

Frequently Asked Questions about the SRA

This edited version of questions and answers about the SRA is taken from the recent report: *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* The full report is available [here](http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/elcnews_080822_SRAPressRelease.htm).
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What is the Special Review Assessment or SRA?

The SRA is a way for students who have not passed all sections of the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) to meet New Jersey's high school graduation requirements. It's a series of performance assessment tasks (PATs) designed by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) that gives students a chance to show what they know in familiar school settings with flexible time limits.

How does the SRA differ from the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA)?

The HSPA is a traditional paper and pencil standardized exam that uses multiple-choice questions, open-ended, short-answer questions and a writing sample to assess student skills in math and language arts. It's given in a formal testing environment under timed, secure conditions on dates specified by the state. The HSPA is created and scored at the state level by a commercial vendor hired by the New Jersey Department of Education.

Typically, students take the SRA after they have failed to pass one or more sections of the HSPA several times. Students may be given multiple opportunities to complete the SRA performance tasks which are scored by local educators using guidelines provided by the state. The SRA is also available in Spanish, Portuguese and Gujarati, while the HSPA is given only in English.

To earn a diploma, both HSPA and SRA students must also accumulate at least 110 credits, pass all core courses required for graduation, and meet other local requirements.

How does the content of the SRA compare to the content of the HSPA?

The SRA and the HSPA are designed to cover the same material and be about the same level of difficulty. As Education Commissioner Lucille Davy has said, "the SRA was never intended to be used as a lower standard, but rather a different means of measuring the same standard." However, the lack of consistency in how the SRA is given and scored across different districts has led some to question the SRA's credibility and reliability.

Why is there an alternative high school graduation test?

The Center on Education Policy reports that of the 25 states that currently require an exit test for high school graduation, 17 provide some sort of alternative to the traditional test. The SRA is one such alternative. Just as students learn in different ways, students may demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways. Educators and experts in educational measurement agree that no single "high-stakes" test should be used to make important decisions about a student's future.

Who is eligible to take the SRA?

Since 1991, the SRA has been available to all students who do not successfully pass one or more portions of the HSPA. The number of students using SRA has risen steadily over the years, including significant increases between 2002 and 2003 when the state replaced the High School Proficiency Test with the more challenging High School Proficiency Assessment. In 2006, the state reported that over 13,000 New Jersey graduates received their high school diplomas by using the SRA to meet state standards. (NJDOE SRA 2006 Annual Survey. *Note: State data on the number of SRA graduates varies according to the source used. For example, New Jersey School Report Card data indicate a total of just*

over 11,000 SRA graduates.)

What do we know about SRA students?

In 2006, about 12 percent of all New Jersey graduates and about one-third of all graduates in the urban Abbott districts used SRA to meet state graduation requirements. [Abbott districts are the 31 poorest urban districts in New Jersey that receive resources, programs and services under a series of New Jersey Supreme Court rulings known as *Abbott v. Burke*.]

Unfortunately, there is little information available about the educational experience or the post-school outcomes of SRA students. So it is difficult to know whether SRA students have had courses that properly prepared them to meet HSPA requirements or how the post-school life outcomes of SRA graduates compares with either dropouts or HSPA graduates in terms of college participation, employment, health, and criminal justice encounters, etc.

If the SRA and HSPA are of comparable difficulty, why do so many students fail one, (HSPA) but pass the other (SRA)?

This is another question that has not been adequately studied, but there are several possible explanations, both positive and negative:

On the one hand...

- > Inconsistency and the lack of outside review in scoring the SRA may make it easier to pass
- > Students may perform below potential on HSPA because they know the SRA alternative exists; or
- > Given the particularly high failure rate on the mathematics portion of the HSPA, many believe that SRA students have had inadequate access to rigorous mathematics curricula and/or qualified mathematics educators.

On the other hand, the SRA program may be producing positive results by:

- > Providing ongoing, in-school support and supplemental instruction to SRA students;
- > Providing additional time to complete PATs;
- > Providing more flexible opportunities for students with attendance issues;
- > Providing a less intimidating, more supportive environment than formal, standardized testing situations which often include:
 - The use of “distracters” among possible responses
 - Complex instructions which may reduce test performance, and
 - Cultural- or class-based references in test material that may reflect unfamiliar life experiences or background knowledge.

What would be the impact of eliminating SRA? Who would be most affected?

Available research and the experience of other states indicate that eliminating the SRA would significantly reduce high school graduation rates and increase the number of dropouts, particularly among students in low-income districts, as well as African American, Latino and immigrant youth. This would almost certainly affect New Jersey’s long-standing record of having one of the nation’s best overall graduation rates and one of the best graduation rates for students of color. The following student groups would be most vulnerable to negative consequences:

- > English Language Learners;
- > males more than females;
- > students who have had limited opportunities to learn in terms of course work and/or access to qualified math educators;

- > students who entered the New Jersey public schools during their secondary years;
- > students with highly mobile families;
- > immigrant youth;
- > students who have difficulties with timed tests; and
- > students with disabilities, especially undiagnosed disabilities.

What are some arguments in favor of retaining SRA?

Supporters of the SRA note that in recent years, between 11,000 and 15,000 New Jersey students have earned high school diplomas annually through the SRA. They argue that it is in the best interests of these students, their communities, and the state to keep them in school, on track to graduate, and eligible to pursue college or other post-secondary options.

Eliminating the SRA would raise dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and disproportionately affect students of color. This would, almost by definition, constitute bad public policy and would not help improve schools. If there are problems with the consistency and reliability of the SRA process, these problems should be fixed without eliminating it.

What are some arguments in favor of eliminating SRA?

Critics argue that the SRA is a form of low expectations that allows students to get a diploma without meeting the high standards needed for success in college and careers. Some also contend that the SRA scoring process is too inconsistent and too poorly monitored to be a reliable standard for state graduation requirements. They believe that eliminating the SRA would be a step toward raising expectations and standards for all New Jersey students.

What alternatives are there to eliminating SRA?

In May 2007 the NJDOE presented several options to the New Jersey State Board of Education for improving the reliability of the SRA process. These options included moving the scoring of SRA portfolios away from schools and districts, where they may evaluate their own students, to regional centers where educators would score SRA portfolios on a blind basis. Districts and schools with a high number of SRA students would also be required to develop plans to reduce those numbers.

Other alternatives include putting HSPA scores on high school transcripts without using those scores to deny diplomas to students who successfully meet other graduation requirements; using multiple measures, including standardized tests, course grades, and attendance requirements, to make graduation decisions without any using any single measure to determine the decision; and developing more “performance assessment” options for that are open to all students, not just those who fail parts of the exit exam. (for example, conducting research projects, writing research papers, and giving oral presentations in place of standardized multiple-choice tests.)

What is the timeline for revising or replacing the SRA?

In August 2005, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted a resolution that proposed phasing out the SRA beginning with the freshman class that entered in September 2006 for language arts and the entering freshman class in September 2007 for math. But the State Board postponed final action on this timeline and until the Department of Education developed a replacement for the SRA. With the original deadline for eliminating SRA approaching, the State Board must adopt a new process or revise the timeline soon.