

State revising easier graduation path

Alternative Exam to Be Improved, Not Shelved

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The state's plan to eliminate an alternative high school graduation exam is incomplete, and officials haven't determined whether incoming freshmen will be allowed to take it, they said Wednesday.

The controversial Special Review Assessment, or SRA, has been criticized as an easy path to a diploma for students who flunk the standard exit exam. About 12 percent of New Jersey graduates flunked the exit exam but earned diplomas anyway after passing the SRA in 2005-06.

New Jersey had planned to end the SRA, beginning with last year's freshmen class. But to do so, officials must come up with an alternative to the alternative.

Rather than abandoning the test completely, they are considering fine-tuning the SRA to minimize flaws, including standardizing test dates and no longer allowing schools to score their own students' exams.

But that work isn't complete, and no decisions have been made about this year's freshmen.

"We agree that for some students an alternate assessment -- one that measures the same skills in a different way -- is appropriate," Education Department spokesman Jon Zlock said Wednesday.

In a research report released Wednesday, a major student advocacy group called on the state to improve, but not eliminate, the SRA. Eliminating the test would raise dropout rates and remove a crucial lifeline for students with limited proficiency in English, the report by the Education Law Center in Newark said.

"Professional opinion nationally recognizes that no single examination should be sufficient to deny a student a diploma," the center wrote, noting that 25 states require an exit exam to graduate from high school and 17 offer some sort of alternative test.

Advocates for English-language learners also have expressed support for the SRA. While the High School Proficiency Assessment, or HSPA, the standard statewide exit exam, is given only in English, the SRA is also available in Spanish, Portuguese and Gujarati.

"For English-language learners, we need some type of alternative assessment," said Elizabeth Franks, president of a statewide organization of bilingual and ESL teachers. "They need to be able to demonstrate their knowledge."

Researchers found about 40 percent of SRA graduates in 2005-06 were from low-income school districts. But wealthy districts also included SRA graduates: 3 percent of students in affluent districts and 8 percent in middle-income districts graduated via the SRA.

They also suggested that test-taking patterns reveal a crisis in high school math instruction throughout the state: Nearly twice as many students relied on the SRA after failing the math section of the standard exam compared with those who used the SRA after failing the Language Arts section.

New Jersey is actively working to improve high school math and science instruction through its High School Redesign project. A new end-of-year Biology test will debut this spring. Volunteer districts also will give a sample end-of-year Algebra I test, which may also become a graduation requirement.

The SRA was designed for the atypical student, one with severe test anxiety or limited proficiency in English. It is not timed, and it is shorter and generally considered to be easier than the standard HSPA.

But "districts were inappropriately using it as a path to a high school diploma for too many students," said Zlock, of the Education Department.

A Record analysis found 19 New Jersey high schools where more than half of students graduated via the SRA last year. The schools were in Newark, Jersey City, Camden, Trenton, East Orange, Irvington and Pleasantville.

Locally, Paterson's two general-education high schools had the highest SRA rates: 38 percent at Eastside and 37 percent at John F. Kennedy. Those numbers have fallen in recent years, said Schools Superintendent Michael Glascoe.

"You can't eliminate it altogether," he said. "The SRA helps the subgroups we have in our district, such as Limited English Proficiency students. ... They would suffer tremendously by eliminating it. I don't think that's a good idea."

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