

In July, Education Law Center convened a group of educators, parents, advocates and researchers to review this year's chaotic experience with the NJ Alternative High School Assessment. The group developed a series of recommendations to improve the AHSA process and prevent a repeat of this year's turmoil. On August 16, members of the stakeholders group met with NJ Department Education officials and presented the following statement and recommendations.

Background on the Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) Process

According to the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE), nearly 3000 seniors did not receive high school diplomas this year after failing to pass the state's Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA). While this is much less than the 10,000 students who initially failed the AHSA, it still represents a dramatic increase in the number of non-graduating seniors across the state.

The AHSA process was extremely disruptive for schools, teachers, students, and families in hundreds of districts. Because there was no pilot or field testing for AHSA—in marked contrast to all previous NJ graduation tests—it is especially important to review last year's AHSA experience. Concerns have been raised about the clarity of the standards being applied, the fairness and reliability of AHSA scoring, the consistency and appropriateness of certain testing procedures, and the timely availability of test results. Both the Senate and Assembly Education Committees held hearings on the AHSA that addressed these concerns. A thorough review of the lessons of last year's AHSA experience can help inform and improve the process for the 2010-11 school year.

Several other factors add urgency to a review of the AHSA and state assessment policy:

- First, the state assessment system is in a period of transition. The adoption of “common core” standards and the implementation of new end of course exams will lead to major changes in what students must do to earn a diploma. Both the NJ Department of Education and the State Board have expressed a commitment to provide high quality assessments, including appropriate “alternative assessments” for students who do not perform well on standardized multiple-choice tests. This requires sustaining the AHSA over several years of transition and developing multiple pathways to success for NJ's diverse student population.
- Second, this summer (July/August 2010) is the first time that “rising seniors” including thousands of students who did not pass the HSPA on their initial attempt last March, did not have access to the alternative testing program. Only non-graduating seniors were permitted to take the summer AHSA. In the past, many students, particularly in large urban districts, used summer programs between their junior and senior years to complete the former SRA or “bank” performance assessment tasks to satisfy state graduation requirements. This means thousands more students will enter senior year this fall needing to complete the HSPA or AHSA to graduate. Unless the AHSA process is improved, we could see a repeat of last year's chaos a few months before graduation.
- Third, the Department has proposed implementing two new high stakes exams in Biology and Algebra I during the 2010-11 school year. Pilot testing conducted last May indicated that as many as 50,000 students may not pass each test. The State Board has requested

that the Department present a comprehensive plan at its September 1 meeting for phasing in the tests and clarifying the stakes attached to them. A revised AHSA and/or new alternative assessments must be part of this process.

- Fourth, proposals have been advanced at the federal, state, and local level to expand the use of state assessment results to make high-stakes decisions about graduation for students, compensation and retention for educators, and even the mandatory closing of public schools. Evaluating such proposals requires a high level of transparency and public input about the design and uses of the state assessment system, including the AHSA.

For all these reasons, we urge the Commissioner, the Department and the State Board to adopt the following recommendations to improve the AHSA process for the 2010-2011 school year:

Recommendations to Improve the Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) Process

1. Clarify scoring standards:

- a. provide sample student papers online for each level of the scoring rubric;
- b. provide parallel sample papers by ELL students for each level of the scoring rubric;
- c. return graded student papers to schools so students/teachers can see how work was evaluated;
- d. provide appropriate training/guidelines for scorers of ELL students' writing;
- e. use certified NJ educators for scoring;
- f. have NJDOE technical assistance committee review AHSA scoring process.

2. Ensure that appropriate testing accommodations are provided for ELL students, including:

- a. extended time for students to complete the PATs;
- b. enough PATs to provide culturally appropriate test content with review of proposed PATs by bilingual educators/parents;
- c. adequate/equitable availability of translated test materials. Create communal bank of translated PATs available to all districts;
- d. include accommodations explicitly in AHSA guidelines/manuals;
- e. provide extended time accommodation to all immigrant students in the US for less than three years.

3. Revise the AHSA timeline so results are available to inform instruction and seniors know their status earlier than they did this year:

- a. move first AHSA administration to fall after the October HSPA;
- b. return scores by January 1;
- c. lengthen the AHSA administrative window to 4-6 weeks with some district flexibility to avoid midterm exams, semester breaks, and minimize loss of class time.

4. Improve data collection:

- a. track outcomes for all students denied diplomas this year;
- b. provide disaggregated, subgroup data for 2010 AHSA results;

- c. require each district to create a complete roster of senior students in the fall of 2010 for use in tracking senior outcomes throughout the academic year including HSPA/AHSA results, college acceptance, dropout/transfer status, etc.

5. Maintain and clarify “appeals process” during multi-year transition period to end of course exams:

- a. clarify criteria for automatic/portfolio appeals;
- b. disseminate appeals process info widely at the beginning of the school year to ensure equitable access;
- c. sponsor a 1/2 day training for teachers/school teams in the first half of the 2010-11 school year on gathering a portfolio of student work and other evidence that would be considered useful in an appeals process (e.g. college personal statements, scores on Accuplacer or Military Testing, evidence of employment, etc.);
- d. begin formal appeals process after third HSPA scores are returned with clear and widely disseminated windows for submitting, reviewing, and returning appeals;
- e. create county and/or district review process for appeals with NJDOE approval.

6. Develop a pilot to explore replacing AHSA with portfolio assessment alternative:

- a. build upon & extend “portfolio appeals” process;
- b. identify a representative group of school sites to begin pilot project in 2010-11;
- c. include development of performance alternatives to end of course exams beginning with Algebra I and Biology exams.

7. Allow “rising seniors” (juniors who do not pass first HSPA) to participate in future summer AHSA program.

8. Improve post-high school tracking of outcomes for HSPA/AHSA graduates including health, employment, criminal justice, family impact outcomes.

9. Reconvene the SRA/AHSA Advisory Committee or form another committee with stakeholder participation to monitor and provide input on state assessment policies, including high school graduation exams.