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**Statement to New Jersey State Board of Education 1/9/08**

**Re Intent to Amend the Standards and Assessment for Student Achievement Code**

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the proposal to revise the Special Review Assessment and move to a redesigned Alternative High School Assessment process as one way for New Jersey students to satisfy State graduation requirements. My name is Stan Karp. I am here representing the Education Law Center (ELC) and also the group of educators, community members, district data experts, and university researchers that ELC first convened in the fall of 2006 to prepare the report, which I believe all Board members have received, entitled *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?*

We think the resolution presented to the State Board today and the recommendations in the Department's paper, "Standards and Expectations: Alternative Approaches to Meeting New Jersey's High School Assessment Requirements," are positive steps in the right direction. We commend the Department for its constructive response to concerns that have been raised over the past year by educators, parents, and advocates about plans to eliminate the SRA.

What happens with the SRA will have practical consequences for thousands of NJ students. Last year some 13,500 students earned their high school diplomas through the SRA: 12% of all NJ graduates, 1 of every 3 graduates in the urban Abbott districts. With nearly 60% of all SRA students from suburban and other districts, this is clearly a statewide issue. As we examined in detail in our report, changes in the SRA process could have a significant impact on both high school graduation rates and dropout

rates. Our research also indicates that changes in the process are most likely to impact specific student groups, those disproportionately represented in the SRA student population. These groups include:

- English Language Learners;
- males more than females;
- students who have had limited opportunities to learn in terms of course work 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.

Moreover, as both the proposed resolution and the Department paper on “Standards and Expectations” acknowledges, the assessment issues raised by the SRA are part of a larger debate about secondary reform and educational opportunity in our middle and high schools. While our comments today focus mainly on the proposed resolution and changes in the SRA, we will briefly mention some concerns about these larger secondary reform implications, and look forward to a more complete discussion of the “wider statewide initiative” on secondary education mentioned in the proposed resolution at future sessions.

**As to the specifics of the proposed recommendations:**

ELC and the SRA Research group generally support the proposed resolution. We think it is a step in the right direction as well as sound educational practice to develop multiple ways to reliably assess student performance and to provide credible alternatives to high stakes standardized tests. Retaining a performance-based alternative assessment to the standardized High School Proficiency Assessment will keep NJ in the mainstream of states that use multiple measures to determine who has satisfied state graduation rates. We also believe it is a positive move away from what, at times, has been a

divisive and punitive discussion about eliminating the SRA, to a more constructive and collaborative effort to develop assessment practices that promote multiple pathways to higher student achievement, support better professional practice, and generate more effective teaching and learning in classrooms.

### **Timeline**

We also think the timeline proposed in the new resolution is an appropriate one. The delay of several years in reforming or replacing the SRA since the Board's 2005 resolution has led to considerable uncertainty about its current status. This fall both freshmen and sophomore students and their teachers returned to school uncertain about the availability of the SRA option as they approached graduation. Schools and districts have faced similar uncertainty about sustaining their supplemental instruction programs for potential SRA students (some of which involve early identification of students in 9th and 10th grades). Schools and Districts also will need lead time to prepare for a new, as yet not fully defined, alternative process, as assessment calendars, instructional programs, and current testing practices will need to be reviewed and changed.

For these reasons, we support the proposed timeline that would leave the existing SRA in place for the 2008-2009 school year and allow the Commissioner and the Department to develop a well-planned transition to a new Alternative High School Assessment process for the 2009-2010 school year. This would allow sufficient time to engage educators, parents, district officials and community stakeholders in developing the guidelines for the administration and scoring of this new assessment. It would also give schools and districts time to plan to implement these changes effectively and to educate students, parents, and communities about their importance.

Some proposed changes in the scoring and administration of the new alternative assessment could have a significant impact on the access students will have to the new AHSA and on the numbers of students

who successfully complete the process. It is important that these changes be based on a solid understanding of existing practices, particularly in districts with relatively high numbers of SRA students, and on careful consideration of how a new process can improve the reliability and transparency of a new assessment without disrupting the instructional support systems now in place, or imposing unreasonable reporting and monitoring requirements beyond those needed to improve the credibility of the new system. This is another reason we support a timeline and a process that allows for the direct involvement of school-based educators, district officials, parents and others in developing the calendar and guidelines for the new assessment.

### **Process going forward**

In general, we believe the direct participation of school-based educators in implementing high quality assessment practices is critical to the success of such practices. We also believe that parents and other advocates need to be involved to make sure the assessment system is transparent, reliable, serves the educational needs of students and families, and does not function as an institutionalized system of low expectations *or* unfairly penalize students for unequal opportunities over which they have little control. For these reasons, while we support the proposed resolution which empowers the Commissioner to proceed with the transition from SRA to ASHA, we would also like to see the Board and the Commissioner publicly affirm their commitment to an inclusive, transparent process to develop and vet the specific guidelines for this transition, either through an expanded SRA Advisory Committee or some other appropriate body.

### **Research agenda & data issues**

We also hope the Board will direct the Commissioner and the Department to develop a research agenda to track these proposed changes that goes further than the one outlined in the Department's "Standards & Expectations" paper. As we noted in our own research report last year, despite much talk

of “data-driven” reform, information on the educational experience and post-school outcomes of SRA students, or for that matter, HSPA students, is sparse. Up to now, the state has had two somewhat conflicting reporting streams on SRA participation, one from the school report cards and one from the Department’s County offices. SRA information is not yet included as part of the NJ Smart database system.

In order to track the implications of changes in the assessment system, and to make the consequences of these changes visible for all, we believe it is essential to develop data and reporting systems that allow us to monitor the following:

- Changes in the numbers of students participating in the SRA/AHSA process
- The number of students who participate, but do not successfully complete the SRA/AHSA process
- The eventual outcomes for students who do not successfully complete SRA/ASHA
- The course-taking patterns for SRA/ASHA students (data that has been required by regulation in the Abbott districts since 2004, but which the Department has not gathered.) including students’ access to rigorous coursework and highly qualified educators in core areas (e.g. mathematics, history, language arts, science)
- Post-secondary student outcomes — for SRA graduates, HSPA graduates, and dropouts — in key categories including income/employment levels, higher education, health and criminal justice.
- Disaggregation of all the above data by race, language, gender, and ethnicity and other appropriate demographic categories.

As noted in our earlier report, “Critics of the SRA have argued that the HSPA is a more valid standard

with stronger predictive validity in terms of college-going and economic success. Yet, in the absence of a longitudinal student database that can track student progress through graduation and beyond, these contentions are without empirical substantiation. For graduation policy to be fully data driven, it is critical that New Jersey establish a database that can be used to document the post-secondary consequences of the HSPA diploma, the SRA diploma and dropping out.”

We also recommend that all of the above-mentioned data be widely available to the public so that educational policy making in the state of New Jersey can truly be data-driven, transparent, and democratically engaged by multiple constituencies.

### **Secondary Reform context**

Finally, as noted, this discussion of proposed changes in the state’s assessment system and graduation policy is really a subset of a larger discussion about secondary reform of our state’s middle and high schools. Both the resolution and the “Standards & Expectations” paper reference just a few pieces of this debate, primarily the desire to move toward “more demanding course requirements which will, in turn, be assessed through more demanding testing instruments.” The Department’s paper also projects a continuing move from a system of high stakes graduation tests in language arts, mathematics and science, to a series of end-of-course exams tied to increased graduation course requirements.

There is still much to be determined about these exams, including the specific stakes attached to them and whether they will support or inhibit improvements in teaching and learning. If New Jersey is really committed to high standards and multiple pathways to graduation, it will require developing alternative performance assessments for each of these proposed end of course exams, and, eventually, making

these assessments available to all students, not just a “remedial option” for students who fail a particular standardized exam

There is also much about the “wider statewide initiative on secondary reform” that has not yet been publicly defined, including the lessons of a dizzying array of initiatives and experience that needs to be critically examined, from the American Diploma Project and the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills to the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative and previous experience with “whole school reform.” While we all support higher levels of student achievement to get there we will need better secondary programs, not simply more “demanding” ones. We hope to discuss these issues with the Board at future meetings and forums, but will end our comments with two final points:

1. ELC and the SRA Research Group support the proposed resolution and the overall direction of the Department’s recommendations to move from the SRA to the ASHA as outlined in their accompanying paper.
2. As our state moves more deeply into comprehensive secondary reform efforts, it is important not to confuse “assessment reform” with educational improvement. We believe the proper purpose of educational assessment is to improve teaching and learning and to support better outcomes for the greatest number of students. Assessment reform efforts should strengthen this fundamental purpose. We believe the changes proposed today can contribute to that end.