

# Standards and Expectations: Alternative Approaches to Meeting New Jersey's High School Assessment Requirements

Prepared for the New Jersey State Board of Education

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## *Executive Summary*

For many years now the Special Review Assessment (SRA) has been the state's designated alternative mechanism for meeting the HSPA graduation requirement, but in recent years the SRA has come under attack as a "backdoor" to a high school diploma because most students who fail one or both sections of the HSPA do succeed in meeting the statewide testing requirement through the SRA process. The fact that approximately 12 percent of high school students fail to pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) even after three attempts raises a number of critical questions: Why are so many students failing? What is the state's responsibility to those students who do fail the HSPA?

In response to such concerns, the Department of Education (DOE) and the State Board of Education had announced plans to phase out the SRA; however, the acknowledged desire among educators and citizens' groups alike for some kind of alternate or second chance vehicle suggests that it might be wiser to improve the alternate mechanism that we have instead of trying to invent a completely new one. This discussion paper examines the SRA dilemma by focusing on the issue of standards, both curriculum and performance standards, and our readiness to hold all students to these standards. The trend nationally is for states to expand opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement of knowledge and skills learned in high school by providing additional measures for students failing the primary state exit exam. While there is no consensus among states as to what form such opportunities or flexibility should take (e.g., alternate exams, substitute exams, waivers, appeals, multiple indicators of achievement, etc.), it is recognized that withholding a high school diploma from a student who has, in good faith,

attended school for twelve years is problematic. The state has a moral obligation to ensure that all students are prepared to face the challenges and to compete for the opportunities that await them after high school. At the same time, the state has a moral obligation to ensure that it does not, in pursuit of that goal, create an undue burden on, or impediment to, the individual student's passage to adult life. The absolute insistence that every student pass the HSPA, without recourse to other measures or alternatives, would constitute such an undue burden.

This paper suggests that concerns about the SRA arise largely from procedural deficiencies, that these deficiencies are capable of being remedied, and that doing so would provide New Jersey with a sound alternate means of meeting the HSPA requirement, superior to other options that involve differentiated diplomas or quasi appeals-like mechanisms. In this regard, the department recommends a number of steps that will improve the validity of the state's alternate high school assessment vehicle and restore confidence in the credibility of diplomas achieved through that alternate means. These steps include the following:

- Rename the SRA to reflect more fairly its close relationship to the content standards on which the HSPA itself is based: e.g., Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA);
- Establish specific administration windows for the alternate high school assessment;
- Standardize the alternate administration by having the state test vendor assign and distribute the performance tasks to districts;
- Improve the validity of the scoring by establishing regional, vendor-supervised scoring centers, staffed by trained New Jersey teacher-scorers;
- Collect and report more data about student performance on the performance tasks; and

- Require districts that disproportionately rely on the SRA (or alternate high school assessment) to develop a plan to reduce the number of students using it and report annually their progress in reducing this level of dependence.

The department is currently engaged in a comprehensive high school redesign initiative that will transform secondary education in New Jersey, raising the rigor of both the state curriculum standards and the statewide assessments that measure student achievement of those standards. New Jersey's anticipated participation in the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, a collaborative effort among education, business, community, and government leaders nationwide, embodies the underlying purpose of New Jersey's high school redesign initiative: to prepare our students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as workers, as leaders, as citizens. For high school assessment, this means a transition from the current, integrated content model of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), with its mathematics, language arts literacy, and science components, to an end-of-course testing model. Thus, the evolution of the HSPA into an end-of-course high school assessment model would, even in the absence of controversy, inevitably transform the SRA into a different, more demanding alternate high school assessment program.

### ***Introduction***

What does it mean that out of approximately 97,000 New Jersey high school juniors each year, about 13,000 eventually fail to demonstrate proficiency on the state graduation exam, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), in one or both content areas after three attempts? This question is at the heart of the controversy over the Special Review Assessment (SRA), the state's designated alternate means for satisfying the graduation test requirement in order to receive a state endorsed diploma.

The SRA takes the form of a series of locally administered and locally scored Performance Assessment Tasks (PAT) developed by the state and aligned to the state's Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS). The PATs are selected by teachers and administered in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade year over several weeks or months, following a period of remedial instruction. The SRA is administered to students who fail one or both content sections of the HSPA in their first sitting for the test in March of the eleventh grade. For students just shy of the proficiency standard, the difference may amount to as few as one or two test questions answered incorrectly or poorly. Thus, most affected students begin the SRA process in the fall of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Such students continue to take the HSPA each time it is offered. In many cases, such students pass the HSPA in a retest opportunity in October or March of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. For many others, the SRA is the vehicle by which they satisfy the HSPA requirement in whole or in part.

According to an analysis of HSPA student data files for the years 2005-2006, 11,468 students failed to attain proficiency in mathematics after three administrations of the assessment.

Of those students, 10,623 received a scale score at some point, and of those, 6,571 received a maximum scale score between 180 and 199, while 4,052 students scored below 180. For math, as for language arts literacy (LAL), the score scale ranges from 100 to 300, with 200 as the proficiency cut point, and 250 for advanced proficient. The raw score cut points for proficiency (i.e., 200 scale score) were 24.0 for LAL and 20.5 for mathematics. In LAL, 6,342 failed after three administrations: 5,714 of those received a scale score at some point, and of those, 3,099 students received a maximum scale score between 180 and 199, while 2,615 students scored below 180. In 2006 the gap between a partially proficient score of 180 and a proficient score of 200 represented 1-4 test items for LAL and 2-6 test items for mathematics, depending on whether the items were one-point multiple-choice or multi-point constructed response items.

In 2006, 80.4 percent of graduating students met their state testing requirement through the HSPA, while 12.5 percent did so through the SRA (2006 NJ School Report Card). The overall state graduation rate, 93.2 percent in 2006 (2006 NJ School Report Card), attests that most students who participate in the SRA process do so successfully. In recent years, 12,000-15,000 students annually have achieved their diploma via the SRA, most of them general education students. In 19 New Jersey high schools in 2006, 50% or more of graduates satisfied their testing requirement via the SRA. As a result, the SRA has long been criticized as a “backdoor” to a high school diploma. The particularly heavy reliance on the SRA by larger urban districts has created considerable distrust of the credibility of the SRA and, by extension, of the readiness for post-secondary life among the students who use it to satisfy the state graduation test requirement. Critics charge that, in effect, students are receiving diplomas without having earned them.

This controversy has produced calls for the outright elimination of the SRA. In fact the Department of Education (DOE) has previously announced intentions to phase out the SRA and replace it with a combination of steps, including moving up the first administration of the HSPA to the fall of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, so as to allow an additional testing opportunity, and an appeals process for those who still fail one or both content areas after four attempts. A “White Paper” on the SRA was issued in 2003 ([www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/sra/sra\\_white\\_paper.htm](http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/hs/sra/sra_white_paper.htm)), authored by then assessment director Dr. Brian D. Robinson, outlining the department’s position at the time. Then Commissioner William L. Librera formally advanced this proposal to the State Board of Education in May 2005 and in August 2005 the State Board adopted a resolution endorsing the phase-out of the SRA, even as the Board continued to look for an alternate, or “second chance,” mechanism for students who fail the HSPA. Thus, in effect, the State Board is still committed to an alternate vehicle for satisfying the graduation test requirement, whether or not that alternate vehicle is the SRA.

The present discussion then is about whether there is a place in New Jersey education for an alternate mechanism for meeting the graduation test requirement and what that place might be. This paper argues that there is a need for such an alternate mechanism and that improving or transforming our current one, the SRA, is the way to start. While it is tempting to imagine the SRA as a discrete problem to be solved by simple surgical removal, the truth is more complicated. Advocacy groups such as the Education Law Center (ELC) argue 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” (Fine and Pappas, *et al.*, 2007, p. 5). To be sure, research by the Center for Education Policy (CEP) suggests that the effect of high school exit exams on dropout and graduation rates is much more modest, and that factors such as repeating grades, boredom, and personal or family issues play a much greater role. (CEP 2007, pp. 62-64). Citing its own earlier studies, CEP reported that “there was only moderately suggestive evidence of exit exams causing more students to drop out of school.” (CEP 2007, p. 63). Massachusetts’s exit exam, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment of Skills (MCAS), “does not appear to be a major deciding factor in the decision to drop out” (CEP 2007, p. 64) Nonetheless, the association of the SRA with particular at-risk student subgroups is confirmed every year by the SRA “usage” data supplied to the DOE by local districts: the anxiety that the elimination of the SRA would unfairly disadvantage those subgroups is a natural and reasonable one, even if it does not rest primarily on research data about dropout rates.

More broadly, the SRA controversy is inextricably bound up with larger state and national debates about the meaning and value of a secondary school credential and the associated role of a high school “exit” exam in certifying the credibility of that credential Any discussion of the SRA requires us to wrestle with the deeper purpose of public education, the larger mission of our agency, and the precise meaning of serving “all students.”

### ***Standards vs. Expectations***

The Introduction to the current, 2004 text of New Jersey’s Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS) characterizes them as a “common set of expectations” and “intended for all

students” (CCCS, pp. i-ii). The Introduction starts with a glance back at the establishment of the CCCS in the previous decade:

In 1996, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards, an ambitious framework for educational reform in the State’s public schools. New Jersey’s standards were created to improve student achievement by clearly defining what all students should know and be able to do at the end of thirteen years of public education . . . . In addition, the statewide assessments were aligned to the Core Curriculum Content Standards. This alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment was unprecedented. (CCCS, p. ii)

In one sense, the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards mark with precision the results expected of all students. In another sense, they serve as a banner behind which all segments of the education community and the state at large can mobilize to reshape our approach to education. Collectively, they embody a vision of the skills and understandings all of New Jersey’s children need to be successful in their careers and daily lives. (CCCS, p. iii)

The implicit expectation here is that the assessment of student achievement of the CCCS will prove the success of the educational system that we have established, justify our approach to education and assessment, and validate the purpose of the CCCS. The questions then become: What do we do when the assessment outcomes do not prove fully the success of our underlying educational system? What does our mission obligate us to do if that underlying educational

system fails even one child? If a student cannot pass that assessment, i.e., if a student cannot help to justify the rightness of our educational approach, then what? Do we allow an unlimited number of attempts to pass the assessment that we say will prove the success of our state's public education system? The CCCS do not precisely parse the difference between "standards" and "expectations." Are the CCCS standards to be rigorously enforced through instruction and assessment, or are they expectations vigorously pursued through instruction and assessment? At what point, e.g., on a student's 4<sup>th</sup> attempt or 10<sup>th</sup> attempt to pass the graduation exam, do we let the student move on?

To return to our starting question: What does it mean that out of roughly 97,000 students each year, 13,000 eventually fail to demonstrate proficiency on the state graduation exam in one or both content areas after three attempts? Does it mean that we have a testing problem or a teaching problem? A 2004 review by the policy group Achieve, Inc., argued that the HSPA is insufficiently rigorous, reflecting skill levels – as defined by Achieve – closer to grade 8 than grade 11. Here's what Achieve's alignment review found about the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade tests in mathematics, the content area in which almost twice as many New Jersey high school students take the SRA as take the SRA in LAL:

Although the 8<sup>th</sup> grade test shows a good emphasis on algebra, the relatively low level of demand of the test as a whole results from having too many "whole number" items and too many items that do not require students to demonstrate their mathematical knowledge in appropriately challenging ways. The same issues with low cognitive demand are found

in the high school assessment. In fact, the test aligns better with the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade standards than the 12<sup>th</sup>-grade standards. (Achieve, 2004, p. 6)

As for LAL, again here is Achieve on the HSPA: “As the tests are currently written, too few items ask that students do little more than demonstrate basic comprehension.” A separate study by Achieve of six states’ graduation exit exams found New Jersey’s reading assessments “the most challenging among the six studied,” but still finds the HSPA and the other five state tests “not overly challenging” and therefore perfectly “reasonable” in their demands upon students. (Achieve, 2006, pp. 28-30) While there might be reason to dispute some of these conclusions by Achieve, which arose from little direct engagement with New Jersey secondary school educators, there clearly is no broad consensus that the HSPA is too difficult. In short, the SRA problem is not primarily a testing problem: it is not the product of a faulty HSPA test design.

If we approach our starting question from the perspective of content standards instead of assessment, the question might then become this: What exactly do we mean when we say that the Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS) define “what every student should know and be able to do at the end of 13 years of public education”? Do we mean that no student may receive a high school diploma if his or her mastery of the CCCS is partial? Do we believe that every student who received a New Jersey high school diploma in June 2007 can “Determine, describe, and draw the effect of a transformation, or a sequence of transformations, on a geometric or algebraic object, and, conversely, determine whether and how one object can be transformed to another by a transformation or a sequence of transformations” (Mathematics, 4.2.12 B. 1)? Do

we believe that every graduate in 2007 can “Critique the validity and logic of arguments advanced in public documents, their appeal to various audiences, and the extent to which they anticipate and address reader concerns” (Language Arts Literacy, 3.1.12.H.6)?

In practice, we mean that students must master a preponderance of the CCCS to merit a diploma, and we rely on criteria such as course credits, course grades, attendance, teacher observation, student conduct, extracurricular activities, and in three content areas, state test scores, to certify that level of mastery. In the case of the statewide test, the HSPA, which embodies a compensatory design, that preponderance standard is expressed by the cut score defining the border between proficiency and partial proficiency. On New Jersey’s scale of 100-300, that cut point is 200, with a further cut point of 250 for advanced proficiency. Thus, a student who achieves a 200 on the HSPA language arts literacy (LAL) assessment and a 200 on the HSPA mathematics assessment has met that standard – demonstrating mastery of a substantial body of the CCCS content for math and LAL, while still answering numerous standards-aligned test questions incorrectly or with partial success. The raw score cut points corresponding to those 200 scaled score proficiency cut points or “cutscores” are established largely by committees of New Jersey teachers working under the guidance of NJDOE experts and testing specialists for whom standard-setting is a core discipline within measurement science. The validity of these cutscores derives in large measure from the content validity embodied by the teachers in applying a methodology established according to the technical principles of measurement science, under the guidance of DOE and external measurement specialists.

That cut point of 200 represents a principle, a kind of line in the sand drawn by the state with the help of its teacher committees: you are simply not prepared for adult life, for college, for community college, for job-hunting, for the real world, if you cannot do at least *this*. And since each student may achieve proficiency by answering a slightly different portion of the test items correctly or fully so, even the meaning of *this* is fluid. A standard-setting proposal produced by one of the DOE's testing vendors, Riverside Publishing Company in April 2006 makes the point more precisely, and invokes psychometrician Greg Cizek, a member of New Jersey's Technical Advisory Committee:

It should be emphasized that there is no "right answer" corresponding to "truth" in the establishment of cutscores. In his article, *Reconsidering Standards*, Gregory Cizek (1993) describes standard setting as a measurement process involving the "development, description, and implementation of a reasonable system of rules for rationally deriving and uniformly applying judgment." (Insko and Doolittle, pp. 2-3)

Educational measurement uses scientific methodologies to pursue social ends, and Cizek's definition plainly acknowledges the role of subjective judgment in the setting of educational performance standards. The retention of an alternate mechanism for meeting the state high school testing requirement would be very much in the spirit of the kind of "implementation of a reasonable system of rules for rationally deriving and uniformly applying judgment" envisioned by Cizek, himself a nationally known expert on standard-setting in educational measurement. In this context then, and keeping mind that the CCCS are subject to revision every five years, the SRA becomes part of the reiterative process by which New Jersey

policy makers negotiate the differences between “expectations” and “standards.” In this sense, the SRA dilemma is rooted in what the Introduction to the CCCS characterizes as the state’s continued grappling “with a paradox regarding the governance of public education” (ii), the tension between the Constitutional mandate for a “thorough and efficient” education and the state’s longstanding tradition of local control over schools.

An additional factor in the debate over the SRA is that the traditional conception of high school as a rite of passage to adulthood, largely independent of academic concerns, remains potent. Who wants to deny a student that graduation day, and all that is associated with it? On one level, the state serves that student by refusing to allow her/him to face the world of postsecondary life without the necessary knowledge and skills necessary to compete for the opportunities that await them in the world. On the other hand, that same student might argue that the state had its chance to prepare her or him, and in so doing failed to meet what Diane Ravitch calls “opportunity to learn, or school delivery standards” (Ravitch, 13). New Jersey implemented rigorous curriculum standards and rigorous, standards-aligned assessments and found that thousands of students could not “pass” these tests, even as the state debated whether its curriculum standards and associated assessments were rigorous enough. The same phenomenon occurred in other states such as Utah, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Arizona (Darling-Hammond, *et al.* pp. 9-13), where poor statewide test performance results caused states to pull back from those performance standards or test designs. The will to “enforce” those standards did not exist.

For New Jersey, this is where the SRA comes in, originally developed as an alternate mechanism to the then state graduation test, the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT), which gave way to the HSPA in 2002. The SRA was established on the premise that some students are in fact masters of the content but unable to demonstrate that mastery through standardized testing, due either to the presumed limitations of standardized (i.e., heavily multiple-choice-based) tests, or due to “test-phobia” that prevents them from showing what they can actually do and what they actually know.

The underlying premise is that the SRA is a reasonable alternative and equivalent to the HSPA in providing a valid measure of the student’s mastery of the CCCS. Concerns about the SRA essentially question this equivalence, suggesting that the SRA is, or enables, a lower proficiency standard. It is important to note that the suspicions of the SRA arise not from a review of the content – of which few critics have any actual familiarity - but from the fact that so many students “pass” the SRA who could not the HSPA. This being the case, how can we assure that the alternate vehicle for meeting the HSPA requirement is genuinely equivalent to the HSPA, so that no one graduates without meeting state proficiency standards? In part, the answer lies in improving the credibility of student performance results by standardizing the administration, scoring, and documentation components of the program.

### ***Statutory Basis of the SRA and HSPA***

A review of the statutory basis for the HSPA and SRA is instructive. New Jersey’s state high school graduation proficiency test is mandated by N.J.S.A. 18A: 7C-6. According to N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-6.1, “the test shall measure those basic skills all students must possess in order

to function politically, economically, and socially in a democratic society.” The Special Review Assessment (SRA) is authorized under another statute, N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-3: “For any student who does not meet State and district examination standards for graduation by the end of eleventh grade . . . . Any student who does not meet said requirements but who has met all the credit, curriculum, and attendance requirements shall be eligible for *a comprehensive assessment of said proficiencies utilizing techniques and instruments other than standardized tests, which techniques and instruments shall have been approved by the Commissioner of Education, as fulfilling State and local graduation requirements.*” (italics added)

Of course, this language does not name or identify the SRA as such, but it does stipulate that the alternate means of satisfying the state graduation proficiency test requirement be “a comprehensive assessment” and take the form of something “other than standardized tests.” The meaning of this statute is dependent on how we define “assessment” and “standardized tests.” Standardizing the administration of the SRA might threaten the spirit of the “other than standardized tests” clause here, but if “standardized tests” is taken to mean, as it commonly is, multiple-choice or predominantly multiple-choice tests, then that would leave the department reasonable latitude to refine or improve the SRA.

In the portion of N.J.S.A. 18A:7C-3 highlighted above, “comprehensive assessment of said proficiencies using techniques and instruments other than standardized tests” seems to open the door to a wide ranging process of evaluation, as distinct from testing. Moreover, the statute’s subsequent requirement that these techniques be approved by the Commissioner of

Education implies that these “techniques and instruments other than standardized tests” need not originate with the state, but merely be approved by it.

Likewise, N.J.S.A. 18A7C-4, which explicitly links assessment to diplomas, states: “All students who meet state and local graduation requirements shall receive a State-endorsed diploma; provided, however, that the Commissioner of Education shall approve any State-endorsed diploma which utilizes the comprehensive assessment techniques as provided in section 3 of P.L. 1979, c. 241 (C.18A: 7C-3).” This language uses “comprehensive assessment” in a more precise technical sense, yet still without insisting that the comprehensive assessment techniques originate in all cases with the state. It is the administrative code that specifically locates the origination of the assessments at all grade levels with the DOE:

N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1      Statewide assessment system

- (a) The Commissioner, in accordance with N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-10, may implement assessment of student achievement in the State’s public schools, in any grades and by such assessments as he or she deems appropriate, and shall report to the State Board the results of such assessments in accordance with the New Jersey Open Public Records Act (P.L. 2001, c. 404) N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.

- (b) The Commissioner shall implement a system and related schedule of Statewide assessments to evaluate student achievement of the Core Curriculum Content Standards.
4. District boards of education shall administer the SRA, following the 11th grade, to all students, or corresponding adult high school students, who have not demonstrated proficiency on one or more sections of the HSPA. *District boards of education, in implementing the SRA process, shall use only those assessment instruments and procedures approved by the Commissioner of Education.* (italics added)

Even here, however, as the italicized text indicates, there is an implication that the SRA is not a fixed program or event but rather a package of multiple components – “instruments and procedures” – approved by the Commissioner, but liable to change or evolution.

### ***Changing SRA Populations***

A chronic problem that has hampered analysis of the SRA has been the fact that SRA data is largely self-reported by districts. To be sure, the department does implement an annual due-diligence paper audit, which seeks to confirm that districts are administering the SRA according to prescribed state guidelines and protocols. This audit, however, does not allow the ability to determine how and when the SRA is administered since the PATs are administered at a

variety of times depending on individual student preparedness. The county offices must give final approval to the SRA “profiles” in order for students to graduate. While most counties review all the SRA profiles submitted, the counties with the largest student populations review a sampling based on the total number submitted.

Unlike the HSPA and the other state standardized assessments which have intense data processing components to them, including extended quality control protocols, the SRA – going back to the SRA11 in the 1990s - has never been given equivalent attention, perhaps due to the evolving rationale for the SRA and the changing student population it came to serve.. As a result, the SRA data – including that reported on the School Report Card annually - has been inconsistent and of limited usefulness. For one thing, only “successful” SRA administrations are reported: that is, districts submit the SRA profiles – the paperwork documenting successful student performance on the SRA PATs – only for those students who have successfully “passed” the four language arts and eight mathematics PATs required of them. No data are collected pertaining to the PATs on which students fail to demonstrate proficiency of the standard, nor are figures collected for students to whom a full series of PATs were administered but who failed to demonstrate proficiency on the required quantity of them. In short, we have little information about student performance levels on the SRA PATs. Thus, any enhanced alternate mechanism for meeting the HSPA requirement must be attended by a robust data collection - and *reporting* - process.

In addition to the students who satisfy the state graduation test requirement through the SRA, there is another group of students who may graduate without having demonstrated

proficiency on the HSPA. Each year approximately 7,000 students with disabilities are exempted from the HSPA graduation requirement when the Individual Education Program (IEP) Team determines that, in one or both content areas, due to the nature and severity of a student's disability, the student has not been instructed in all of the knowledge and skills tested in the content area(s). In practice, this means that such students must sit for the HSPA once, but are not required to retest or take the SRA if they fail to attain proficiency in one or both content areas. The evidence suggests that such exemptions are determined with varying degrees of precision: each year, as many as 24 percent of IEP exempt students in LAL and 15 percent in math actually pass, that is demonstrate proficiency or advanced proficiency on the HSPA. Any effort to reinforce the state's commitment to a common set of expectations for all students should include efforts to limit such exemptions to students who warrant them. Toward this end, the department should consider revisions to the Special Education administrative code (N.J.A.C. 6A:14-3.7) governing IEP-based modifications to state graduation requirements. Additionally the department should ensure that the revised SRA offers an appropriate alternative to students with disabilities who may require a different format but have been instructed in the knowledge and skills tested by the HSPA.

### *Approaches of Other States*

In implementing high school graduation exams, all states must wrestle to some degree with the same questions of how to address the gap between expectations and standards, and whether (and how) to hold students accountable for an education system that has failed them. Some states, such as New York, try to reconcile that gap through differentiated diplomas, and indeed the original DOE SRA *White Paper* from 2003 floated the idea of a "Certificate of

Attainment” for students who fail to pass the HSPA or meet the appeals process requirements (Robinson, p. 9) As yet, however, New Jersey policy makers have shown little interest in a differentiated diploma. So let us review additional options pursued by states, sometimes in concert with a certificate of completion or attainment.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP), all states that require high school graduation exit exams provide opportunities for general education students who fail the test to take it over. “Retesting is a universal method used by the states to give students multiple opportunities to pass exit exams and to identify problem areas for students who fail.” (CEP 2004, pp. 80 and 98) Therefore, the issue of retesting, in and of itself, is not a controversial issue. However, the number of retests allowed or needed and taken raises other issues for the general education student population. In an attempt to address the student who does not pass the high school exit exam, states implement various approaches and apply varying degrees of strictness in enforcing the policies underlying those approaches. (CEP 2004, p. 80)

Significantly, CEP research findings indicate that, generally, the trend nationally is for states to offer greater options for students in demonstrating proficiency in the knowledge and skills required as a result of a high school education. Nine of the 25 states with current or planned exit exams offer, or will offer, alternative assessments or substitute tests to students who have not passed the exams after multiple tries. Here are examples of such options in other states, drawn from the CEP’s 2004 and 2006 survey findings:

### Alternate Tests

- In Maryland, students not enrolled in high school may pursue a Diploma by Examination. This process requires students to pass either the Maryland External Diploma Program assessment (an alternative assessment) or the GED assessment (a substitute test). Students who pursue this route receive the same Maryland high school diploma as students who graduate at the end of grade 12.

### Substitute Tests

- North Carolina students can meet state exit exam requirements by substituting scores from the PSAT, SAT, and ACT tests, as well as from College Board tests such as ACT PLAN, ACT COMPASS, and ACCUPLACER.
- In Virginia, students can use the Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, SAT II, ACT, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Advanced Placement International English Language Examination, Cambridge International Examination, and the College Level Examination Program tests.
- The minimum scores required on these substitute tests vary and sometimes they are very minimal indeed. In Florida, “concordant scores” for the 2004-05 exit exams were 410 on the SAT in reading and 370 on the SAT in math.

### Collection of Evidence/Alternative Evaluations

- Eight states use other forms of evidence as the basis for their alternative evaluation method, waiver, or appeal process for students struggling to pass exit exams.
- Arizona allows students who fail sections of the exit exam to “augment” their scores with points derived from course grades of a C or better. To qualify for the augmentation, students must have completed all course requirements, taken the state test each time it is offered, and participate in remedial instruction programs. If students meet these criteria, and if their augmented score exceeds the “meet the standard” threshold, then they are considered to have met the alternative graduation requirement.
- In Indiana, students who fail the exit exam may be eligible to graduate if they do all of the following: Retake the exam in each failed subject at least once per year after the year in which they first took the exam, complete remediation opportunities, maintain a school attendance rate of at least 95 percent, maintain a C average or equivalent in the courses required by the state for graduation, and either: a) complete the course and credit requirements for a general diploma, including the career academic sequence; complete a workforce readiness assessment; and complete at least one career exploration internship, cooperative education, or workforce credential recommended by the student’s school; or b)

obtain written recommendations from their teachers in each subject in which they failed the exam, with supporting documentation from the principal.

- Georgia has a waiver process for students who are considered incapable of passing the exit exam due to disability or who have not had a reasonable opportunity to pass the exam due to substantial hardship beyond the student's control. In addition, the state offers a "variance process" that allows an alternate means of demonstrating academic proficiency. Students must meet all of the following requirements in order for the State Board of Education to grant a variance, by majority vote:
  1. Pass any three of the five graduation tests
  2. Meet attendance and course unit requirements for graduation
  3. Have a 90 percent or better attendance record, excluding excused absences, while enrolled in grades 9-12
  4. Obtain a scale score that falls within one standard error of measurement of passing the relevant section of the exit exam
  5. Where applicable, successfully pass each end-of-course test related to the sections of the exit exam in which the variance is being sought.
  
- In Mississippi, the appeals process is broader. A student who fails the graduation exam twice can appeal for a substitute evaluation, which draws on other evidence

to demonstrate the student's mastery of the subject. Such evidence may include the student's grades, a written recommendation from the teacher, and a portfolio of class work and tests completed by the student.

- Finally, Washington uses a "collection of evidence" approach as one of its alternative methods. Under this approach, students and teachers work together to assemble a collection of the student's work that demonstrates proficiency in all of the major subject areas tested on the state exam. The collection must have sufficient evidence at a level that meets or exceeds state standards in each area. The collection is then scored off-site by trained raters. This system was implemented for the first time in fall 2006.

Table 1 below, summarizing the alternatives offered to general education students to earn a high school diploma in the 25 states that currently require a high school exit examination, is reprinted from the CEP's most recent survey of high school exit exam policies (CEP 2006, p. 92):

Table 1: Summary of State Alternatives

State	<i>Alternative Methods of Evaluation, Waivers, or Appeals</i>					Accommodations for General Education Students	Alternative Diploma or Certificate
	Alternative Test	Substitute Test	Course Grades	Classroom Evidence	Criteria-Based		
Alabama		X					
Alaska							
Arizona			X	X	X		
California							
Florida		X					X
Georgia				X	X		X
Idaho							
Indiana			X	X	X		
Louisiana							
Maryland	X	X					
Massachusetts					X		
Minnesota						X	
Mississippi			X	X	X		
Nevada							X
New Jersey	X						
New Mexico							X
New York		X	X				
North Carolina		X					X
Ohio					X	X	
Oklahoma							
South Carolina							X
Tennessee							X
Texas							
Virginia		X					X
Washington		X	X	X			

Clearly, states are employing a number of options to address the issue of general education students who are not passing high school graduation exit exams. Recognition of the need to consider alternatives is an acknowledgement, on some level, that the underlying educational system is not perfect, that the students should not bear the full brunt of the failings of that educational system, and that not all students learn best or best demonstrate learning in the same manner. The existence of such alternatives is a tacit acknowledgement that it is problematic to withhold a high school diploma from a student who has, in good faith, completed 12 years of education, but who has failed to pass a required high school exit examination.

Increasingly, the question is not whether to offer flexibility in meeting high school graduation and graduation test requirements, but which types of flexibility to offer. Given the widely divergent approaches currently being taken by states across the nation, there is clearly no one right answer to the question of how we ensure that students meet increasingly higher standards of achievement, while also ensuring that we are giving due consideration to the varied learning styles of students. In this regard, it is perhaps best to begin with New Jersey's current alternate assessment for high school, the SRA, and to take steps to assure the validity of that assessment, while investigating other options for students who do not pass the HSPA.

### ***Recommendations***

As noted above, the department had previously proposed eliminating the SRA by 2010 (2009 for LAL, and 2010 for math). As an alternative to the SRA, the department proposed an appeals mechanism through which a student would be eligible to attain a diploma by a range of criteria, e.g., a minimum HSPA score, attendance, teacher evaluations, course grades, etc., along with increased opportunities to take the HSPA. Under this alternative approach, appeals would be reviewed by a department panel, with final appeal to the Commissioner. In our view, any appeals or waiver-like process will inevitably require new administrative burdens at the local and state levels, and such a process is inherently likely to tend toward a rubber stamping rather than a rigorous review. Certainly, to the degree that the appeals or waiver-eligibility process is performed at the local level it will lend itself to systemic inequalities or inconsistencies.

Furthermore, almost no informed person questions the quality of the SRA assessment tasks themselves: they are developed by the same state test vendor and test development process that produces the HSPA. In that sense the SRA is actually very strong; it is the credibility of the SRA scoring that is under suspicion. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that SRA PATs are performance assessments, and thus compatible with the department's move toward wider use of performance assessment in the state system overall.

While the State Board of Education previously approved a resolution to phase out the SRA, the Board indicated that it still wanted an alternate mechanism for satisfying the high school testing requirement; a quasi-judicial appeals mechanism was not desirable. If we agree that it is desirable to retain an alternate or "second chance" vehicle for meeting the HSPA requirement, then the issue is not about eliminating our current alternate vehicle but, rather, fixing it. We recommend the following steps for addressing concerns about the laxness of the state's current alternate mechanism for meeting the graduation test requirement:

- Rename the SRA to reflect more fairly its close relationship to the content standards on which the HSPA itself is based: e.g., Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA);
- Establish specific SRA (or alternate high school assessment) administration windows;
- Standardize the administration by having the test vendor assign and distribute the PATS to districts;
- Improve the validity of the scoring by either, organizing scoring of the PATs by New Jersey teachers in regional scoring centers, or by developing an audit process that assures the reliability of local scoring;

- Collect more data about student performance on the PATs;
- Report performance data pro-actively;
- Continue the availability of translated PATS in Spanish and two to three other languages, if possible;
- Require districts that submit a large number of SRA (or AHSA) profiles to develop a plan to decrease the number of students using it and report annually on their progress in reducing these numbers; and
- Continue remediation and retesting for those who “fail” the SRA/AHSA and HSPA.

The advantages of these recommendations are that they:

- Continue to require active efforts by students to demonstrate proficiency in the state Core Curriculum Content Standards;
- Preserve the HSPA “second chance” vehicle;
- Retain focus on school district responsibility to improve student learning; and
- Place minimal additional administrative burden on the department, depending on how the performance tasks are scored (i.e., vendor vs. NJ teachers).

There is every reason to believe that an alternate high school assessment vehicle embodying the characteristics identified above would provide a sound due process vehicle for students who fail to demonstrate proficiency on the HSPA. Indeed, it is likely that the state’s planned move to end-of-course testing for high school assessment will reduce the role of the SRA in certifying student readiness for graduation by creating a more direct and immediate link between instruction and assessment.

In short, the department believes that the best approach to resolving the SRA dilemma is to improve the rigor and overall measurement validity of the state's alternate vehicle for meeting the HSPA requirement so that its equivalence to the HSPA is strengthened and the credibility of diplomas achieved via the alternate path vindicated. Doing so would standardize scoring using regional scoring centers staffed by teachers and overseen by the state's testing vendor. It would mean greater control over the assigning of performance tasks and the conditions under which they are administered, and it would require the collection of more information about student performance on the alternate mechanism for satisfying the graduation test requirement. Taking these steps would keep the state in the mainstream of states across the nation applying "multiple measures" for certifying graduation eligibility, a principle that is similarly at the heart of national and industry standards for educational measurement (Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, p. 6). The figures cited in the introduction to this study suggest that a majority of the SRA student population is within reach of the HSPA performance standards and the curriculum standards from which the HSPA derives its meaning and purpose.

The state has a moral obligation to ensure that all students are prepared to face the challenges and to compete for the opportunities that await them after high school. At the same time, the state has a moral obligation to ensure that it does not, in pursuit of that goal, create an undue burden on, or impediment to, the individual student's passage to adult life. An enhanced alternate vehicle for meeting the graduation test requirement would give students a valid, credible means for bridging the gap between their performance on the HSPA and their true achievement level. The result of implementing the recommendations outlined above would be

clarifying, helping us to distinguish more confidently between those students who are prepared for new challenges and those students who still need substantive instructional intervention to prepare them for life after high school.

Finally, the department is currently engaged in a comprehensive high school redesign initiative that will transform secondary education in New Jersey, raising the rigor of both the curriculum standards and the statewide assessments that measure student achievement of those standards. New Jersey's anticipated participation in the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, a collaborative effort among education, business, community, and government leaders nationwide, embodies the underlying purpose of New Jersey's high school redesign initiative: to prepare our students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as workers, as leaders, as citizens. For high school assessment this means a transition from the current, integrated content model of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), with its mathematics, language arts literacy, and science components, to an end-of-course testing model. We might expect, for example, that rigorously scored performance tasks in biology or algebra would have considerably more validity, as alternate measures, than the SRA in its current form. Thus, the evolution of the HSPA into an end-of-course high school assessment model would, even in the absence of controversy, inevitably transform the SRA into a different, more demanding alternate high school assessment program.

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