

To many it may seem reasonable, and perhaps even generous, that the State of New Jersey gave members of the class of 2016 a laundry list of tests they could pass in order to graduate.

New graduation requirements rolled out this year replaced the previous graduation exit exam, the HSPA, with a whole host of options. High school seniors must now receive a particular score in both Language Arts and Math on the PARCC, and if they fail to achieve the required score they can use scores from the PSAT, SAT, Accuplacer, or the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery-The Armed Forces Qualification Test (ASVAB-AFQT). If a student fails to attain the needed scores on any of these tests, there is a portfolio option available.

One of the many issues with these new exit exam requirements is that they were put in place without going through the proper regulatory channels. As the Education Law Center pointed out in testimony before the State Board of Education on January 11th, the state has “implemented these policies without following the legal requirements for changing high school graduation standards, modifying the existing assessment regulations or providing the necessary opportunity for public review and comment on policies which affect every high school student in the state. This has led to a challenge filed on behalf of NJ parents by ELC and the ACLU-NJ, and calls into question the legality and legitimacy of the Department’s new graduation policies.”

Under the regulations, when a student enters high school they should know what is required of them in order to graduate. The current senior class was not informed as freshman that passing any of these tests would be a graduation requirement, nor were they told that the HSPA would no longer be an option. In fact, the regulations in place today still state that students must “demonstrate proficiency in all sections of the HSPA or AHSA process” to receive a NJ “state-endorsed diploma.”

It’s important to note that scores on exams like SAT and ACT, which are fee-based assessments, closely correlate to socio-economic status. ELC points out that “In 2014, about two-thirds of the seniors in the state’s poorest districts took the SAT or ACT. Their average SAT scores did not reach the NJDOE’s proposed cut scores for graduation.”

Here in Highland Park there has already been speculation as to how many students the new graduation requirements have put at risk of not graduating, and rumors that many students were put at risk of not graduating because they opted out of the PARCC. The facts do not bear out these rumors. There are less than 10 students in the district that have not met testing requirements, and only half of those students opted out of the PARCC.

The greater issue by far for the class of 2016 is the NJDOE’s switch from using the HSPA as a graduation requirement, which had an 85-90% pass rate, to the PARCC, which this year had a 30-40% pass rate. This switch has been devastating for many seniors across the state. In Clifton, nearly 193 seniors have yet to meet the exit exam requirement. This is creating havoc in the district, as administrators scramble to assist students to prepare portfolios to submit to the State.

When you live in a state like New Jersey that has an exit exam requirement it is not readily apparent that no such requirement exists in most other states. Education policy analysts at the Education Commission of the States in Denver report that in 2016 only 13 states, including New Jersey, require exit exams, which is down from 25 in 2012. In addition, there is a movement underway across the country to award retroactive diplomas to individuals previously denied them based solely on exit exam requirements.

In New Jersey however, the state intends to make exit exam requirements ***even more stringent*** than they are this year, putting even more students at risk of not graduating.

In changes proposed to the State Board in January, the Department proposed that starting next year, the class of 2020 (current 8th graders) and all subsequent classes will be ***required to take each and every high school PARCC exam*** before they can access any other options in order to graduate.

In addition, for the class of 2021 (current 7th graders), the state will be no longer allow any other substitute assessments, so no more PSAT, SAT, etc. The only path to graduation will be passing the PARCC ELA10 and Alg1 tests. Statewide pass rates on those two tests this year were a staggeringly low 37%. If a students fails one or both of these tests, their only recourse will be the poorly defined “portfolio assessment.”

Highland Park’s senior class consists of 121 students; 35 of those seniors did not pass PARCC ELA 11 and 23 did not pass a PARCC math exam. These students used an alternate assessment in order to graduate. If these options are taken away from students in the future, and if these trends persist, ***close to half of our seniors could be put at risk of not graduating.***

As Board President, I feel it is my obligation to inform the board and the community, including our students, about these potential changes. I plan to continue to research the issue, and to work with the Education Law Center to draft a resolution the board can adopt to express our concerns with our legislators, the State Board, and the Commissioner. I look forward to any comments from my fellow board members and from the community regarding changes to this year’s graduation requirements, and the changes proposed for the class of 2020 and beyond.

Please feel free to email me directly at boedcimarusti@hpschools.net with your comments or concerns between now and the board’s next meeting on February 22nd, when I plan to present a board resolution pertaining to the proposed changes to current graduation requirements.