


January 14, 2005

TO: Members, State Board of Education

FROM: William L. Librera, Ed.D. 
Commissioner

SUBJECT: Special Review Assessment (SRA)

Approximately eighteen months ago, the Department of Education issued and circulated a white paper on the Special Review Assessment (SRA). The white paper concluded that the Special Review Assessment had evolved from a means by which to serve a small number of students, who, because of special needs or extraordinary circumstance, could not pass the High School Proficiency Test into an alternate statewide test that enabled approximately 20 percent of the high school senior students each year to get diplomas, without having passed the regular state graduation test. This evolution went well beyond the original intent, and the present results suggest that approximately one-fifth of our students are unable to meet the state requirement for a diploma. This in my estimation makes a mockery of our standards and raises disturbing questions and conclusions about the ability of a large portion of our students to learn and to master important content. Eighteen months later, our conclusions are no different. The SRA hurts the very students we seek to help, and it must be replaced.

What needs to replace the SRA is a well-informed set of approaches that support student learning. It is evident that students require different approaches to the literacy and mathematics state tests. These approaches needs to be driven by best practices as many of our high schools have demonstrated important progress with students who have initial difficulty with the test. We also need more assertive measures and program responses in each district where students give clear indication on the eighth grade test, that unless their test performance changes, they will not pass the high school graduation test. To these ends we need to have more opportunities, not fewer for students to take the high school graduation test, so at minimum, that the test now given in March of the junior year needs to be administered at the very least in October of the junior year, and probably in May of the sophomore year. That is when Massachusetts administers its graduation test. Among other desirable results in that state, due to other approaches such as their aggressive appeal process, Massachusetts annually, without any safety valve test like the SRA,

has approximately 400 students who do not pass the test out of a population of approximately 80,000 students while we have approximately 20,000 out of 100,000 students. Among other issues, there is a strong rationale for giving students more opportunities to pass the test, and also for giving districts additional time to analyze and adjust to what data tells them needs to be altered so students are better prepared to be successful.

As you know, last summer we held Special Review Assessment programs for approximately 250 students in five sites. Results have been shared with you and in other public settings. Basically, we saw highly motivated students and very talented teachers work diligently for five weeks, and the results were most encouraging in Language Arts Literacy as more than 75 percent of the students passed the Language Arts Literacy Test. The results in Mathematics were not as encouraging as only 36 percent of the students passed the test. These data provide us with very important conclusions. One conclusion is that quality support and remediation in this state will have very positive results in improving Language Arts Literacy. We have seen the same conclusion in other aspects of state assessment, notably fourth grade results and eighth grade results overall, and also the dramatic improvement we have seen in some Abbott school districts where, in particular, three districts experienced 20 percent improvements in Language Arts Literacy.

The other conclusion that the data from the summer programs provide is that the manner in which Mathematics as it is taught and arranged with respect to content in this state does not make it possible for dramatic improvement. The absence of significant progress in this state from the fourth grade Mathematics Test to the eighth grade test unfortunately supports the same conclusion. In short, we need to approach changes in our SRA process differently in Language Arts Literacy than in Mathematics. In Mathematics, we need at the very least to make program changes that assure that students need to master algebraic concepts by the eighth grade in order to successfully meet our state standards.

Based on the data and information we have amassed in at least a three-year period, we believe the following should occur:

1. The High School Graduation Test should be moved as soon as possible to May of the tenth grade without changing the performance standards or the rigor of the test.
2. SRA for Literacy should no longer continue. The final administration of the SRA for Literacy would, therefore, occur in June, 2008 and that would be for the students that will be in the tenth grade in September, 2005.
3. SRA for Mathematics should continue for approximately two years. The final administration of the SRA for Mathematics would, therefore, occur in June, 2011 and that would be for the students who will be in the seventh grade in September, 2005. This would provide the state of New Jersey the time necessary to make changes in our Mathematics teaching as well as curriculum.
4. This summer, we should double the number of students, teachers, and sites so there will be ten sites where only Mathematics support and teaching will be provided. The teachers involved will be provided with support and strategies prior to the summer, through a group of educators, with expertise in mathematics so these

summer sessions can be laboratories to help us learn more about the changes we need to make in our teaching of Mathematics.

5. In the spring of 2005, we will ask the newly constituted Math Task Force to provide us with recommendations pertaining to the practices and policies which will best position the state to improve student math performance. The proposed timeline for the end of the Math SRA process allows for the results of program implementation to be reflected in student performance.
6. An appeal process similar to what is used in Massachusetts should be employed at the same time that the SRA is eliminated, so there are avenues available in those small number of cases where students are unable to pass the state test.

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c Senior Staff