

Why some N.J. seniors are still scrambling to graduate



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TRENTON — When Joseph Fiscaro crossed paths with a high school senior recently, the long-time state Board of Education member asked the teen if he was going to graduate, he said.

"He said, 'I failed my PARCC tests,'" Fiscaro recalled. "And I said, 'Did you take any other tests?'"

In the wake of the state's new math and English exams, more high school seniors are in the same predicament as the student Fiscaro spoke with, state and local officials said.

Seniors who either skipped or scored too low on last year's PARCC tests, SATs and other exams must now sit for alternative testing or compile a last resort portfolio appeal, said Dana Karas, president-elect of the New Jersey School Counselor Association.

Though it's unclear exactly how many students are short of the graduation requirement for testing, Karas said more students are scrambling to earn their diploma than usual.

"What we are seeing is that the number of students as of February that haven't met graduation requirements is significantly more than what we have ever experienced before," Karas said.

The situation stems from a change in New Jersey's graduation requirements that came with the introduction of the **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)** exams. In abandoning the old state exams, New Jersey created a "menu" of tests that could serve as students' high school exit exam for the next four years.

Educators say the new graduation requirements have led to:

- A military aptitude test that was seldom used in New Jersey schools being widely administered.
- More high school seniors participating in the PSAT, a test usually taken by sophomore and juniors.
- School counselors, teachers and administrators spending increased time trying to help student meet graduation requirements.
- A greater number of students who may need to file an appeal with the state in order to graduate.

By changing high school graduation requirements for students who were already in 11th grade, the state created a mess for schools and students, said Stan Karp, a director for the Education Law Center, a public interest law firm.

PARCC had a lower pass rate than the prior state test, and the changes to graduation requirements weren't well communicated to students, Karp said.

But state Education Commissioner David Hespe said he's frustrated by complaints that PARCC could prevent students from graduating. Schools were given plenty of notice about what tests students could take and the scores they needed, he said.

"PARCC has nothing to do with this," Hespe said. "What's having to do with this is that students thought opting out of PARCC was a great idea, and now they have to figure out what other tests to take."

Passing the test

Using an exit exam as a high school graduation requirement is nothing new in New Jersey.

Previously, **high school juniors took an exam** that more than 80 percent of students usually passed, and those who didn't were retested during their senior year. If students still missed the mark, they had the chance pass an alternative assessment, which nearly everyone did.

When New Jersey decided to use PARCC as its new state test, the department of education had a decision to make.

A 2012 recommendation from a state task force suggested New Jersey avoid setting a passing score for graduation in the initial years of PARCC. The task force instead called for graduation to be "dependent on satisfactory completion of the required courses, as established by local boards of education."

Yet, in the fall of 2014, months before PARCC debuted for most students, the state **sent a memo to school districts** announcing ways the Class of 2016 could meet the graduation requirement for standardized testing, including using PARCC scores.

"If a student does well on it, why not let them use it?" Hespe told NJ Spotlight at the time.

In response, the Education Law Center and American Civil Liberties Union **filed a lawsuit** on behalf of students and argued the state didn't follow the proper procedures for changing graduation requirements.

"These new rules cannot fairly be imposed retroactively on current seniors," Karp said.

Beyond PARCC, the other options provided were the the SAT, ACT, PSAT, a college placement test called the Accuplacer and an entrance exam used by the military. Few could have guessed how many students would need to take those exams, educators said.

In a groundswell of opposition against standardized testing, thousands of high school juniors **refused to take PARCC** last spring.

Of those who did participate, only about 65 percent met the score on the English exam needed for graduation. It's unclear how many juniors met the graduation benchmark in math because tests are not administered by grade level.

In some schools, such as Millburn and Livingston, the opt outs and PARCC scores aren't posing a graduation problem, administrators said. Nearly every senior at Millburn High School had high enough PARCC, SAT or ACT scores to meet the graduation requirements, principal Bill Miron said.

But districts with a higher numbers of students who either didn't take or didn't perform well on those tests have entered uncharted territory.

"I don't think any of us anticipated what we were going to be facing at all," said Karas, the director of guidance at Franklin Township Public Schools.

Exhausting all options

The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), an exam used to predict future academic and occupational success in the military, is given to a million military applicants each year.

In New Jersey, the test has typically been offered to just handful of students in each school, Karas said. But now that the ASVAB is among the tests students can use to meet their graduation requirements, the exam is suddenly "huge" in local schools, Karas said.

"We would traditionally get five or six kids," Karas said of her district. "This year we administered it to every senior."

Clifton Public Schools offered the ASVAB four times this school year instead of the single administration it normally provided, said Janina Kusielewicz, director of curriculum and instruction.

Districts have also ramped up their offerings of the other exams students can use for a graduation requirement, administrators said.

Clifton offered the PSAT, usually given to sophomore and juniors, to its senior class and gave more students the Accuplacer, a college placement exam usually reserved for students who have filled out college applications, Kusielewicz said.

Freehold Regional High School doubled its sessions of ASVAB and Accuplacer, Superintendent Charles Sampson said.

"You want to make sure you are doing right by the student and you want to provide them as many opportunities as possible," Sampson said. "You don't know how many students are going to meet the requirements and how many aren't."

The extra work has been taxing for school counselors, Karas said. Schools began identifying students who might not fulfill the standardized testing requirement in the summer and staff have been carefully monitoring each student's status as test results come in, she said.

"I would say this year that one of our primary focuses has been on reviewing tests data and meeting with students to discuss options," Karas said.

The last resort

Even with the extra testing, more students in the Class of 2016 will likely need the portfolio appeal process than prior classes, administrators said.

As of late January, Clifton had 193 students who hadn't met the graduation requirement, Kusielewicz said. Freehold Regional was still working with 88 students, Sampson said.

"That's obviously much more than what you had in the past," Sampson said. "I think everyone's going to be in the same boat with some of their seniors."

The open-ended questions students need to answer for the portfolio have previously been provided by the state. This year, districts need to create those questions on their own.

The state Department of Education says it's committed to helping districts guide students through the appeal process. The department extended the window for submitting portfolio appeals this year and has offered direct support to any district with more than 100 students who need to file an appeal.

So far, the state has heard from eight districts with more than 100 students using the portfolio appeal, Department of Education spokesman David Saenz said.

Hespe called the appeals process, which was also available in prior years, a "safety net."

"We are ready for as many students who need that portfolio appeal," Hespe said. "And we will make certain those students graduate."

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Thousands of HS seniors face state appeal to graduate in June

DIANE D'AMICO, Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, February 9, 2016 11:49 am

Thousands of high school seniors may be at risk of not graduating this June because they did not pass the new state PARCC test in 2015, or one of the approved alternative tests.

Area high schools are taking steps to help those students graduate through a time-consuming state appeals process.

Millville Senior High School Principal Kathleen Procopio said they have a math teacher, an English teacher, an assistant principal and a supervisor to work on the process of qualifying all students through the appeals process.

“When we first got the (PARCC) results, about 150 students still needed to do something to meet the testing requirement,” she said. “We have maybe 60 left. It’s a ton of more work.”

Statewide, about 30,000 of this year’s high school seniors did not take at least one section of the new PARCC test last spring.

Many will be able to substitute the results of another state-approved test, including the PSAT10, SAT, ACT, Accuplacer and ASVAB military test.

But that still leaves potentially thousands of students who are not planning to attend college, join the military or who could not meet the passing score on any of the tests and will require a state portfolio appeal.

In September, the ACLU-NJ and Education Law Center filed a lawsuit on behalf of several students challenging the state process in implementing the PARCC. Stan Karp, of the Education Law Center, testified that they are especially concerned about low-income, special-education and English learners who are less likely to have access to, or be successful in, tests such as the SAT.

State law requires students to pass a state test in language arts and math to graduate. Under the old High School Proficiency Assessment, more than 90 percent of juniors passed the language arts test in 2014 and 80 percent passed the math. Those who did not pass the test could graduate through an appeals process



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with the state.

The new PARCC results show only 41 percent of the 61,768 students who took the English Language Arts 11 PARCC test and only 22 percent of the 71,137 students who took the Geometry test in 2015 passed.

If students do not pass any of the other approved tests, high schools can again submit portfolios of student work to the state for approval. But the appeal process is a lot of work for both students and staff, and this year there are far more students to process.

Many schools are scheduling the free ASVAB, though students may then be recruited by the military in the same way that colleges solicit students who take the SAT.

State Department of Education spokesman David Saenz said the department has extended the timeline for submitting portfolios and is encouraging districts with at least 100 portfolio students to contact the department to coordinate.

Vineland Superintendent Mary Gruccio said they have more than 100 students in the portfolio appeal process and many teachers and counselors are working with them. Her goal is to have all portfolios submitted before spring break and the next round of PARCC testing.

Representatives of all of the high schools in Cape May County met at Lower Cape May Regional High School to develop a common portfolio model, which school officials there said is saving time.

Joseph Castellucci, director of curriculum and instruction for Lower Cape May Regional, said they are lucky in having only eight students in a special class created to prepare for the portfolio assessments.

Cape May Technical High School has 25 seniors who will be given the chance to take the ASVAB this month and retake the PARCC this spring. Superintendent Nancy Hudanich said the students' schedules were reviewed to add extra time for portfolio assessments. The school now gives the PSAT to all 10th- and 11th-grade students.

Pinelands Regional Superintendent Robert Blake said they were able to qualify 84 students through the ASVAB. They still have 34 students who need to pass a test in at least one subject. They are being given remedial instruction in preparation for the portfolio process.

"This has been a significant amount of extra work," he wrote in an email.

Hammonton Superintendent C. Dan Blachford said students there are still taking alternative tests, but he anticipates about 20 will need portfolio appeals.

Procopio said she already submitted a dozen portfolios for Millville students, and while the first ones

needed some tweaking, all were approved, and she is now pretty confident all students can meet the criteria.

“It was a little scary at first,” she said. “We are trying to submit portfolios as soon as they are done. We have never had a student not graduate because of the test.”

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Nearly 200 Clifton High seniors at risk of not graduating because of new test

BY JEFF GREEN

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

CLIFTON – Nearly 200 Clifton High School seniors are in danger of not graduating because they failed to show proficiency on a new state test or have failed to do so on an alternate assessment, school administrators said.

The school district is working with 193 students who either scored below math and English language arts thresholds on last year's exam or who refused to take the controversial standardized test and didn't meet performance standards on another test, such as the SAT. Janina Kusielewicz, Clifton's director of curriculum and instruction, told board members during a Wednesday night meeting.

The 193 students are being given several other testing opportunities in the coming months, but as a last resort they are undergoing a "portfolio appeal process" in which they'll submit their coursework to the state, she said. Last year, only 39 students submitted portfolios, compared with 30 in 2014.

In total, 521 high school students opted out of the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC test – 400 of them 11th graders, Kusielewicz said. Out of the 400, 140 failed to show proficiency on other tests.

When the PARCC results came in last month, 198 test-takers failed to score high enough on one or both of the sections, which Kusielewicz attributed to a "grassroots movement" and media coverage that challenged the test's significance, leading students to not take it seriously.

"Many students simply clicked through, completing their PARCC test in three to five minutes instead of the 30 to 50 minutes allotted," she said.

Many of the students who didn't score proficient on the PARCC or on other tests, 145 in all, have already met the graduation testing requirement by taking a pre-SAT administered in October or an additional test that was given in November and December, Kusielewicz said. There will be at least three more testing opportunities for the remaining 193 students – one in February, one in March and another that's still being coordinated with Berkeley College, she said.

For the students who don't make the cut on those tests, the district will submit their portfolios ahead of the May 13 deadline, to give the state ample time to review them. Kusielewicz called the process "tremendously labor intensive" for staff and the students, but "we've been given assurances we'll get a timely response" from the state.

“Our only goal is to provide as much support as possible to help our students demonstrate the proficiency we know many of them have,” she said in an interview. “We’re providing every opportunity we can as a district to resolve this.”

During Wednesday’s board meeting, officials seemed most disappointed in an initially low rate of involvement by parents of the students who had not yet met the testing requirement for graduation. Trustee Arlene Agresti said the response was “ridiculously low” and urged parents to stress the importance of the PARCC this year.

“We have to convince them this is a necessity for graduation,” she said. “These scores aren’t going to make it. You’re not going to get there without them. They have to start taking it seriously.”

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