

NJPSA Testimony Before the Assembly Education Committee on A-4639 (Caputo)

February 9, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to share the perspectives and recommendations of the statewide membership of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) on the issue of student assessment generally, and the statutory requirement of a high school exit exam. I am Karen Bingert, Executive Director of NJPSA and a former high school principal of 15 years in Hillsborough, Somerset County. We represent not only principals and supervisors who lead the instructional process, but also Directors of Curriculum and Instruction and Directors of Student Assessment in our public schools.

Let me begin by addressing the importance of student assessment to the instructional process and emphasize to you the value our members place on assessment as an instructional tool. To be an effective tool, our assessments must be linked to the NJ Learning Standards, our local curriculum and strong instructional practice in our classrooms. Additionally, the data derived from the assessments must be timely, provide current information on student understanding and proficiency levels, and then be disaggregated appropriately so educators can identify and address any learning gaps (generally, individually or in subgroups.) During a student's educational career, he/she will be tested many times by standardized tests in grades 3-8 and then in high school in Mathematics (Algebra I, Geometry), English Language Arts and in grades 5, 8 and 11 in Science based upon federal and state requirements. Additionally, each year, students will take:

- Local district benchmark assessments throughout the school year to determine understanding, proficiency and progress,
- Teacher-developed tests throughout the academic year in their coursework, and
- Other assessments such as the SAT, ACT, licensing exams, military entry exams and other tests as they move through the grade levels and consider their long-term goals after high school.

One thing we can say, without question, is that in New Jersey there is no shortage of assessment data on our students across their educational careers.

This data is utilized to identify students in need of assistance, modify curriculum, develop and adapt learning strategies, understand student growth and progress, and for school, state, student, and district accountability purposes. I can assure you that this data is critical to us and our teachers as we work together to address the learning impacts of the pandemic and the comprehensive needs of our students today.

A-4639

The issue of the high school graduation assessment has a long and rocky history as shown by the Assessment History Timeline included in our testimony. As many of our members note, the issue of assessment has become too politicized to the detriment of our students. As one member states, “While high school exit exams have the benefit of setting a common bar for proficiency, the assessment and scores have become too politicized, with the collateral damage being the students and teachers caught in the middle.”

As a high school principal for many years, I can attest to the fact that high school students have been directly impacted by our state’s inability to resolve the questions of how much testing is appropriate, whether New Jersey should continue to have an exit exam, what it should look like, what level of proficiency should be set, whether there should be multiple pathways, and how the exit exam fits into a, hopefully, cohesive state assessment system.

The divisiveness of the adults on this issue has clearly sent students the message that some assessments matter and some do not. As a result, students’ motivation levels on state tests, including the NJGPA, vary, based upon the meaning and relevance of the test to each high school student. This impacts the validity of the test results where students may finish an assessment in five minutes, just clicking through to the end. The ever-changing rules establishing multiple pathways to graduate, while promoting fairness to some, create equity issues for other students without access to these options. So, if the goal of a high school exit exam is to establish and validate a common standard of proficiency for graduation, we need to be honest about what is actually going on, what standard is actually being met, and the impact our inconsistent rules are having on our students.

These are not easy questions and there is evidence on both sides of the question. In grappling with this issue as an association, we decided that a “temperature check” was needed on this critical issue with our membership. As a result, on February 1st, we issued a Student Assessment 2023 Survey to our statewide membership, the results of which are attached.

We clearly struck a nerve with our members who have been administering state and local assessments for decades. With 666 members responding and 882 individual comments filed, our members demonstrated their passion and commitment to their students, the value they place on student assessment as part of the instructional process, their thoughtfulness in analyzing the issue, and the overwhelming need for New Jersey to re-examine the entire scope, content and purposes of our state

assessment system, particularly in light of the current, post-pandemic world of our schools.

While members had differing views on the value of a high school exit exam, when asked if they believe it is important to utilize a standardized, statewide assessment to evaluate each high school student's proficiency level in ELA and Mathematics as a condition of graduation, 38.07% said yes, 38.68% said no and 21.31% were unsure^[DB1]. Yet, on the final question of supporting or opposing A-4639, 58% of members support the bill, 20.7% oppose and 20.6% are neutral. On such an important issue to educational leaders, the support of this bill is truly reflective of their view that the time has come to change what is required at graduation.

Our survey results contained certain clear messages and recommendations that we share as part of this important conversation:

1. Student assessments have valid instructional and intervention purposes (see Question 3) and must be aligned with NJ Learning Standards and local curriculum.
2. Assessment results, while helpful, are only one indicator that should be considered among multiple indicators of student performance and progress.
3. School districts have developed strong local assessment systems that educators have aligned with curriculum, that provide more in-depth, useful and timely data to educators, and that provide more instructional value to students and teachers than state standardized tests.
4. Overwhelmingly, NJPSA members (85%) believe that Start Strong should NOT be required of school districts moving forward as they find little value in the duplicative, vague, and unreliable data produced. Additionally they attest to the major negative impacts on students, staff, and administrators by this suddenly required assessment at the start of the school year. Uniformly, members strongly feel that September priorities should be focused on making connections with students, setting classroom norms, establishing a positive school environment, and formatively working with students to reconnect them to learning.
5. The vast majority of members believe that we are over-testing students to their detriment. They believe the time has come to streamline required standardized assessments, that learning gaps require more instructional time, that educators must be at the table making these decisions and that out-of-the box thinking is needed to set a new direction.

6. Members questioned the current NJGPA as an appropriate exit exam. They have many recommendations for alternate approaches if New Jersey decides to maintain a high school assessment requirement.
7. Members strongly pointed out the equity concerns with the NJGPA specifically and the requirement of a high school exit exam generally. They noted the inequitable, high-stakes impacts of requiring multilingual learners, students with disabilities and socioeconomically disadvantaged students to pass this exam to graduate. Time-consuming portfolio appeals, while an option, further pull these students from instruction and limit students' opportunities to take electives in areas of interest or to pursue a career and technical path.
8. They noted the inadequacy of the NJGPA as a measure of career readiness.
9. Many members noted the undue stress the graduation requirement induces in students at a very volatile time for students' mental health.
10. Members noted an important shift in the higher education community, where colleges and universities are making standardized testing optional for admission.
11. Others described the level of interference that the over-assessment of students has on the provision of an engaging and motivating academic experience. "Students are burnt out and do not value these assessments. The data we receive back is not helpful as we already have plenty of our own data. Our ELLs are struggling and being compared to native English speakers' results. We barely have teachers in schools right now due to leaves of absences and resignations, but we are expected to properly prepare students for these assessments, which often do not mirror the type of instruction (hands-on, project based, Inquiry- based) that we are delivering."

For these reasons and more, NJPSA agrees that the time has come to revisit our state assessment system as a whole and to stop the constantly changing landscape of what is required to graduate from high school by eliminating the requirement of a high school graduation assessment, that, in this time and place, does more harm than good to our students' futures.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives. We look forward to working with this committee, the entire Legislature and the NJ Department of Education on this important issue.

Respectfully submitted,
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New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association