

NJ Coalition Says Urban Schools Need Help to Meet Tougher Rules for Getting High School Diplomas

By Leslie Brody
The Record
January 20, 2010

A Paterson-based coalition charges that urban high schools don't have the space, supplies, staff or academic support students will need to get diplomas under the state's new requirements, a new report says.

The New Jersey Education Organizing Collaborative argued in a report Tuesday that boosting graduation requirements without giving city schools more resources will increase the "disastrously high" dropout rate.

It surveyed 17 of the 25 high schools in Paterson, Jersey City, Newark and Elizabeth and found:

- * Many science labs lacked equipment to teach biology, even though ninth-graders will face end-of-course exams this spring for the first time, and passing is a must for graduation.
- * Administrators at Kennedy High School in Paterson, among others, said there weren't enough qualified science teachers, resulting in overly large science classes.
- * Summer school courses for floundering students are limited, and after-school tutoring is not consistently available.

The state education department says it is phasing in tougher requirements for graduation — including passing an end-of-course algebra test — to bolster the value of a New Jersey diploma and prepare students for an increasingly competitive, high-tech world.

The New Jersey Education Collaborative argues these steps will widen the achievement gap if urban schools aren't given more help. In Eastside High School in Paterson, for example, only 32 percent of juniors passed the statewide language arts test last spring and only 20 percent passed in math.

"We must break the familiar cycle of 'here today, gone tomorrow' reform initiatives that begin with grand promises, but in the end, leave behind only more standards, more tests and more of the same real gaps in achievement and opportunity," says the report. The collaborative's members include the grass-roots Paterson Education Fund, advocates in other cities, and the Education Law Center, which has long fought for equity for poor and minority students.

Rosie Grant, program director at the Paterson Education Fund, said the group recognizes current budget constraints.

"It's not really about money," she said. "We're looking for regulations to help schools think about how they get to where they need to be. We're asking the state to have schools do an audit and prepare a plan for how they're going to meet the high school redesign."

"This is supposed to improve our high schools," she added. "We don't want it to be a reason for more kids to fail or drop out."

The collaborative plans a "Graduation for All" rally at the statehouse in Trenton at 11 a.m. and will send representatives to the meeting of the state Board of Education today.