



More than half of Newark students needed to take alternate exam to graduate from high school

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By **Jessica Calefati/The Star-Ledger**

NEWARK — More than half of all Newark students rely on an alternative aptitude test to graduate from high school, according to a report being released today that tracks graduation trends among students in the state's largest city.

Researchers from Rutgers-Newark studied the graduation and college matriculation rates of 9,725 Newark public school students from 2003 to 2008 and found that girls, racial and ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged increasingly graduate by passing the alternate exam, formerly known as the Special Review Assessment.

New Jersey students must either pass the state's standardized test — the High School Proficiency Assessment — or the alternate exam to earn a high school diploma. Students take the alternate high school exam after failing the HSPA twice.

Overall, the study found:

- 60 percent of all Newark students needed to pass the alternate exam to earn their diplomas.
- Among the students who attend college, 47 percent passed the alternate exam.



Alexandra Pais/For The Star-Ledger

From left to right: Newark Mayor Cory A. Booker, Governor Chris Christie and Cami Anderson formally nominate Anderson to be Newark's next superintendent during a May 4 press conference at Science Park High School in Newark.

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- 75 percent of alternate exam graduates who attend college choose two-year schools.

- 67 percent of those who passed the HSPA attend four-year institutions.

Acting state Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf has said the more difficult HSPA is not rigorous enough. But the study's authors questioned what would happen if the alternate test, now known as the Alternative High School Assessment, was eliminated or made more difficult.

Jeffrey Backstrand, Andre Keeton and Alan Sadovnik of the Institute on Education, Law and Policy at Rutgers-Newark said such a move would put Newark's neediest students at a significant disadvantage.

"Attempts to eliminate the (alternate exam) would disproportionately penalize blacks and Hispanics/Latinos for graduation via the alternative assessment program," the authors concluded. "These attempts would further penalize them for the social context in which they find themselves."

Sadovnik said if the state eliminates the alternate exam or makes it more difficult for students to pass without first reforming Newark's public education system, thousands of students would drop out, making them ill-equipped for the workplace or unable to attend community colleges.

Under the current system, nearly all students who attend community college after having passed the alternate exam need to take remedial courses.

"If the state raises standards, it has a moral and constitutional obligation to ensure that all children, those in Newark and other (poor) districts especially, have the education needed to pass those exams and go on to productive careers and college," he said.

Though no changes will be made to either high school exam next year, state Department of Education spokeswoman Allison Kobus said the state is accepting bids for a vendor to re-write the HSPA exam.

"I have seen no evidence that passing the HSPA is itself an indication that students have mastered the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in the next phase of life," Cerf said in an interview in March.

Former assistant education commissioner Gordon MacInnes said districts like Newark, which have large populations of at-risk students, are over-reliant on the alternate exam.

But this does not mean the exam should be scrapped, he said.

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"DOE needs to be consistent and coherent on what it expects these tests to do," MacInnes said. "Does the high school diploma signal that a kid knows enough stuff and knows how to do enough stuff well enough that he or she can go to college and succeed. That's what we should be striving for."

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