

Raising Bar in N.J. Includes Closing Test Loophole

By Catherine Gewertz

New Jersey leaders have launched a campaign to build support for boosting high school rigor, but some are worried that the effort could produce a higher dropout rate as the state phases out an alternative exam used by nearly 15 percent of its students.

Part of the state's bid to raise expectations involves scrapping the Special Review Assessment, or SRA, which provides another route to a diploma for students who fail the regular state assessment.

Last year, education leaders at a high school summit convened by then-Gov. Richard J. Codey and Art F. Ryan, an influential New Jersey business executive, concluded that widespread use of the SRA "contributes to the misstatement" of New Jersey's graduation rate, reported by the state as 91 percent for the 2004-05 school year.

The alternative assessment "offers a loophole you can drive a truck through to earn a high school diploma," with "lots of latitude for almost anything to qualify as meeting that standard," said Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve Inc., a Washington-based nonprofit group formed by governors and business leaders to push for high academic standards.

State leaders announced in August that New Jersey had joined the American Diploma Project, which is overseen by Achieve and helps states develop more rigorous standards, assessments, curricula, and graduation requirements.

The decisions to phase out the alternative assessment and to join Achieve's project were driven by rising concern among business and education leaders that a New Jersey diploma doesn't ensure readiness for college or employment. They argued that high school curricula are too weak, that the regular High School Proficiency Assessment measures only 8th to 10th grade skills, and that the SRA permits students to graduate who haven't met even those standards.

The Garden State's challenges echo nationwide as the standards movement and the federal No Child Left Behind Act press states to move students over key academic thresholds—and grapple with creating a nexus of resources, skills, and support that enables the neediest students to clear them.

"There is a dual pressure," said Norm Fruchter, a former New Jersey educator who is now the director of the community-involvement program at the Annenberg Institute of School Reform, located at Brown University. "One is to ratchet up standards for graduation, and the second is what to do about the kids those standards will eliminate."

Acting Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy said she is troubled by "the idea that we have an alternative assessment that isn't a real assessment, and we give kids a piece of paper that doesn't mean anything."

The goal, she said, is "to ensure that these kids leave the pipeline prepared to participate in the 21st-century economy. ... You don't do kids a service when they leave and don't have the skills."

Causing 'Chaos'?

In August of last year, the state board of education voted to phase out the Special Review Assessment, which provides an alternative route for students who repeatedly fail the state's regular high school assessment to get a standard diploma.

The SRA is a series of open-ended mathematics or English questions administered by a teacher, one-on-one or in small groups, over several days and scored by the local district.

Originally intended for a minority of students—those deemed “test phobic” and some students in special education—the SRA is now used overwhelmingly by general education students. Of the class of 2005, 14.7 percent took that route to graduation. In some urban schools, three-quarters of students use the SRA to graduate.

New Jersey isn't the only state to allow students an alternative way of showing proficiency, but it permits a relatively large portion of its students to do so. Florida allows students to substitute a satisfactory score from a college-entry exam if they repeatedly fall below the state test's proficiency score, but only 0.5 percent of graduates use that method to get a diploma. In Massachusetts, which lets students show proficiency through their coursework if they repeatedly fall just below the state test cutoff, less than 1 percent of graduates take that route.

While even some of the SRA's staunchest defenders concede that it can be misused, they argue that it is a crucial option for students who need alternative ways to demonstrate proficiency.

James F. Simonelli, who is retiring in January after 12 years as the principal of Long Branch High School, which serves a high-poverty population in central New Jersey, said his school has minimized the use of the SRA by making coursework more rigorous and increasing support to help students catch up. But even then, he said, the disadvantages in an urban population, such as poor academic preparation and high mobility, make some kind of alternative assessment a necessity.

Properly administered, he said, the SRA is “just as rigorous” a test as the state's mainstream exit exam.

“The SRA allows us to have an option to get kids through that wouldn't get through,” Mr. Simonelli said. “If they do away with it, it's going to cause chaos.”

Stan Karp, a longtime Paterson high school teacher who is on a task force to redesign secondary education in New Jersey's poorest districts, said he fears that in the rush to raise standards, key supports for disadvantaged students—well-targeted academic interventions, strong teacher-student relationships, close school-to-home connections, and the training to make it all happen—will be overlooked.

“Raising expectations without dramatically changing the way urban high schools function will only push more young people out the door,” he said.

Wilhelmina Holder, the president of the Newark Secondary Parents Council, agrees that graduation standards must be improved. She said she was appalled to have to help a Newark graduate fill out an application to work at McDonald's. But problems with resources and operations still hobble urban districts, she said, and must be addressed if they are to succeed with higher standards.

She cited as an example the state-run district's difficulty hiring strong teachers. The state often doesn't approve the district's budget until August, she said, and by then the top teachers have been hired elsewhere. As students face a state exit exam in science next spring, Newark's high schools lack science teachers, she said.

“In our community, we call that a setup,” Ms. Holder said.

Rigor and Support

Ms. Davy, the acting state commissioner, said increased rigor will go hand in hand with student supports so teenagers are equipped to pass exit exams.

There still will be an alternative assessment—state law requires it—but state education leaders envision that it will be available to far fewer students. It also will likely include more state supervision than does the SRA. One type of alternative being considered is Massachusetts' approach, in which students who fail the state test repeatedly may use their grades to show proficiency.

Arnold G. Hyndman, the president of the New Jersey state board of education, said the panel will not permit the elimination of the SRA—currently slated to affect this year's 9th and 10th graders—unless a rigorous, viable alternative and appropriate supports are in place. But the board's resolution should signal “clear and early notice,” he said, that more students are going to have to meet higher standards.

New Jersey requires students to take four years of English, and three years each of science, social studies, and math, but requires no specific courses in those areas except U.S. history. Ms. Davy considers it highly likely that course and graduation requirements will have to be strengthened, and the assessments that measure them revised accordingly.

The “trickiest part” will be ensuring effective professional development that will make all the pieces work, she said, but she is optimistic.

“I firmly believe if we do this right and attend to the needs of all learners, large numbers of these students can achieve at the levels we expect of them,” she said.

Mr. Ryan, the chairman and chief executive officer of the Newark-based Prudential Financial Inc., and a leader of the business-education coalition backing high school reform, said employers acutely feel the need for improvement. He cited a state chamber of commerce survey in which 99 of 100 employers said that high school graduates lacked appropriate skills. Only one-quarter of New Jersey graduates go on to earn college degrees, he said, and half those in college need some form of remediation.

The coalition leading the improvement effort—which includes top education groups and has the blessing of Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine—has launched a campaign to raise public awareness and get feedback about the changes it envisions.

Members followed an August press conference with an eight-page insert in a monthly magazine in September, making the case for more rigor in schools. They will be distributing that insert and other information to educators at conferences this fall, and at a series of meetings this month. Similar sessions will be held for the public in December.

Meanwhile, the state is working on revising its academic standards to reflect the skills and knowledge business and higher education leaders say are critical. It’s a long process, and one likely to produce more statewide academic requirements—a marked change for districts accustomed to local control.

“It is making a shift from letting schools and students choose courses to being prescriptive on a continuum,” said Linda Morse, the acting director of the state education department’s office of academic and professional standards. “It opens up a broader discussion not just in New Jersey, but everywhere, about how specific we need to be.”



CAMPAIGN: A business-education coalition in New Jersey that is backing the state's efforts to raise standards for high school graduation is taking its case to the public with these ads.

—Courtesy of the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee