

Governor Chris Christie Endorses Task Force Recommendations to Ensure New Jersey's Children Graduate Ready for College or a Career

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Trenton, NJ – Taking another step to implement a comprehensive education agenda to put the opportunity of a quality education in the reach of every child in New Jersey, Governor Christie today endorsed a series of recommendations to increase the number of graduates and ensure that all students graduate from high school truly ready for college and career. These recommendations, contained in a report released today from the College and Career Readiness Task Force, will transition New Jersey away from the current high school assessments – High School Proficiency Exam (HSPA) and Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) – to a new series of end-of-course assessments that measure student readiness at each grade level. These new measures will provide a powerful tool for schools to identify students in need and target individual supports to put them on track for high school graduation.

Paired with the phasing in of a new, federally mandated methodology for calculating the graduation rate, Governor Christie's reforms will ensure that graduating from high school in New Jersey means having the skills and knowledge to be ready to enter college or the workforce, and that educators have the tools to help students get there.

"Preparing students for college and career is not only a moral imperative, it is an economic necessity to keep New Jersey competitive given the demands of the 21st century. In too many areas of our state – often in our lowest performing districts – when students graduate high school they are not truly ready for college or a career. These new graduation requirements will better measure college and career readiness so that a high school diploma earned in New Jersey is the gold standard for the country," said Governor Christie.

Twenty-four states, including New Jersey, are moving toward end-of-course assessments for language arts literacy and math to be implemented in the 2014-15 school year as part of their participation in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). For the first time, these new assessments will create a common set of expectations among K-12 educators, higher education, and the business community to ensure that when students graduate from high school they are ready for the next step of their education or their career without the need for remediation. These new assessments will not only measure the knowledge that students have attained, but half of the tests will also measure how well they can apply that knowledge to real-world situations through writing and the use of critical thinking skills.

The Obama Administration has provided financial support and fostered the development of these new assessments through this state-driven PARCC consortium. Ultimately, these new graduation requirements will ensure that a New Jersey high school diploma is a meaningful measure of college and career readiness, increase the number of students that graduate high school ready for the 21st century, and align the K-12 and college experiences to ultimately increase the number of college graduates in the state.

"I applaud leaders from K-12 education, higher education, and the business community for their work in coming together and making thorough, thoughtful and meaningful recommendations to modernize our school system. Every child who walks off the graduation stage in New Jersey should do so with a diploma in their hand that symbolizes to colleges and employers that they are truly ready for that next stage of their life," said Acting Commissioner Chris Cerf.

[Adopting A Better, More Complete And Transparent Measure Of The Graduation Rate](#)

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For the first time, New Jersey has calculated its high school graduation rate using a new federally mandated methodology for the 2011 cohort of students. This new methodology, called the "four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate," is required of every state in the country and presents a more complete, accurate and transparent way of calculating the high school graduation rate.

Until now, the graduation rate for a given year was calculated by taking the number of students in a graduating class and dividing that number by the graduating class total plus the number of drop-outs in the class over each of the four preceding years. This graduation rate methodology contained flaws that are widely considered to result in inflated rates, in large part because of some districts' under-reporting of drop-outs totals. Under this system, last year's statewide graduation rate was a reported 94.7%.

This year's graduation rate was calculated using a more thorough method of accounting that is being adopted as a national standard for all students who began high school four years earlier. Under the new system, districts will be responsible for tracking student-level enrollment data using the statewide data system NJSMART, including students that transfer out of the school and that register in another New Jersey school or another state, students who emigrate out of the country, and any student deaths for the four years of each class of students, beginning in the 9th grade. If a district is able to provide documentation for one of these changes, these figures will be subtracted appropriately from the total size of the cohort as an entering 9th grade class. The size of the graduating class will then be divided by this figure.

Under this revised methodology – already in place in 34 other states this year and being implemented in all 50 states after that – New Jersey's graduation rate in 2011 stands at 83%.

"New Jersey continues to rank among the top states in the nation by any number of measures, and we owe our outstanding educators and school leaders a debt of gratitude for that. But the new 2011 graduation rate presents us with a more accurate picture of the true level of high school completion across the state, and we encourage all districts to study the data carefully to help target their investments," said Acting Commissioner Cerf. "This does not mean that fewer students received a diploma this year than last year; in fact more students received a high school diploma in 2011 than 2010. But it does mean that when we count accurately, the true graduation rate in New Jersey is 83 percent."

Because this is the first year that New Jersey is using the new methodology to calculate the graduation rate, direct comparisons to previous year's rates are not possible. Rather, it represents a different and fuller measure of the graduation rate for the state.

New Graduation Requirements To Better Measure And Prepare Students For College And Career

While New Jersey students are graduating from high school at high rates, there is significant evidence that even high school graduates are not truly ready for college and career.

College Ready

90% of students in Bergen and Essex County Community Colleges need remediation before taking a college course;

1/3 of students at Rutgers need remediation;

Only 25% of students who take remediation courses graduate college within 8 years.

Career Ready

The Chamber of Commerce reports that only half of recent high school graduates could pass eighth grade mathematics aptitude tests, the gateway to entry level jobs;

Businesses spend substantial time and money to train entry-level high school graduates.

In October 2011, Acting Commissioner Cerf convened the College and Career Ready Task Force, comprised of experts in public education and business community leaders, to clearly articulate the knowledge and skills that students should master to be considered ready for college and the workforce. The Task Force also reviewed both graduation requirements and high school assessments to see if they were consistent with college and career readiness goals, appropriately and meaningfully measured progress along the way, and aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted in 2010.

The Task Force found that the current high school tests – the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPA) and Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) – are not aligned to the CCSS and therefore are not the right assessments to measure college and career readiness. As a result, students who are able to pass HSPA are often still in need of remediation in college.

To address this problem and give educators a powerful tool to identify early on students who require assistance and the specific areas in which help is needed, the Task Force recommends that New Jersey migrate to end-of-course exams in high school that will measure college and career readiness in each grade and each subject.

“Not only does this change have the potential to actually decrease the number of tests that students will need to take, since most districts already offer their own final exams for each course, but these new assessments will be able to identify whether students can apply their knowledge to the real world in ways that did not previously exist before. When students cannot accomplish this goal, these assessments will provide new opportunities for schools to target instruction to the needs of individual students and put them back on track for graduation,” said Acting Commissioner Cerf. “This new assessment system will build a true K-16 continuum that will better prepare students for college and career and eliminate the need for costly remediation that lowers college completion rates once students enter college.”

The new end-of-course exams are preferred by both higher education and the business community and will differ from previous exams in two important ways. First, they will measure the mastery of knowledge and skills at the end of a specific course, such as Algebra or Geometry, rather than folding all subjects into one comprehensive 11th grade exam as is the case under HSPA. Second, these exams will not simply measure the knowledge students have attained through traditional multiple choice questions, but rather half of the exams will measure the application of knowledge and critical thinking skills through essays and other problem solving questions, providing more robust information about whether students are truly college and career ready across grade levels.

In partnership with institutes of higher education, students who pass the assessments will demonstrate a true readiness for college or a career at each grade level and will not need remediation when they enter community colleges. For students that do not pass the assessment, educators will be given new and unprecedented opportunities for individualized remediation at each grade level. Those students will then be able to retake only the part of the assessment that they did not pass, putting them back on track for a high school diploma.

In order to develop a transition that will give both students and schools a chance to adapt to the new assessments, the state will transition to the new assessments over several years. Students currently in high school will continue to take the HSPA and AHSA for graduation to maintain continuity for students and schools. Students in grades 5 through 8 will pilot the new assessments but graduate based on a robust transcript while the state adapts to the new assessments. Students currently in 4th grade will be the first cohort to graduate based on the new end-of-course assessments.

The development of end-of-course assessments aligned to the CCSS is already under development through PARCC in both language arts literacy and math in grades 9-11. New Jersey is on the governing board of PARCC, which has committed to making these assessments ready for the 2014-15 school year. The Task Force also recommends that the Department of Education develop and administer end-of-course assessments in science and social studies, but they should not be mandated and districts should be able to establish their own assessments if they meet the state's standards. The Department is reviewing this recommendation. New Jersey will also migrate to the new PARCC end-of-course assessments to replace the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) in 2014.

Over the next several years, the Department of Education will work to identify both the number of end-of-course assessments required for graduation and the passing scores for each assessment over several years of administration.

A copy of the College and Career Readiness Task Force report can be found here:
<http://www.state.nj.us/education/genfo/readiness.pdf>

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