



Education Law Center

Standing Up for Public School Children

April 13, 2010

Honorable Bret Schundler
Commissioner of Education
Office of the Commissioner
100 River View Plaza, P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Commissioner Schundler:

We write to request your immediate attention to pressing issues related to the administration and scoring of the Alternate High School Assessment (AHSA). These issues are directly tied to the Department of Education's (DOE) implementation of new AHSA guidelines and scoring procedures for 2009-10. The results are now impacting hundreds of districts statewide and have put the June 2010 graduation of thousands of high school seniors in doubt.

As you know, the AHSA, previously known as the Special Review Assessment (SRA), provides an alternate way for students to demonstrate proficiency on state standards and thereby meet state requirements for a NJ high school diploma. This year, the DOE implemented new guidelines that removed the scoring of the AHSA from local schools and districts and moved it to regional "centers" supervised by a State test vendor, Measurement Inc. (MI)

Last week, the results of the first administration of the ASHA conducted last January were returned to districts. According to DOE reports, passing rates were just 10% for language arts and 34% for math. Only 3242 of 10,308 students tested received passing scores in the required four math standards, and only 428 of 4293 students tested received passing scores in the combined language arts and writing standards.

These results strongly suggest that MI has implemented dramatically different criteria for evaluating the AHSA's performance tasks than had been used in the past. The results raise serious questions about how MI determined the metrics and standards used for this year's scoring; about the sampling and assessment practices used to verify these standards; and about the instructions and training given to educators who participated in MI supervised scoring sessions. There is also some uncertainty about how much of the actual scoring was conducted by MI staff and how much was done by certified NJ educators, as the State Board of Education had been told would be the case.

Last April, in a presentation to the State Board, DOE estimated an SRA "failure rate" of about 4%. This year, under the new guidelines and MI supervision, DOE reports preliminary failure rates of 90% in Language Arts and 66% in Math. This extraordinary increase in failure rates is not restricted to a few districts. DOE reports show that in 120 districts not a single student passed the language arts assessment. In 40 districts no students passed the math assessment. Pass rates for all district factor groups were below 50% in math and 20% or less in language arts.

Since DOE has reported that the performance tasks themselves have not changed since last year, it seems clear that the changes in administrative and scoring processes are responsible for these results. Yet when districts asked DOE about the scoring process and requested to see the students' actual work—partly to prepare students for the next ASHA administration—they were advised that “AHSA does not rescore or release student work.” This response is clearly inappropriate in light of the high stakes involved for the students taking the ASHA and their families.

The graduation prospects of thousands of high school students are now in question. Given the significance of these issues, we request that your office undertake an immediate review of the administration and supervision of the ASHA. More specifically, we request that you take the following actions:

- 1) Set aside the results of the January administration of AHSA until the DOE can complete a thorough review of the process by the appropriate staff and technical review committees;
- 2) Notify all districts that DOE will provide fiscal and administrative support for AHSA instructional programs to prepare for another test administration this summer for all seniors who have completed the necessary course credits and other local requirements for graduation;
- 3) Reinstate the option for local scoring with DOE audits for the April and summer administrations of the AHSA;
- 4) Reconvene the SRA Advisory group to review the problems with this year's process and make recommendations for a revised process for 2010-11. [The SRA Advisory Group, on which I served, made a number of recommendations to improve the reliability and transparency of the alternate assessment process that NJDOE rejected in its AHSA guidelines. Those recommendations are worth revisiting in light of recent experience.]

We stand ready to assist your office and the DOE to address this urgent matter. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or need additional information. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Stan Karp
Director, Secondary Reform Project
Education Law Center

CC: Deputy Commissioner Spicer
State Board of Education
LEE Group
Superintendents