



NJDOE News

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Department Forms Advisory Panel to Recommend Effective Ways to Assess Visual & Performing Arts, World Languages & Health and Physical Education

- Time Schedule for ESPA and GEPA Social Studies Test Modified -

In order to ensure that New Jersey's standards-based educational reforms remain strong, Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe has modified the schedule for implementation of the social studies component of the 4th and 8th grade statewide assessment program.

Hespe said the modifications will give school districts fair warning of the test to be used and to complete the alignment of their curriculum to meet the state's new, more rigorous standards. In place of the operational test, a statewide practice test will be administered during the 2000-2001 school year.

"Merely setting higher expectations will not guarantee higher student achievement," the commissioner said. "Higher achievement will occur in schools and classrooms throughout the state only if we successfully implement a process of curricular, instructional and learning changes informed by state assessments that will allow us to accomplish these standards-based goals.

"That process must be flexible to accommodate different or better strategies as we move forward. It must also give schools sufficient time and information so they can align their curriculum and develop innovative instructional techniques to reach our expectations. Having a process that acknowledges the concerns and heeds the advice of educators and parents will make our standards-based reform effort stronger and more accountable."

This past March marked the second administration of the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA). In two weeks, the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) will be administered for the second time. A social studies assessment was scheduled to be administered as part of the ESPA and GEPA during the 2000-2001 school year. The first operational administration of the social studies component will now occur during the 2001-2002 school year - in October 2001 for 5th graders and March 2002 for 8th graders. Districts will now have an additional year, beginning with the new school term in September, to evaluate their social studies curriculum prior to the introduction of the assessments.

However, during the 2000-2001 school year, for the ESPA, a half-length practice test will be developed and distributed to districts. The practice test will be accompanied by answer keys (for multiple-choice questions) and scoring rubrics (for open-ended questions) to allow classroom teachers to administer and score the test.

For GEPA, a statewide field test will be administered in March 2001 to support future test administrations. In September 2001, the department will produce and release a GEPA social studies practice test form for districts to use in preparing students for the operational test.

At the same time, the commissioner announced the formation of an Assessment Advisory Panel that will recommend the best way to test the performance of students in visual and performing arts, world languages, and health and physical education.

"New Jersey is a leader among the states in our commitment to standards and assessments in these three subject areas, and we should make sure that as we move forward we do so with an open mind," Hespe said.

"The department remains committed to assessing the performance of students in all core curriculum content areas because of their importance to a well-rounded, world-class education. But we need to be certain we are moving forward at the right time and in the best possible way. It has been four years since the new standards were adopted. The past years have seen much activity nationally in terms of developing options for testing of these more performance-based subject areas. The department will soon begin reviewing our standards, as we are required to by law. This is an appropriate time to take a fresh look at our assessment program as well."

Underscoring the department's commitment to phase in tests in all subject areas as soon as possible, Hespe said the advisory panel will have to report its recommendations to the department by the fall of 2000. The panel will

include stakeholder groups such as district administrators, school administrators, curriculum and testing coordinators, classroom teachers, educational organizations, and representatives of the higher education and business community.

"A number of legitimate questions have been raised regarding the most appropriate way to test these subject areas while assuring that the goals of the core curriculum content standards are met," Hesper said. "A performance test may be more appropriate than a pen-and-pencil test in some areas. The expertise of the members of the advisory panel will help the department determine how best to assess the visual and performing arts, health and physical education, and world languages.

"Our goal is to ensure that our assessments accurately reflect the achievement of our students. These refinements serve a dual purpose. They will give us the information we need to make an informed decision and give districts sufficient time to align their curriculum with the standards. The practice and field tests will help teachers and students alike prepare for the official assessment, which will be administered a year later."

The commissioner noted that these changes are also responsive to concerns being expressed by many education practitioners and groups.

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