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## New Jersey Graduation for All: What Will It Take A Report by NJEOC January 2010

New Jersey's adoption of tougher high school graduation requirements last June presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is to dramatically increase the number of students leaving high school with the preparation they need to succeed in college and careers. The challenge is to find ways to reach the new standards without reducing graduation rates or increasing dropouts in a state with over 100,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 already out of work and not in school.

The central issue is how to create the capacity to deliver high academic standards to all students, especially for schools and students that have not been meeting current standards. As this report shows, many schools are not ready. Unless the new graduation standards are linked to a credible plan to reach them, our schools, our state and our young people will pay a high price we cannot afford in lost earnings, lost tax revenue and lost personal and social potential.

Rising to the challenge will require resources and effective reform, not simply State mandates. Over many years, NJ's system of standards and tests has failed to close gaps in secondary achievement and outcomes. In 2007-08, the most recent data available, 74% of general education students in urban districts passed the language arts HSPA, and only 56% passed math, compared to rates of 95% and 89% in other suburban NJ districts. Urban graduation rates and college participation levels are well below NJ averages. Real dropout rates are disastrously high.

Without urgent action, the new standards will only widen these gaps. Next year, NJDOE plans to implement two new, high stakes graduation exams in Biology and Algebra. Access to the Special Review Assessment, now used by nearly one of every three urban graduates to earn a diploma, is being reduced. Implementing new graduation exams without assessing the capacity of schools to prepare students for them is a formula for failure. 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.

When NJDOE first presented the new graduation standards to the State Board of Education it promised to systematically gather information on the reforms, resources, facilities and staff needed to reach them

*NJEOC is a coalition of parents, community members, and advocates from Newark, Jersey City and Paterson. We believe that all children, regardless of where they live, deserve a quality education that is built on academic excellence and that prepares them for life and work. We also believe that children in schools and communities negatively impacted by social and economic inequalities should be guaranteed resources that will ensure high achievement and broaden available opportunities for their adult lives after high school. Through systematic grassroots organizing and community leadership development in Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, Asbury Park and Elizabeth, NJEOC is working to engage community voices in school reform and public education policy change.*

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(Transforming Secondary Education in New Jersey, presentation to the NJ State Board of Education, September 17, 2008). Unfortunately it has not followed through on this commitment.

In the absence of the necessary information and data, the New Jersey Education Organizing Collaborative (NJEOC) launched the NJ Graduation for All campaign. The campaign mobilized parents and community advocates in four key cities (Paterson, Newark, Elizabeth, and Jersey City) to begin to investigate the gaps that must be closed between the new graduation standards and the plans to reach them. Interviews were conducted with administrators in 17 of the 25 high schools in these cities. This report summarizes those efforts.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

- **Many schools will struggle under the new science requirements because lab space, supplies, equipment and qualified staff are lacking.**
- **Students need stronger supports to contend with higher expectations. The uneven and confusing system of support for failing or struggling students needs to be improved if students are expected to achieve.**
- **Schools need help connecting with parents and community members so they can become effective partners in advancing school reform.**

### **Not Enough Space, Supplies or Equipment for Science Labs**

A major impediment to the successful implementation of the new science curriculum is the lack of space, supplies and equipment needed to effectively run science labs. Out of the 17 schools where interviews were conducted, 13 reported that lab space was a problem, either because they could not adequately meet current needs for Biology, or because they would not be able to accommodate students when additional lab sciences are required in coming years.

All but one of the administrators interviewed reported that the labs that did exist were not state-of-the-art; some were not even functional. A common sentiment expressed was that while some schools had physical space dedicated to science labs, they were not furnished with the necessary equipment and supplies. When asked to rate how well equipped school science labs are on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent), of the 17 schools, 10 rated their school as 2 or less. Three schools serving over 2,300 students – Liberty, Lincoln and Snyder in Jersey City, – rated their labs as “very poor”. Even some newly built high schools, such as International High School in Paterson and Science Park in Newark, do not have labs operating at capacity because of a lack of equipment. Administrators expressed concern over budgetary issues, acknowledging that they did not have enough money to purchase needed equipment or supplies (Kennedy HS in Paterson) and that budget cuts would preclude them from replacing existing supplies in the future (Central HS in Newark). Those interviewed at Kennedy,

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Snyder, Weequahic, and Central also expressed concern over staffing, reporting that they did not have enough highly qualified teachers for science classes, resulting in large class sizes.

## Uneven Support for Struggling Students

Plans to implement high-stakes graduation exams will negatively affect many urban students if they do not receive the support needed to meet these new requirements. We know that many students in urban schools are underperforming on current assessments, so raising the bar without adequate supports in place could have disastrous effects. Schools need to ensure that students who struggle with coursework have the opportunity to seek help and to improve. Our survey of administrators showed that these supports are uneven across schools.

Although 10 of the 17 schools surveyed offer summer school for students who do not pass all of their courses, the offerings are limited. In some schools certain courses are excluded from summer school, in other schools some grade levels are excluded from participating. Some schools require students to repeat failed courses during the regular school year, requiring them to double up with heavy course loads. Eight schools offer after-school tutoring, but that is also uneven. One administrator at Central High School in Newark reported that tutoring is lacking in subject areas other than English and Algebra I because of funding constraints.

### Schools Interviewed

**Elizabeth:** Edison House

**Jersey City:** Dickinson, Ferris, Liberty, Lincoln, McNair, Snyder

**Newark:** Academy of Vocational Careers, American History, Barringer, Central, Science Park, Weequahic, West Side

**Paterson:** John F. Kennedy, International, Eastside

At all 17 schools in the four districts, there does not seem to be any systematic approach to ensuring that all students who fail essential courses receive appropriate interventions.

## Parent and Community Involvement Seriously Lacking

The practice of involving parents and the community as partners in the process of improving high schools is widely recognized in the literature on school reform as a very important element for success, particularly in low-income communities. In the NJ School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) regulations, there is a specific mandate that all secondary school districts “shall have a school level planning team to guide the development and implementation of the secondary education reforms,” and the participation of parents and community representatives in those teams is highly recommended.

We found that in almost all of the 17 schools there was either a specialized planning team for high school redesign or a pre-existing School Leadership Council with a planning function. While most had some type of regular meeting schedule, several only met when the principal convened the group. In general, these planning teams were dominated by the principal, other administrators and teachers. We found that only 30 parents were reported as regular members of these teams – on average less than two parents per school. Four schools reported no parental involvement at all. In some cases, the parent was also a paid staff person (Parent Liaison). One administrator acknowledged that the scheduling of the meetings might present an obstacle for parent and community involvement.

The token presence of parents in many schools, their absence in some, and the near total absence of community representatives on the secondary reform planning teams is a glaring problem. Without far

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more significant recruitment, training and involvement of parents, struggling urban high schools have little hope of fostering support for high school reform among families and community members.

### **Personalized Learning Environments – Not Fully Implemented**

A key secondary education initiative under SFRA regulations requires secondary school districts to create personalized learning environments that strengthen relationships among students, teachers, staff members, families and the larger community. Most of the high schools we surveyed have a personalized learning model established, but they are often not reaching the full student body. Due to facility, scheduling and staffing challenges, high schools are unable to have a strong, consistent program for all students.

The personalized learning communities in Newark, Paterson, Jersey City and Elizabeth high schools include a mix of small learning communities, academies, and career/college prep and mentor programs. Some administrators report using a number of different programs within one school. However, only three schools reported full participation of all students, and three schools reported that they had no personalized learning plan in place at all. Six schools noted that they required more staff and more resources to implement or improve their plans.

For personalized learning environments to be effective, they need to reach all students. Because of a lack of staffing and resources, a significant number of students are being denied a critical element of a successful high school experience.

### **Schools Need Help to Succeed**

Our interviews with administrators in four of New Jersey's largest and most challenging school districts demonstrate that schools need more support in order to comply with and succeed under the adopted secondary school reforms. The conditions reported in these 17 schools have direct consequences for over 18,000 New Jersey high school students, and we expect many other urban schools are facing similar issues. Administrators report insufficient resources, staff and infrastructure to implement the new graduation requirements. The inability to prepare students for tougher graduation standards will have dire consequences for students, schools, the community and the state.

We are calling on NJDOE to follow through with the promise to systematically gather information on the reforms, resources, facilities and staff needed to successfully implement the department's high school redesign plan. Following through on this commitment is the first step to ensuring that all students in the state have the opportunity to succeed under higher graduation standards.

NJEOC calls for:

- **A public implementation plan for all high school redesign initiatives.** Before tougher graduation standards and tests are imposed on students, there must be a credible plan to reach them. Each district should develop a "redesign readiness plan" outlining the resources, staff, facilities, and reforms needed to prepare all students for college and/or careers. The NJ Secondary Education Redesign Review Act (A3692/S2574) provides one way to develop such plans.

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- **An urban high school reform process that includes parents, families and students, as well as educators.** All young people deserve good choices for their educational future, but only some have them. Students in large, low-performing high schools especially need better options and more support. Each district and school should have broad-based reform committees (required by the NJ School Funding and Reform Act\*) to shape and support reform plans. [*\*N.J.A.C.6:13-2.2 Secondary education initiatives*]
- **Real Assessment Reform.** Test scores are being used to punish schools and students without holding the State and districts accountable for the changes needed to improve academic performance and close gaps in achievement and opportunity. Instead of more high stakes graduation tests that increase dropout rates, students should have multiple ways to show what they have learned and multiple pathways to graduation. Any new end-of-course exams should be limited to 20% of course grades, instead of becoming a “make or break” hurdle for graduation.