Good afternoon. I am Patricia Wright, Executive Director of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) representing over 7,000 principals, assistant principals and supervisory staff playing key instructional leadership roles in our public schools. I appreciate the opportunity to share our members’ views on student assessment in New Jersey and the proposed code changes before you today.

I must begin our comments by commending Commissioner Repollet and his team for their extensive outreach across New Jersey counties, communities and diverse stakeholder groups to listen to our collective perspectives on the issue of student assessment and its role in New Jersey’s system of teaching and learning. Educators in the field welcome the Department’s hard work, receptivity and multi-phased approach as we transition to a new assessment system. These ongoing NJDOE outreach efforts will go a long way towards the collaborative development of a fair, rigorous and meaningful assessment system in our state. NJPSA and its members look forward to engaging with the State Board and the Department in Phase II of this effort.

Guiding Principles

NJPSA believes that student assessment is an integral part of the instructional process that is inextricably linked to standards, a viable curriculum and strong instructional practice. As we consider changes to our assessment system, NJPSA believes, based upon our members’ expertise in instructional practice and the joint committee work we have undertaken with the NJ Association of School Administrators, that we must transition to a balanced assessment system. The NJDOE must ensure that the right tools and framework are in place so that the new assessment system drives continuous improvement of teaching and learning. As you know, the rollout of the last assessment came amid the corollary rollout of several other so-called reforms – new standards and new evaluation systems. The NJDOE must ensure that the right tools and framework are in place so that the new assessment system drives continuous improvement of teaching and learning. As you know, the rollout of the last assessment came amid the corollary rollout of several other so-called reforms – new standards and new evaluation systems. The NJDOE and stakeholders have learned much from the missteps in implementation. That is why it is so important to take action to alleviate some of the unintended consequences of the previous roll out. We must look toward creating a learning system that ensures the next generation assessment system is tightly aligned to the rigorous NJ Learning Standards in a way that ensures that the resulting data provides actionable and timely information to students, parents and educators concerning what students, know, understand and can do in relation to our learning standards.

I am enthusiastic about the NJDOE vision for improving teaching and learning in a way that builds the capacity of educators to, not “teach to a test,” but rather, teach to rigorous learning goals that ensure student growth on assessments aligned to those goals. I believe this Department truly understands that we can no longer look at standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment as separate silos. We need to view them in a way that supports the development of a world class learning system.
The Proposed Code Changes

With this goal in mind, NJPSA supports the proposed code changes as a first, interim step in a process to develop an assessment system that will best serve our students. Although NJPSA feels that the previous state assessment did have some positive aspects, we must deal with the unintended consequences created by the previous assessment while letting those positive aspects inform our thinking as we move forward. Specifically, NJPSA supports the transitional period code proposals that:

- streamline and clarify high school graduation requirements based upon the content proficiency standards of English Language Arts 10 and Algebra 1;

- update and clarify assessment requirements for English-language learners and special needs students recognizing their specific needs for flexibility and accommodations;

- provide for more timely reporting/delivery of actionable data to educators, students and parents to promote targeted interventions, remediation, curriculum revisions, and enhanced instruction (N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4-3);

- continue the current flexibility for students to demonstrate proficiency in meeting our graduation requirements through alternate assessments or a portfolio approach (N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(f); and that

- seek to increase the amount of instructional time in our schools by reducing the length, frequency and number of state-required assessments of our students.

These code proposals strike an appropriate balance of opening the door to continued statewide collaboration on the development of a New Jersey assessment system while protecting students by “doing no harm” to them during this process. During this interim period, educators and the Department will be able to address long overdue work such as unpacking the learning standards to ensure that our final New Jersey standardized assessment is focused on assessing commonly defined learning goals across districts. It will also provide time to ensure that our new state assessment system is sufficiently rigorous to meet (or perhaps exceed) our current ELA/Mathematics proficiency standards for college and career readiness and a state diploma while continuing to identify performance gaps.

We also appreciate code proposals that address specific implementation issues our members have had to address locally. Specifically, we support the proposal providing flexibility to students who transfer or move into our districts during their high school years to permit them to demonstrate proficiency in ELA and/or mathematics in multiple ways when their prior school did not offer the New Jersey ELA 10 or Algebra 1 assessments.

In closing, NJPSA supports the approach contained in the proposed revisions to N.J.A.C. 6A:8 as an important interim step on New Jersey’s journey to a strong, aligned statewide system of assessment that serves the needs of all New Jersey students. We look forward to working with the Department and the State Board of Education as we begin Phase II of our statewide collaboration on this important issue.