



**Education Law Center Testimony in Support of A4121:
Legislation to Eliminate New Jersey’s High School Exit Testing Requirement
Assembly Education Committee, December 4, 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Education Law Center (ELC) in support of A4121, legislation that would eliminate New Jersey’s high school exit exam requirement. My name is Nicole Ciullo, and I am the Associate Director of Policy & Development at ELC.

We would like to thank Chairwoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson and Assembly Education Committee member Michele Matsikoudis, along with Assemblywoman Alixon Collazos-Gill, for sponsoring this important legislation.

For decades, New Jersey has required students who have otherwise met all credit, coursework, attendance, and other requirements for high school graduation to also earn a specific score on a designated state test. ELC has repeatedly documented¹ the negative effects of this policy, a remnant of a failed, test-driven approach to defining high school graduation requirements that has been rejected by the overwhelming majority of states. In the early 2000s, 27 states required students to pass high school exit exams to graduate. Today just six — including New Jersey — still do.² Recently, two of the largest remaining states with exit testing, Massachusetts³ and New York,⁴ moved to end the practice. New Jersey should do the same. There is no federal mandate for exit testing; it is entirely a state decision.

Earlier this year, ELC sent a letter urging New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) Commissioner Dehmer to support A4121, and its companion bill, S1562.⁵ All the major education groups in the state, including the NJ School Boards Association, NJ Association of School Administrators, NJ Principals and Supervisors Association, NJ Education Association, NJ School

¹ See Education Law Center, *Exit Testing is Lowering NJ’s Graduation Rate*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://edlawcenter.org/exit-testing-is-lowering-njs-graduation-rate/>; Education Law Center, *ELC Urges NJ to Address Negative Impacts of High School Graduation “Exit Test” Requirement*, Jan. 29, 2025, <https://edlawcenter.org/elc-urges-nj-to-address-negative-impacts-of-high-school-graduation-exit-test-requirement/>.

² Harry Feder, *Press Release: Massachusetts & New York Reject Graduation Exam Requirements. Only Six States Maintain Mandatory Exit Tests For Diploma*. FairTest, Nov. 13, 2024, <https://fairtest.org/massachusetts-only-six-states-maintain-mandatory-exit-tests-for-diploma-voters-and-policy-makers-see-education-and-equity-benefits-from-multiple-measur/>. The six remaining states with mandatory exit exams are: Florida, Ohio, Louisiana, New Jersey, Texas, and Virginia.

³ Hadley Barndollar, *What happens now that Mass. voted to end MCAS as a grad requirement?* Mass Live, Nov. 6, 2024, <https://www.masslive.com/news/2024/11/what-happens-now-that-mass-voted-to-end-mcas-as-a-grad-requirement.html>.

⁴ Alex Zimmerman, *New York to ditch Regents exam graduation requirement by fall 2027*, Chalkbeat, Nov. 4, 2025, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2024/11/04/new-york-plans-to-end-regents-exam-requirement-by-2027-2028-school-year/>.

⁵ See ELC’s January 14, 2025 letter to Acting Commissioner Dehmer, *Addressing the Impact of NJ’s High School Exit Testing Requirement on Students with Disabilities*, <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ELC-Ltr-to-Acting-Commissioner-Dehmer.1.14.25.pdf>.

Counselors Association, Save Our Schools NJ, SPAN Parent Advocacy Network, and the Garden State Coalition of Schools, joined in support. This broad consensus underscores the urgent need to end this harmful policy.

Exit Testing Disproportionately Harms Vulnerable Student Populations

High-stakes testing disproportionately harms historically vulnerable and underserved student populations. Research has shown conclusively that these exams do not improve academic achievement⁶ or economic outcomes for graduates, and multiple studies have linked them to increased dropout rates for students of color and students from low-income families.⁷

While current regulations identify alternative graduation pathways for students who do not pass “the State graduation proficiency test,” they fail to provide equitable and nondiscriminatory options, since they include fee-based exams (SAT, PSAT, ACT), and others requiring special institutional access (Accuplacer, ASVABAFQT). See N.J.A.C. 6A:8-1.3 and N.J.A.C. 6A:8-4.1(e). Because there are no provisions that require districts to ensure that *all* students have access to these assessment options, certain student groups may be unable to meet the graduation requirement, even if they have met all other criteria for a diploma.

The uneven availability of the portfolio appeals process across 600 school districts does not adequately address this problem since that process depends on each district’s willingness to devote the time and resources necessary to provide the remediation, support, and translation necessary for students to successfully complete a portfolio appeal. The available evidence suggests that some districts fail to do so. For example, in 2022, over 1500 New Jersey students failed to graduate from high schools that submitted NO portfolio appeals; and in 2024, the same was true for 1150 students.⁸ This data, along with the state’s continuing reliance on the fee-based, alternative assessments referenced above, indicates that a significant number of New Jersey students are not getting equitable access to all available graduation pathways.

Exit Testing Creates Barriers for Students with Disabilities

Following a federal performance review,⁹ the NJDOE issued guidance in April 2021 explaining that the U.S. Department of Education (USED) now requires the state to exclude from the state’s official federal graduation rate thousands of students with disabilities who have not satisfied the

⁶ Sean F. Reardon & Michal Kurlaender, *Effects of the California High School Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement, and Graduation*, Policy Brief 09-3, Aug. 2009, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED510168>.

⁷ Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson, & Rebecca W. Cohen, *Assessing the Effects of High School Exit Examinations*, Review of Educational Research, Volume 80, Issue 4, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654310383147>.

⁸ NJDOE graduation pathway data, 2022 and 2024.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, School Support and Accountability, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, *New Jersey Performance Review Report FY 2019*, Apr. 9, 2020, <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2020/04/njfy19performancereviewreport.pdf>.

exit testing requirements.¹⁰ The sole reason for this change is New Jersey’s continued reliance on exit testing.

As a result, the NJDOE now reports two different graduation rates: an “unofficial” state rate for all graduating students, including those who have met all requirements in accordance with their IEPs and received state-endorsed diplomas, and a lower “official” federal rate used for school and district accountability under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), that excludes thousands of students with disabilities.

When this change was first implemented in 2022, the state’s overall “official” federal graduation rate for students with disabilities fell from 67% in 2021, to 48.5% in 2022,¹¹ and over 6000 students with disabilities were excluded from the official graduation count.¹² Under the new criteria, 63% of New Jersey high schools had a lower federal graduation rate than the state rate, which also made more of them vulnerable to federal intervention under ESSA.¹³

This change has increased pressure on students with disabilities to qualify for inclusion in the “official” graduation rate by sitting for multiple administrations of various graduation assessments, including the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA), the “substitute assessments,” and the portfolio appeals process, which is cumbersome and time-consuming, and in many cases, requires students to take a special, remedial portfolio preparation course in lieu of music, art, or some other elective.

Adaptive Testing Raises New Concerns

In August 2025, New Jersey announced a change to “adaptive testing” for statewide standardized tests, including the NJGPA.¹⁴ “Adaptive tests” provide students with different versions of the test, drawing questions from a bank of varying difficulty depending on a students’ prior responses. Because adaptive tests are adjusted for each student, setting a credible, verifiable cut score will be nearly impossible. This raises questions about fairness and transparency, and it is unclear what the impact of this switch will be on graduation rates.

¹⁰ New Jersey Department of Education, *New Jersey FY2019 Federal Performance Review Report*, Apr. 28, 2021, <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/april/NewJerseyFY2019FederalPerformanceReviewReport.pdf>.

¹¹ See NJDOE *Cohort 2022 4-Year and 2021 5-Year Graduate Rates – Cross-Tabulated by Student Group* and NJDOE *Cohort 2021 4-Year and Cohort 2020 5-Year Graduation Rates – Cross-Tabulated by Student Group*, <https://www.nj.gov/education/spr/adddata/acgr.shtml>.

¹² Education Law Center, *Exit Testing is Lowering NJ’s Graduation Rate*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://edlawcenter.org/exit-testing-is-lowering-njs-graduation-rate/>.

¹³ Education Law Center, *Exit Testing is Lowering NJ’s Graduation Rate*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://edlawcenter.org/exit-testing-is-lowering-njs-graduation-rate/>.

¹⁴ Hannah Gross, *Launch of NJ’s new standardized tests was rushed, some school leaders say*, Aug. 26, 2025, https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2025/08/nj-introduces-adaptive-statewide-testing-school-leaders-blindsided/?utm_source=NJ%20Spotlight%20%20Master%20List&utm_campaign=3cb2202b79-AM_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_08_26&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1d26f473a7-3cb2202b79-398944009&ct=t%28AM_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_08_26_2025%29&mc_cid=3cb2202b79&mc_eid=b45c333320.

Limited Graduation Pathway Data is Available

While the NJDOE releases a limited amount of pathway data in its annual graduation and performance reports, it does not report the key data point needed to adequately evaluate—and to make visible—the human costs of New Jersey’s exit testing policy: namely the number of students who do not graduate each year as a result of this policy.¹⁵ New Jersey Administrative Code 6A:8-5.2(f) explicitly requires the chief administrator of each district to report annually “at a public meeting not later than September 30, and to the Commissioner:

5. The total number of students denied graduation from the 12th grade class; and
6. The number of students denied graduation from the 12th grade class solely because of failure to pass the State graduation proficiency test, substitute competency tests, or portfolio appeals process based on the provisions of this chapter.”

Yet, during many years of tracking this data and monitoring this policy, ELC has never seen any district release such data publicly, or seen the NJDOE provide aggregated data for the state, despite the clear regulatory requirements. By failing to enforce disclosure of this data, New Jersey is hiding the real impact of the exit testing policy on students of color and students with disabilities. Passage of A4121/S1562 would eliminate the need to withhold information and strengthen New Jersey’s commitment to data transparency in education policy-making.

Exit Testing Wastes Limited State Resources

Exit testing costs New Jersey millions of dollars each year. Given significant financial concerns due to state revenue losses and potential threats to federal funding for education, these funds would be better spent on programs and services that have been shown to improve student achievement, rather than on tests that provide no educational benefit and harm students who do not pass them. Eliminating exit testing would not reduce the availability of data about school and student performance at the district or state levels. Students will still be required to take federal, state, and district assessments and to meet all other state and district graduation requirements. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments — which exceed federal ESSA requirements — and multiple school and district assessments would all remain in place.

New Jersey Should End Exit Testing as a Graduation Requirement

ELC urges the passage of A4121/S1562 and the elimination of exit testing as a state graduation requirement. This would be the most direct and reliable way to ensure that every student who meets New Jersey’s rigorous graduation requirements receives the diploma they earned.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. For additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at nciullo@edlawcenter.org.

¹⁵ See, for example, New Jersey Department of Education presentation to the State Board of Education, *2023-2024 School Performance Reports and Graduation Data*, Apr. 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuYYhUdZoQ>.