middle and high schools face, but to underscore the need to preserve and build on these strengths as we seek ways to raise expectations and opportunity for all students. We must craft policies that improve academic performance for all students while closing achievement gaps and sustaining our commitments to equity for our most vulnerable students and communities.

Currently, New Jersey has two major secondary reform initiatives underway, one led by the High School Redesign Steering Committee, another the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative. While these are not the only education initiatives relevant to secondary school improvement in New Jersey, they are presently the two main frameworks for conversation and planning about secondary reform at the state level and in the majority of districts.

These two initiatives, High School Redesign and SEI, have both distinct and overlapping features. In considering the challenges facing each initiative, we give special attention to the issues these efforts raise for the Abbott districts and to suggestions for integrating both initiatives while promoting equity, rigor and high graduation rates across racial, ethnic and geographic groups.

High School Redesign is the New Jersey expression of the American Diploma Project, affiliated nationally with Achieve, Inc. The ADP network now includes 26 states, including New Jersey, whose participation was encouraged at the February 2005 National Summit on High School Reform, ratified by a New Jersey state summit on high schools in September 2005, and endorsed by Governor Jon Corzine with the formation of the High School Redesign Steering Committee in August 2006.

The American Diploma Project seeks “to restore value to the high school diploma by raising the rigor of the high school standards, assessments and curriculum, and better aligning these expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and work.” ADP reflects growing concerns of business and higher education leaders about the readiness of high school graduates for success in college and careers. States in the ADP network commit to aligning graduation requirements, high school course work, and state assessments with the expectations of the workplace and the university. The primary instruments of this effort are benchmarked standards, course frameworks aligned with state standards, more rigorous assessments, and improved data systems to track student achievement and align expectations across the P–20 spectrum and the world of work.

The Secondary Education Initiative grew out of New Jersey's Abbott process which established state constitutional standards for equity in school funding and educational opportunity. Specifically, SEI was developed in response to an Abbott X mediation agreement that required a new program of secondary reform to address gaps in student achievement and educational opportunity. SEI was designed by a collaborative workgroup of educators, DOE officials, academic experts, and community stakeholders. The SEI framework is currently part of Abbott regulations governing 31 of the state's poorest urban districts. It requires that by Fall 2008, all students in Abbott districts in grades 6–12 have access to college preparatory curriculum aligned with state standards, small learning environments including teacher teams paired with a cohort of students over multiple years, and a system of family/student

advocacy to personalize school experience and provide increased academic and social supports for all students.

Both these initiatives face considerable challenges. They share a common commitment to raising academic expectations and to providing supports needed to reach those expectations. They differ in origins, emphasis and the specificity of the academic expectations and corresponding supports required to reach their goals. For example:

The High School Redesign/ADP effort seeks to close the “ever-widening gap between what students are learning and what they need to know to lead productive adult lives.” In curricula terms, this latter knowledge is defined as higher level math and science courses and more rigorous language arts courses aligned with more challenging standardized assessments (with potentially high stakes consequences for high school graduation, college admission and employment.)

SEI was designed to address a different gap: the achievement gap between New Jersey's urban and suburban students as measured against existing state standards and tests. The workgroup that developed the SEI framework gave particular attention to the large gaps in high school graduation rates (both reported and “hidden”) between Abbott and non-Abbott districts. Focusing on graduation rates, as opposed to test scores, provides a broader view of the urgent individual and social costs of secondary school failure and of the deeper changes that need to be made in curricula, instruction, professional practice, and school climate in order to help students move successfully from middle school through high school and on to graduation.

Both ADP and SEI share a commitment to higher standards and more rigorous curricula. SEI's commitment is reflected in its requirement that all core courses for graduation credit be aligned with state standards and include rigorous, college preparatory content, and that remedial and substandard courses (e.g. “consumer math” and “life science”) be replaced by more demanding ones (e.g. Algebra and Biology.) At the same time, the SEI framework pairs these curricula improvements with small learning communities and family/student advocacy, which are short-hands for the changes in professional practice and school climate needed to support higher achievement. These changes include structural and instructional reforms and the kind of sustained, embedded professional development that is necessary if higher academic standards are to be realistic and attainable across New Jersey's diverse districts.

Beyond these different frames, the higher standards and assessments called for by ADP pose an additional challenge to both the High School Redesign and SEI efforts: namely, how will secondary schools that are not meeting existing standards successfully meet tougher ones? If our goals include both excellence and equity, our reform plans must address such questions directly. Otherwise rhetoric about raising expectations for all will face quite reasonable concerns that something less is being proposed.

It remains to be seen whether either of these initiatives can live up to the challenges that gave them birth, or whether, like earlier rounds of secondary reform, they will float like helium balloons above the din of school reform rhetoric, leaving school communities, educational practice and student lives unchanged (or even worse, diminished). It is because we take seriously our responsibilities as advocates for students and school communities, and because the prospects of both these ambitious initiatives would be greatly

strengthened by finding common ground that we offer the following ideas and recommendations for moving forward:

### Recommendations:

1. New Jersey needs greater coherence and integration among related secondary reform initiatives. This includes dialogue between the stakeholders of overlapping but distinct initiatives like ADP and SEI. We believe the unique origins and regulatory status of SEI justify continuing the existing Advisory Group to support and monitor progress toward implementation. But we recommend regular dialogue and communication between the SEI Advisory Group and the High School Redesign Committee through occasional joint meetings, regularly shared updates, and, where appropriate, collaborative undertakings (e.g. public engagement activities, overlapping “subcommittees,” statewide events or convenings.) Assistant Commissioner Doolan’s offer to circulate a draft of the Redesign Committee’s white paper to the SEI Advisory Group before it is finalized would be a good first step.
2. We also need better coordination between proposed changes in curriculum and assessment and the supports needed to improve teaching and learning. We need a balanced approach that pairs calls for “rigor” with the reforms and resources needed to produce and sustain it. We agree that challenging content standards and effective assessments can play an important role in improving academic performance (especially when the educators responsible for implementing the standards and assessments have a role in their creation). But we do not believe that higher levels of academic achievement can be attained solely, or even primarily, through the use of standards and tests, (and we are concerned that the High School Redesign/ADP standards process seems to be top-down, with the standards endorsed by business and university bodies and the NJDOE before K–12 educators are even brought into the process). Particularly in the over-tested, under-resourced era of NCLB, we see a danger that a reform strategy narrowly focused on top-down, higher standards and harder tests (including high stakes end-of-course exams) will amount to “NCLB on steroids” and be more likely to generate new forms of tracking and educational inequality rather than improvements in educational outcomes across all student groups and communities.

As Michael Cohen, former assistant U.S. secretary of education, and Adria Steinberg, president of Jobs for the Future, wrote in *Education Week* (3/13/02), “the crisis in urban high schools can’t be solved simply by setting high standards and then trying to push a larger number of students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them. The problem is that by the time young people reach high school, growing numbers of them are so alienated and disengaged from school that higher expectations and more challenging curricula—the primary tools of standards-based reform—are necessary but far from sufficient to engage or motivate them. In fact, some recent evidence on dropout rates points to the possibility that these strategies may cause more students to give up on school altogether.”

3. For such reasons, we believe the high school redesign piece is as at least as important as curricula and assessment reform. Yet we are concerned that the “redesign” piece of the ADP framework is weak and that, to date, the implementation effort of SEI has been thin and under-resourced. To move either

agenda will require creating much greater capacity to support deep reform at the school, district, and state levels. Toward that end we recommend:

- a. Expansion of NJDOE's capacity to provide technical assistance for secondary reform to schools and districts, including formation of dedicated support teams within the Department.
- b. Making SEI the default "restructuring" framework for all secondary schools in CAPA review, including the growing number of schools likely to be sanctioned under NCLB in the next few years.
- c. Facilitation and funding to promote partnerships between districts and successful reform developers. One lesson from New Jersey's uneven experience with "whole school reform" is that technical assistance is most effective when it is targeted, specific, and well-integrated into other district and state objectives. The SEI framework presents such an opportunity. Research-based, experienced professional development assistance, properly applied and evaluated, is a necessary complement to (though not a substitute for) district and school-based reform leadership. This would be an especially useful topic for joint exploration by the High School Redesign Committee and the SEI Advisory Group.
- d. Creation of an innovation fund that provides incentives and supports for districtwide plans that reflect the SEI and/or ADP framework and goals, possibly including an RFP process to promote public/private and university/school partnerships to support secondary reform.
- e. A statewide conference on secondary reform for educators that makes recent national and regional reform experience available to policymakers and practitioners and that highlights model reform efforts in New Jersey.
- f. Sustained public engagement and constituency-building efforts that extend the Redesign Committee's public conversation strategy to other groups and locations, and that address both the ADP and SEI frameworks. (This could include active participation by parent, community, civic, and business groups in developing the family/student advocacy elements of SEI. For additional public engagement ideas see the SEI workgroup documents: *Capacity-Building/Professional Development in Abbott Districts* and the *Roll Out Action Plan*.)
- g. Development of a research and evaluation component of the reform (as called for in the Abbott regulations: 6A:10A-3.2 (5)) This includes collection of baseline data, formulation of implementation standards and benchmarks for desired outcomes. (Student/Youth Participatory Action Research Projects, such as those underway at Orange and Snyder High Schools, could also be developed as part of this effort.)
- h. Creation of educator networks across districts, linked to university and college educators and resources, to promote content area curriculum work, and address other reform challenges.
- i. Provision of appropriate professional development resources to address multicultural perspectives and other culturally relevant issues raised by secondary reform (e.g., preparation and support for family/student advocacy, culturally responsive pedagogy).
- j. Integration of facilities planning and support for conversion efforts to create small learning environments in large comprehensive high schools and middle schools.



4. The plans to eliminate the SRA as an alternate route to a diploma should be revisited. Currently over 13,000 students, more than a third of Abbott graduates and 20 percent of all New Jersey graduates, receive their diplomas through the SRA. Eliminating the SRA before significant and demonstrable improvements are made in secondary programs and supports would be punitive to students and have disparate impact on immigrant youth and youth of color. It would also negatively affect the climate for reform. The existing lack of coordination and alignment between High School Redesign/ADP, SEI, and proposed changes in SRA increases the prospects that fragmented policy initiatives will raise dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately affect students of color. This would, almost by definition, constitute bad public policy.
5. At a minimum, plans to revise the SRA should be aligned with the timeline for phasing in SEI in the Abbott districts. The August 2005 New Jersey State Board Education "resolution of intent" proposes phasing out the SRA beginning with the entering freshman class in 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in 2007 for math. (Final action on this timeline awaits agreement on an alternative process to replace the SRA that is still pending.) Yet current Abbott regulations set a target of Fall 2008 for implementing SEI's key elements: college prep curriculum, small learning environments, and improved family/student supports. Not only would it be unfair for students to face a single high-stakes graduation requirement before having access to improved programs, it would also significantly distort the perceived and actual impact of SEI if the SRA is phased out, with predictable impact on dropout and graduation rates, just as the reforms are being put into place.

### Closing thoughts

Our own experience with secondary reform has taught us clearly that one size will not fit all. It is not a matter of having lower expectations for some groups and higher expectations for others. On the contrary, it is a matter of addressing honestly the different conditions that our society and our schools have presented to different groups of students. All students deserve access to high quality curricula and instruction, but the reality is not all students have it. All students deserve science labs, computers and modern educational facilities. But not all have them. All students deserve well-prepared, fully-qualified teachers, but not all schools are able to provide them. Given these very real situations, what works successfully to raise expectations and achievement levels in one setting may not work in another. Identical treatment for very different conditions is not equity.

The ADP framework posits increased high school rigor as necessary preparation for college level academics and ever-more demanding levels of skills required in the workplace. However, our society has never sent more than a third of its students on to higher education, and, in recent years, both college participation rates and affordability have declined significantly. Reversing these trends will require much more than challenging high school courses. Similarly, ADP brochures cite rising needs for "advanced knowledge" and "additional education" to fill "more than two thirds of new jobs," adding that "the number will be even higher" in the future. Yet other sources paint a quite different picture. Of the 20 fastest growing occupations in the U.S. Department of Labor's forecasts, only six require a college degree. One study projects that over 75 percent of the new jobs created over the next ten years will pay less than \$26,000 a year and require only on-the-job training.

We don't cite these alternate, and unsettling, forecasts to argue against college level preparation for all students. We support that goal, and consider it part of the overlapping common ground between ADP and SEI. But we do question the credibility and motivational power of approaches that tie school reforms too tightly to uncertain labor market projections or rely too heavily on appeals to individual self-interest in a post-secondary job market. Especially in communities where we are losing thousands of our young people to the unemployment lines, the streets, and the prisons, we will need much broader visions of community renewal, social justice, collective well-being and hope to carry the changes we need.

School reform in general, and high school reform in particular, raise complex issues about how public education should respond to changing economic conditions, technological developments, and to the needs of many different constituencies. Business and industry leaders and parents and educators may all have compelling, but differing, priorities. Public policy must serve civic, social and democratic interests that, at times, can compete with, as well as complement, economic ones. While common ground is always to be sought, it is not always easily found, especially where significant inequalities of power and access exist.

New Jersey's two major secondary reform initiatives present some of these competing priorities in particularly compelling form. The challenge is to find common ground between them that will serve all our children well. We hope this paper contributes toward that end and look forward to continuing such dialogue in the future.

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## National experts stress importance of the SRA in New Jersey and beyond...

**“The SRA is an example of high-quality performance assessment and is one reason why New Jersey has both very high achievement levels and very strong graduation rates. New Jersey’s multiple measures system of evidence for high school graduation reflects an approach that a growing number of states are seeking to emulate as an essential part of effective secondary reform.”**

Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University, and founding Executive Director of the National Commission for Teaching and America’s Future.

**“At a time of retreat from the promises of Brown v. Board of education, it is more important than ever to insist on quality education for all children, including urban and rural kids of all colors, but particularly children of color living in high poverty districts. This means significantly improving the high school graduation rates for African American and Latino students, and closing the teaching and resource gaps in achievement and opportunity. Blacks and Latinos are the canaries in the mine, signaling to all Americans what real education reform looks like. If we fix the conditions in the educational mines for the canaries, we will be fixing the atmosphere for everyone.”**

Lani Guinier, Bennett Boskey Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

**“The new report on New Jersey’s SRA is excellent, important and timely. It shows that elimination of the SRA avenue to high school graduation would be not only unfair, but would almost certainly lead to thousands more New Jersey students dropping out of school every year without a diploma.”**

Dr. Walt Haney, Professor, Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy, Boston College.

**“The skills and intellectual resources that English language learners possess position them well to become cultural and linguistic leaders in today’s increasingly globalized world. Unfortunately, both to their detriment and ours as a nation, the narrow, single-indicator path of high-stakes testing thwarts their progress. New Jersey’s special review assessment provides an important alternative to this one-size-fits all model. We must ensure that our respect for diversity is accompanied by policies that create such multiple options for student success. ”**

Professor Angela Valenzuela, Ph.D., Director, Texas Center for Education Policy, University of Texas at Austin

**“Alternative assessments provide options for students who might otherwise be denied a high school diploma, and New Jersey should be commended for having provided such an option with the SRA. Now, New Jersey has a new opportunity to lead the way in educational policy by strengthening the SRA and showing the rest of the nation that sound performance assessments can lead to success for our children. By adopting the recommendations in this policy brief, New Jersey would be promoting greater educational opportunity for its young people, and a better future for all.”**

Martha Foote, Director of Research, The New York Performance Standards Consortium