



Thousands may not graduate in New Jersey after exit exam changes

By Heather Kays

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Recent changes to New Jersey graduation requirements led to more than 10,000 students using an appeal process in which a portfolio of a student's work determines if they are able to graduate.

That's at least a five-fold increase over last year's graduating class, and includes only school districts that complied with a [settlement](#) requiring the [Education Law Center](#) to be given data on the exit exam rules that changed starting 2016. More than 150 districts — about half the number of New Jersey districts with high schools — have so far not reported data, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

Appealing by using a portfolio — including test scores with graded classwork, school transcripts and other evidence of academic achievement — can allow seniors to graduate without passing an exit exam.

The first report provided by the NJDOE indicates:

- New options for exit exams that include using the SAT, ACT, PSAT and the new state math and English tests, called the [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers \(PARCC\)](#) exams led to at least 10,323 portfolio appeals.
- The switch from the High School Proficiency Assessment and the Alternative High School Assessment dramatically increased the number of students using portfolios. In part, this may be due to more than half the graduating class either not passing or taking the PARCC tests, [according to the Education Law Center](#).
- Students in both urban and suburban districts statewide have used the portfolio option this year. There were 56 districts to submit more than 100 portfolios, more than 50 districts submitted more than 50 portfolios and nearly 150 districts turned in 10 or more portfolios.

Bob Schaeffer, public education director at FairTest: National Center for Fair & Open Testing, says his group is working with allies in New Jersey who advocate moving away from exit exams as an ultimate determining factor in whether a student graduates.

“First of all, FairTest agrees with the many scholars who have concluded that graduation tests are counterproductive,” said Schaeffer. “They do not improve overall academic quality and push many young people out of school onto the streets without the diploma they need for decent jobs or access to higher education.”

While some states have opted to move away from exit exams, New Jersey officials instead simply changed the testing options, a move Schaeffer said will not help students.

“New Jersey moved in the other direction — to my knowledge it is the only state trying to use the PARCC as an exit exam,” said Schaeffer. “Until New Jersey repeals that unjustified requirement, we support the use of portfolio assessment appeals as a way for teenagers to demonstrate their mastery of the high school curriculum.”

Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, says the problem rests not solely with the specific testing occurring in New Jersey but with how education policy functions as a whole.

“This is how the huge tension between ‘high-stakes testing’ and compulsory, monolithic education comes to a head,” he said. “We want students to get over ‘high bars,’ but it is almost impossible to accept that that means some kids will not get a high school diploma, a basic requirement to succeed in life. Typically what happens is appeals are allowed, the bars are seemingly lowered, and the much-touted ‘rigor’ melts. But don’t do that, and many students will be without diplomas and handicapped for life.”

McCluskey has spoken out against Common Core, one of two testing consortia connected with the K-12 math and English standards, as well as often speaking against federal overreach into education.

“In a system based in freedom, we wouldn’t have that,” McCluskey said. “We’d eventually see lots of different educational models with numerous ways of indicating that students had mastered useful but varied learning, thus avoiding this impossible choice: either drop the rigor, or doom some kids.”