

To: Commissioner Rochelle Hendricks
From: Willa Spicer
Date: September 1, 2010

Re: Ensuring that High School Seniors Have the Skills to Graduate

The Problem

This past school year, testing revealed that several thousand high school seniors in New Jersey could not evidence an ability to read, write and/or do math well enough to meet the State's standards for graduation.

As in past years, the state provided struggling students with multiple opportunities to provide such evidence. Each student received five (5) pre-Graduation Day and one post-Graduation Day opportunity to show competence on the regular High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) or the alternative instrument that has been used for over 15 years (originally known as the SRA but changed this year to the AHSA, Alternative High School Assessment). The alternative assessment results were reviewed by people who did not know the students, and were trained to score them properly, and produced accurate (though not pleasant) assessment information. Meanwhile, students who still could not demonstrate competence on the exams were invited to provide other evidence of skill in language arts and/or mathematics. For instance, we set cut-off scores on tests such as the SAT, ACT required for seniors who are seeking to enter college or the military and accepted the scores on these tests as evidence of reading, writing and math skills. In addition, we asked high school counselors or teachers to forward evidence of skills from the students' high school record and/or work products.

In response to that last step, we received over 1,000 portfolios, including information on courses students took during their four years, their grades, and examples of their work. Each of the portfolios was read by members of the DOE staff and a decision was made on the basis of whether, in the area where the student failed to reach proficiency, there was, in fact, evidence of proficiency.

The results of the testing and the alternative examinations are attached to this report. They do not include the results of the March or August HSPA administration, but they do include results from Adult Schools whose students were in line for graduation this spring as well as the results of retained juniors who did not take the test the year before. Data from local districts that had fewer than 15 students were repressed in this report for student privacy reasons, but the summary information includes all students.

The findings that result from the extensive data we collected and the portfolio information we reviewed is disturbing. While there were many struggling students whose teachers and counselors provided good evidence of work accomplished and a record of appropriate courses and local interventions, there were other students, unable ultimately to evidence even simple math skills, who were unimaginably recorded

by their schools as succeeding in Algebra II or even Calculus. Equally dispiriting, there were students whose records showed failure after failure in Algebra I, or English I, who were never provided appropriate courses or interventions over the years. Finally, some students with the requisite skills had to call themselves because their school would not prepare an appeal, and we had parents in tears because they could not get anyone to review matters at the school. Clearly, for the sake of these children and their families, changes need to be made.

Our Response

To ensure that struggling students get the help they need to graduate high school, we believe the Department of Education is going to have to implement four new policies, each of which already has authorizing legislation.

1. We must guarantee that students get help before they fail high stakes tests. Right now, 18A requires that local district provide remediation for students after they fail the HSPA in their junior year. (18A:7C-3) Most school districts comply with this law. We are going to compel yet wider compliance by requiring that students who fail the 8th grade test also receive immediate remedial services (18A7C-6.2). Under all circumstances, we will require that remedial plans be implemented for students in the 9th grade who were not proficient on the state achievement test at the end of 8th grade.
2. To ensure that intervention plans are not allowed to collect dust, districts will be required to keep a complete record of progress for each of these at-risk students. To assure that parents are informed and that the communication system in the school is working for the benefit of the students, we will be requiring that all information about the student be recorded and that a portfolio be opened for each student, whether he or she is a freshman or a senior. We will require that a diagnostic test be administered at the beginning of the school year and that the results be recorded, that interventions be planned and delivered, and that a student's progress or lack thereof be noted. In addition, all test scores will need to be carefully collected so as to be available to inform local and/or state decisions about the students' education plan. The portfolio process will be monitored as part of the regular QSAC review but, because the students' future is so clearly tied to the actions of the adults, the state will also do some spot monitoring each year. A draft copy of the portfolio we will be requiring is attached to this report.
3. Students' unique situations must be appreciated. Students who do not reach proficiency in the 8th grade or the 11th grade are not all alike. First, although the state will provide an annotated list of the available diagnostic instruments, local districts will have to choose the most appropriate one to use with a child and decide what constitutes success. We will identify for districts those intervention programs that are well reviewed in the literature but local districts will have to choose. To establish accountability, we will set up a timeline for a district's working with students that presses districts to help students prove or improve their skills as quickly as

possible. Our goal is to address problems early, and avoid having students not graduate because no one paid appropriate attention to their needs.

4. Our policy for students who come to high school without English language fluency needs review. Second-language students often have difficulty reaching proficiency on their language arts exam. They do show growth, however, through the year. We have established a committee to look at the question of whether we should provide a high school diploma to students who have only two or three years in this country and do not yet exhibit high level language mastery, but do appear to be making rapid progress in their language skills. We expect to make a report on this topic in the next few months.

Our Expectations

Our expectation is that every student will graduate from a New Jersey High School with those skills necessary to keep his or her options open—ready for college and careers. It will take several years to accomplish this goal, however, and so we have set a more modest goal for the first year:

By April 2011, we seek to have fewer than 2,000 seniors unable to show evidence of reading, writing and math competence on the HSPA or the AHSA.

By June, 2011 we seek to have fewer than 1,000 students unable to show evidence of reading, writing and math competence through submission of alternate assessment information.

New Jersey Statute
Title 18A Education
18A:7C-2.

b. Demonstration of proficiencies in those subject areas and skills identified by the board as necessary for graduation other than those assessed by the Statewide assessment tests.

The Commissioner of Education shall monitor local plans for the assessment of proficiencies required for graduation including techniques and instruments to be used to determine pupil proficiency; required programs designed to provide the opportunity for pupils to progress toward the mastery of proficiencies required for graduation; and remediation programs for pupils who fail to meet graduation proficiency standards in order to assure compliance with the requirement of P.L.1979, c.241 (C.18A:7C-1et seq.).

Title 18A Education
18A:7C-3.

Students not meeting standards; remedial instructions. For any student who does not meet the State and district examination standards for graduation by the end of the 11th grade, the local board of education when appropriate shall provide additional remedial instruction specifically directed toward mastery of those proficiencies identified as necessary for the awarding of a diploma which may include but not to be limited to an extended school year, extended school day, or additional school years.

Any 12th grade student who does not meet said requirement but who has meet all the credit, curriculum and attendance requirements shall be eligible for a comprehensive assessment of said proficiencies utilizing techniques and instruments other than standardized tests, which techniques and instruments shall have been approved by the Commissioner of Education as fulfilling State and local graduation requirements.

Title 18A Education
18A:7C-6-2.

Eight grade progress examination: remediation programs. For any student not meeting established examination standards, the local board of education shall

provide for appropriate remediation in areas of demonstrated deficiency. Appropriate remediation may include after school, weekend and summer programs.

18A:7C-3. Students not meeting standards; remedial instructions. Any 12th grade student who does not meet said requirements but who has met all the credit, curriculum and attendance requirements shall be eligible for a comprehensive assessment of said proficiencies utilizing techniques and instruments other than standardized tests, which techniques and instruments shall have been approved by the Commissioner of education as fulfilling State and local graduation requirements.

New Jersey Administrative Code

Titles 6 & 6A Education

6A:8-4.3 Accountability

6A:8-4.3(c) Accountability

(c) District boards of education shall provide appropriate instruction to improve skills and knowledge for students performing below the established levels of student proficiency in any content area either on the Statewide or local assessments.