

Testing continues despite demise of PARCC

Scores from controversial assessment tool can still be used to qualify for graduation

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SPECIAL TO THE MIRROR

New Jersey is phasing out PARCC testing as a graduation requirement, but Metuchen High School juniors and seniors who've taken it can still use those scores to get their diplomas.

Meanwhile, Metuchen schools administered the tests; now known as the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment tests, last month under new statewide guidelines for Grades 3 through 10.

"While PARCC may be phased out, state standardized tests will not," said Richard Cohen, assistant superintendent and principal of Mildred B. Moss Elementary School. "The state is required by federal law to test students on standards in high school, by 11th grade ... [so] standardized test-taking at the high school will continue for the foreseeable future."

The state Board of Education and Department of Education announced in March that statewide assessments including NJSLA, in both English language arts and mathematics, would continue as planned for Grades 3 through 10, but districts will not be required to administer such end-of-course assessments to 11th-graders.

The memo from Linda P. Eno, assistant education commissioner, said that students graduating this year and in 2020 can meet testing requirements through one of three options: a passing score on NJSLA/PARCC exams, qualifying scores on alternative exams such as the SAT or ACT, or through submission of a student portfolio appeal to the state Department of Education.

Cohen, also testing coordinator for the Metuchen school district, said of the change, "I am supportive of reducing time our students spend taking standardized tests, which is one outcome. I am also supportive of multiple pathways to graduation and removing barriers from graduation for students who may struggle to demonstrate learning via a standardized test but can demonstrate learning of standards via other means."

According to schools Superintendent Vincent Caputo, testing times for ELA and math exams would have been reduced for students in the district, but "we are required this year by the NJDOE to be a field test district in ELA which adds a unit, so testing for Metuchen in ELA remains the same as last year for the most part."

The district was able to administer all tests, except make-up exams at the high school, in one week, he said.

In 2018, 80 percent of MHS students passed the PARCC exam with scores at Level 4 or 5, the two highest levels, said Caputo. "About 10 percent of our students graduated with a substitute competency test. An additional 2 percent of seniors last year graduated via the portfolio appeals process. And then we had about 7 percent of our students graduate through alternate requirements" through the Individualized Education Program, which covers special needs students.

In math, 67 percent of Metuchen students graduated via their PARCC scores, 29 percent graduated by taking substitute competency tests and 3 percent graduated through alternate requirements laid out in their IEP, he said.

"And now, the 11th-graders aren't taking the test this year, but when they graduate next year in 2020, we have to look very closely at how this impacts - if it does - their pathway to graduation," said Caputo.

A December 2018 appellate court ruling eliminated PARCC testing as a graduation requirement. MHS students are among an estimated 170,000 juniors and seniors throughout the state who can still receive a diploma based on valid PARCC scores.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams are named for a group of states and the District of Columbia, which joined in 2010 to develop Common Core State Standards and exams in ELA and mathematics for students from Grades 3 to 11.

But as the controversial assessments proved increasingly unpopular, state participation dwindled to just three active PARCC members - the District of Columbia, Louisiana and Massachusetts - by this spring, and the PARCC

group officially dissolved.

New Jersey opted out of PARCC in February as part of Gov. Phil Murphy's campaign promise to eliminate it, although a complete phase-out of the exams has been a gradual process.

Under Murphy's administration, some of the standardized testing first implemented in the 2014-15 school year has been eliminated. The NJSLA testing has removed several high school level exams, reduced testing time for



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younger students and decreased the extent to which test scores affect teacher evaluations.

In addition, the administration moved to loosen test-based graduation requirements.

The appellate panel of New Jersey's Superior Court, after a challenge brought by groups represented by the Education Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, last year ruled that PARCC testing as a graduation requirement violated state law because the exam was actually two exams taken over several years.

The ruling left the fate of students graduating in 2019 and 2020 in doubt, because many of them had already passed at least one of the PARCC exams.

In February, the state reached an agreement that would allow those students to graduate based on their PARCC scores.

"Certainly New Jersey has had a long history with standardized tests," Caputo said. "I hope there's some testing that always remains. We use that data to see how our kids are performing, to see how our curriculum is working out, to see if we need to make changes."