



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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April 10, 2008

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons
High School Principals

FROM: Jay Doolan, Ed.D., Assistant Commissioner
Division of Educational Standards and Programs

SUBJECT: Special Review Assessment (SRA)

As you know, the Department of Education and the State Board of Education have been considering the future of the Special Review Assessment (SRA), the state's alternate process for meeting the graduation requirement that all students pass the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) in order to attain a diploma.

In August 2005, the State Board of Education adopted a resolution endorsing the elimination of the SRA, while charging the department to identify an alternate or "second chance" mechanism for students who fail the HSPA. Over the past several months, the department made a series of presentations to the State Board in which we asked the board to consider a new approach.

Specifically, we proposed retaining and improving this alternate vehicle for demonstrating proficiency on the *Core Curriculum Content Standards (CCCS)*. The improvements we recommend would address the issues that have given rise to criticism of the SRA, while assuring that high school students have a reasonable "second chance" vehicle for demonstrating proficiency in the CCCS for mathematics and language arts literacy. These steps include the following:

- Establish specific administration windows for the alternate high school assessment;
- Standardize its 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 track SRA performance information, using the NJ SMART student data warehouse where appropriate;

- 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 to report annually their progress in reducing this level of dependence;
- Convene an advisory committee of stakeholders, field educators, and policy makers to establish sound, credible administrative protocols;
- 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); and
- Research the impact of alternative high school testing on student outcomes, including post-secondary endeavors.

Over the past several months, the board heard testimony from a wide range of stakeholders regarding this topic. I am pleased to report that on March 19, 2008 the State Board of Education formally accepted our recommendation, by unanimous resolution. We believe that most New Jersey districts will be pleased by their action as well. At this time, I wish to direct your attention to the key documents pertaining to the SRA decision, including the text of the resolution itself. I also wish to emphasize the State Board's concern that the department aggressively follow-up on the underlying student achievement issues embodied by the SRA debate.

First, I would urge you to review these key SRA documents and materials at <http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/>. These include:

- *Standards and Expectations: Alternative Approaches to Meeting New Jersey's High School Assessment Requirements*, a policy discussion paper first presented to the State Board at their January 9, 2008 meeting;
- *SRA Graduation Rate – 25 percent or Higher*: an Excel spreadsheet that identifies, on the basis of data reported in the 2007 School Report Card, New Jersey high schools from which 25 percent or more of their graduating seniors used the SRA in whole or in part to satisfy their HSPA requirements;
- *SRA Report* – a narrative supplement to the SRA Graduation Rate spreadsheet;
- *October 2007 HSPA Statewide Summary of Performance, Grade 12* – this summary indicates the passing rates for HSPA re-testers on the October 2007 HSPA administration, for total students and major subgroups;
- *HSPA 2007 Math Performance*: an Excel graph showing total performance statewide compared to Abbott schools only;
- *Adoption Resolution* (March 19, 2008, as amended).

Second, I wish to emphasize that in choosing to retain and improve the SRA, the department is not simply attempting to “fix” a perceived problem in our statewide testing system. Rather, the State Board's resolution, and the comments of State Board members prior to their vote, make clear that the SRA is a student achievement issue, and that the improvement of the SRA must be part of a larger effort to assure challenging curriculum, effective instruction, and success for all students. In this regard, the State Board members took particular note of the disproportionate numbers of SRA profiles in mathematics that are submitted each year. Thus, while the Board's approval of the resolution may settle the

policy debate about the future of the SRA, it also constitutes a challenge to New Jersey educators, stakeholders, and policy makers to address the achievement gaps embodied by the SRA data, particularly those in mathematics. In this regard, please note that the State Board resolution asks that the department require districts in which ten percent or more of graduating seniors satisfy the HSPA test requirement through the SRA to submit a plan for increasing the percentage of students meeting that requirement by passing the HSPA. The department is making this requirement operative with the conclusion of the 2007-2008 school year; thus, districts in which ten percent or more of graduating students meet their high school graduation requirement through the SRA must submit to the department by November 17, 2008, and each year thereafter, as appropriate, an analysis of students who graduated by means of the SRA in the preceding school year. This analysis should include attention to courses taken, attendance records, HSPA and prior assessment data, and whether the affected SRA students were taught by appropriately certified staff. The analysis should include a plan for increasing the percentage of students who satisfy the high school graduation test requirement by passing the HSPA.

Students who fail to demonstrate proficiency on the March 2008 HSPA will participate in the current SRA process during 2008-2009; the planned enhancements to this alternate high school assessment process will take effect with the graduating class of 2010. The department will provide further guidance and training on these changes in the coming months; however, please note that students will retain, without interruption, an alternate means for satisfying their graduation test requirement. We are committed to the continuing involvement of New Jersey teachers in this alternate process, particularly in the scoring of student performance tasks.

If you have questions regarding this proposal or these documents, please contact Timothy Peters, director, Office of State Assessments, at timothy.peters@doe.state.nj.us, or by telephone at (609) 984-6311.

JD/TP/memo:sra

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