

NJDOE Fails AHSA Test, But Thousands of Seniors Will Pay the Price

Below are the details of NJDOE's mishandling of the new Alternate High School Assessment (AHSA). Unless corrective steps are taken, the state's overall high school graduation rate, which according to Education Week has led the nation in recent years, will decline significantly. Immigrant students and students in poor urban districts will be most affected, but the impact will be felt statewide.

The Department has made a series of errors in implementing the AHSA that call into question the validity and fairness of using the results to make graduation decisions for individual students this year. These errors include the following:

Failure to conduct pilot testing of the AHSA. All previous high stakes graduation tests, including the HSPA, three earlier state tests, and proposed new exams in Biology and Algebra, were “field tested” for several years before being used to make graduation decisions for individual students. This was not done with the AHSA.

Failure to provide “due notice” of the scoring standard applied during the new AHSA process. Department officials acknowledged that the AHSA results were “a great surprise” telling the State Board of Education at its April 21 meeting that “the mistake was that we didn’t field test the scoring.” Until the January test results were returned at the end of March, teachers and students had no indication that the standards previously applied at the school and district level and approved by DOE’s county and state offices for years were being applied differently. This is a major reason why pilot testing is necessary before any high stakes test is implemented.

Failure to provide feedback to teachers and students to prepare for the new AHSA process. Teachers surprised by the January results asked to see their students’ test papers to better prepare them for the April administration. Their requests were denied. “It’s patently unfair because it creates a mystery,” said one South Jersey math teacher. “The kids have zero feedback on their January scores. The teachers got no feedback.” DOE belatedly scheduled “training sessions” to tell educators what the scorers “look for” on April 13 and 14—three months after the January test and several days after the April AHSA had begun. Another teacher who “worked with hundreds of the state rubrics, so I am very familiar with past expectations for the students” said “My colleagues and I have never felt so ‘at sea’ about how to prepare our students.”

Failure to have AHSA scoring done by certified NJ educators. NJDOE told the State Board of Education on multiple occasions that NJ teachers would do the scoring for the AHSA under supervision by Measurement, Inc. a commercial vendor that received a \$1.1 million contract to do scoring previously done by NJ teachers at no extra cost to the state. The Department now that acknowledges only 30% of AHSA responses were scored by certified NJ teachers and 70% were scored by nonprofessional MI employees in North Carolina.

Failure to provide the testing accommodations that were the original reasons for having an alternative exam. In standardizing the guidelines for administering the AHSA, the Department restricted or eliminated the extended time for translation, revision, and completion of the performance assessment tasks provided in the past. These accommodations are especially important to English Language Learners and students who perform poorly on traditional, timed multiple-choice standardized tests.

Failure to ensure culturally appropriate testing materials. The new AHSA drastically reduced the number of available performance assessments tasks (PATs) from 60 to 6. Instead of allowing teachers to match appropriate PATs to individual students, the Department, in consultation with MI, provided only a few PATs that all students were required to use. As a result, teachers reported being forced to use PATs that were not culturally appropriate for some students, including recent immigrant and non-native English speaking students.

Failure to provide timely and appropriate translated test materials for students with limited English Previously, performance tasks were available in up to ten languages. (The HSPA is an English only test, although the test directions may be translated. SRA was available in multiple languages) This year, fewer translations of PATS were provided by the Department and in some cases, districts were blocked by the Department from providing their own.

Failure to consider the disparate impact of the new test guidelines and scoring on ELL students. According to NJDOE data, 78% of English Language Learners do not pass the HSPA language arts test and 68% do not pass the math. This means the overwhelming majority of the state's ELL students rely on the alternative test to earn their diplomas. This year's changes in testing and scoring procedures especially affected these students. Educators who participated in AHSA scoring reported that there was "less sensitivity to English language learners" and "a tougher standard was being imposed without adequate notice preparation for teachers and students." Elizabeth Franks, President of the NJ Bilingual Educators association said, "We are extremely concerned about the impact that this process has on our specific sub group."

Failure to consider the disparate impact of the new AHSA guidelines and scoring on students in high needs districts 70% of the students who took the January language arts test and 60% who took the math test come from secondary schools with majority black and Hispanic enrollment. In recent years, one of every three graduates in Abbott districts has used the alternative test to earn a diploma. If the AHSA results are used to deny diplomas to students who have met all other graduation requirements, it will dramatically increase the dropout rate in urban districts. *A recent Rutgers study showed that 40% of Newark students who graduated through the alternate test went on to college, but under the current AHSA guidelines, thousands of black and Hispanic students will be pushed out of school into the streets, the gangs and the school-to-prison pipeline.*

Failure to collect appropriate data about the new AHSA process A 2008 NJDOE white paper declared that any replacement for the SRA "must be attended by a robust data collection—and reporting—process." However NJDOE did not field test the scoring for AHSA, has not collected disaggregated data for student subgroups, and has no reporting channel to track the impact of the AHSA process on dropout and graduation rates.

Failure to implement the recommendations of the SRA Advisory Committee. In 2008, after the State Board voted unanimously to retain but revise the alternate pathway to graduation, a committee of stakeholders and DOE personnel was convened to advise the Commissioner on reforming the alternate test. The Advisory Group recommended that DOE use a systematic audit system to verify the scoring, remove scoring from schools where irregularities were found, and provide four testing periods throughout the year. Then-Commissioner Davy rejected these recommendations, disbanded the Committee and instead gave the scoring contract to Measurement, Inc. The new process, rolled out hastily last September after school calendars were set, also scheduled AHSA administration windows in the middle of January midterm exams and April Spring breaks for some districts.

Failure to address reports of inconsistencies in Measurement Inc’s scoring and training processes. Some participants in the scoring reported that Measurement, Inc personnel gave inappropriate directions during the training sessions. Some scorers were told that 60% of the student essays and open-ended answers to reading comprehension questions were likely to deserve a non-passing score. Others were told they needed approval of a MI supervisor to give a higher score. Some districts reported clusters of scoring irregularities in the same district, such as wildly varying passing rates on the same math standard. Others said there was “no rhyme or reason” to who passed and who didn’t. The results did not square with many teachers’ estimates of their students’ abilities or academic performance.

Failure to acknowledge the “fairness issue.” It is unreasonable for the Department to reveal a new standard three months before graduation. As State Board member Ernest Lepore said, “This is an issue of fairness; they’ve been told all these years they have done enough, and now they are being told that’s been insufficient? There has to be some consideration of fairness.” Many students caught in this situation have already been accepted to college or the military. Their ability to apply for financial aid, participate in summer college transition programs, and preserve their slots for the fall are now in jeopardy.

Failure to address NJDOE’s responsibility for the AHSA debacle. The Department appears more concerned with defusing media and public reaction to its flawed implementation of the AHSA than correcting it. It is hastily “re-scoring” thousands of math and reading responses that received one passing and one non-passing score from the scoring process supervised by Measurement, Inc. It is not rescoring any writing papers (a major factor in low passing rates for ELL students.) The re-scoring may allow some students to pass, but it is also further evidence of why this year’s AHSA results should not be used to make graduation decisions for individual students. Re-scoring “marginal papers” does not address the reliability of scoring for thousands of other tests. It also does not address the many other flaws in the AHSA process.

On April 27, Commissioner Schundler sent a letter to districts encouraging them to let students participate in graduation ceremonies without receiving a diploma if all they still needed to graduate was a passing AHSA score. This does not address the central issue of denying diplomas to thousands of students and appears to be an effort to diffuse negative reaction and deflect attention from the Department’s mishandling of the AHSA process.

Failure to provide adequate support for AHSA summer programs. The Department says it plans “summer opportunities” to students to prepare for a late July or August administration of the test. But these “opportunities” appear to be limited to an online computer program offered at the county level for those districts that will be able to provide any summer programs in the current budget climate. Also juniors who did not pass the HSPA in March will not be eligible for many summer programs, setting in motion a cycle that could repeat this debacle next year.

Failure to address the implications for ‘5th year’ seniors returning next fall. If large numbers of seniors complete all their course credit requirements, but don’t graduate because of their test scores, what programs (and staff) will be provided if they return to high school in the fall?

Failure to reject ‘one-size-fits-all approaches. Commissioner Schundler has frequently said he is opposed to “one-size-fits-all” approaches issuing from Trenton with unnecessary costs, but the AHSA is precisely that. As the director of guidance at one suburban district said, “We have a very low drop-

out rate; in the past we have been able to SRA each student successfully. True, we have very few students who participate, but we don't want to lose ANY of them. In times of severe budgetary problems, this program can't possibly be cost-effective. So—it seems, at the end of the day, AHSA costs more than SRA, is more time-consuming, and will result in an increase in the dropout rate. What do we gain from it?"