

OP-ED: MORE THAN ACADEMICS – IT’S TIME TO ELEVATE HS GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

SCOTT TAYLOR | SEPTEMBER 7, 2018

It’s up to the state Board of Education to continue New Jersey’s national leadership in innovation and quality education



Scott Taylor

Speaking as a New Jersey school superintendent, I believe the state Board of Education should approve proposed changes to New Jersey’s standards and assessments that reduce the number of high school PARCC tests and require students to pass them to graduate.

But just as important, New Jersey should also start taking a close look at the national trend toward eliminating “exit tests” completely and continue to take a leadership role in the emphasis on kids’ social-emotional wellness.

Since 2016, the New Jersey Department of Education has granted the high school classes of 2018, 2019, and 2020 three “pathways” for successfully completing high school (this has been in addition to meeting the local high school’s program requirements). The first option has had kids achieving a passing score on one of a variety of commonly used assessments, such as the ACT and SAT. For instance, a score of at least 400 on the SAT math and SAT critical-reading tests would qualify. These College Board assessments are widely recognized as among the most reputable measures of college readiness.

Graduation option number two has been to allow students to demonstrate mastery of language arts and math by producing a comprehensive and detailed portfolio of work. The math portfolio must include graded samples for four-out-of-five mathematical content areas. The English language arts portfolio calls for students to provide two reading passages that demonstrate comprehension and writing work that includes at least two of the three types required by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards. These portfolios are no walks in the park for students and their teachers. Documents must be scored according to rubrics clearly defined by the New Jersey Department of Education.

A third graduation option has been to pass PARCC, and specifically those for English language arts in grade 10 and for Algebra I. The state board’s rejection of the proposed changes to those rules would limit students to the myopic requirement that they meet or exceed expectations on the PARCC. That PARCC is a highly controversial and dying assessment should go without writing. Gov. Phil Murphy has declared he will phase the test out. Only five states, including New Jersey, implement PARCC, and Illinois is also actively looking for an exit strategy. Fifteen other states stopped using the test since its inception in 2013. We cannot hold our students’ ability to graduate hostage to an assessment that has an extremely limited shelf life and is under fire for its lack of authenticity as a measure of postsecondary success.

Standard-bearer of excellence

New Jersey is a national standard-bearer of educational excellence. The latest U.S. News & World Report ranking of states places New Jersey number two in the country and, notably, number six with regard to the four-year college and university graduation rate. Education Week, the profession's widely read publication, also lists New Jersey number two even though it uses a different set of criteria to make the determination. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows New Jersey at number four and number five in math and reading, respectively. Our state has been able to maintain high standards and foster the highest quality educational experience in the nation without having to implement the PARCC-passing requirement.

There is now the opportunity to build on this success and continue our leadership in the area of social-emotional wellbeing. New Jersey is among the first in the country to adopt five standards as part of its effort to promote positive school climates and the healthy development of young people. The September 12 board vote provides the opportunity to double down on its commitment to growing children who are confident, empathic, and have strong interpersonal skills. It can ensure that graduates do more than master academic skills by giving them the freedom to focus on their psychological wellbeing. What good is math and English language arts mastery if it can't be applied to better society by socially and emotionally healthy young adults?

We do not need to demand that students take and pass the PARCC test to confirm what the United States has come to know: New Jersey's graduates are among the best prepared in the nation. The state Board of Education can maintain New Jersey's stellar reputation by approving the resolution to continue the list of substitute assessments, including the portfolio-appeals option. It can go one step further if it chooses to be a pioneer in the arena of social-emotional learning by moving away from exit assessments and allowing educators to help kids hone the life skills they'll need to be positive contributors to our society.

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