
Appendix A
State Testing Policies in
Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania

October 2003

This policy memo explains how each of New York's neighboring states assesses students for high school graduation. Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, along with New York, are among the 20 states to use high school exit examinations as an element of graduation decisions. However, each of them uses these requirements in a manner different than New York State.

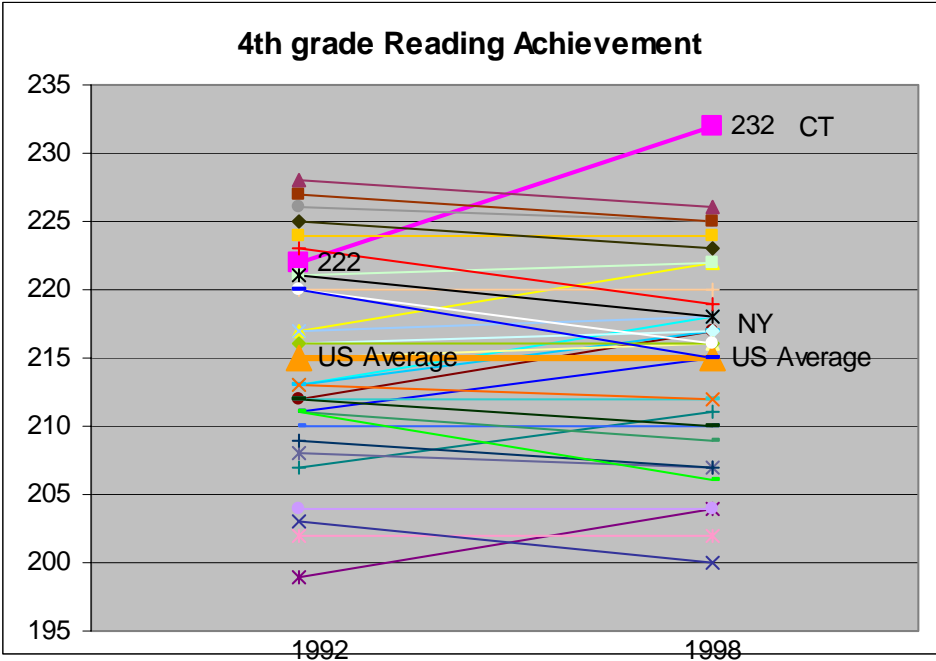
In each of these states, high school graduation tests cover reading, writing, mathematics, and sometimes science. All use open-ended and performance assessments as well as multiple choice items. None of these states uses the high school tests as the sole basis for graduation decisions. Each requires the use of state or local alternative assessments and evidence from coursework as the foundation of the graduation decision, which is made by local school districts. Two of the three states offer an additional Certificate of Mastery to students who have passed the state exit examination. Each has put in place specific policies for special education students and English language learners.

In what follows, we describe the state tests, and we outline: 1) how the tests are used, 2) the opportunities and consequences for students and districts, and 3) options for districts to create or administer alternative assessments.

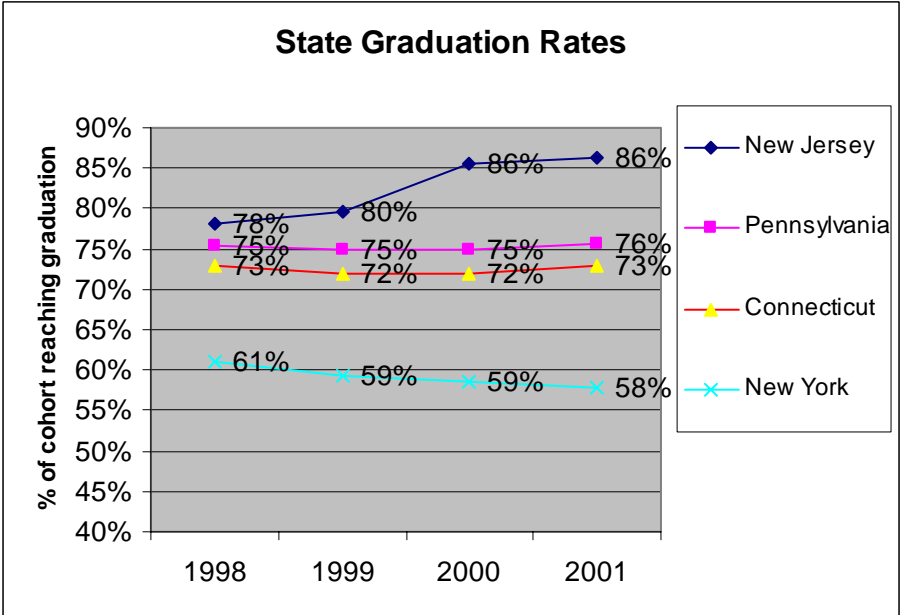
The steps being taken in these three states appear to set high standards that have mobilized curriculum improvements in the districts while minimizing failure rates, the withholding of diplomas, and dropouts. An analysis of NAEP scores and federal data on graduation rates points suggests that these three states are succeeding in raising overall student achievement while continuing to maintain high graduation rates. Their policy efforts to date appear to be having productive outcomes.

State Outcomes

The assessment policies of these states, in conjunction with the other reforms they have undertaken, appear to have supported strong improvement in student achievement as measured by increases on local assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In particular, Connecticut has shown strong increases in achievement even while the proportions of low-income and language minority students in its schools have grown. Connecticut now ranks in the top tier of states in the nation on NAEP (#1 in writing and among the top 5 in reading, mathematics, and science). Analysts have attributed these gains to strong investments in a highly qualified teaching force and an assessment system that supports diagnosis of local needs for curriculum reform and professional development and that prevents tests from being used to make decisions about student promotion or graduation (Baron, 1999; Wilson, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 2001).



In addition, these states have had strong and rising graduation rates. (See figure below.) In contrast, New York's graduation rates have been declining sharply, and are now among the lowest in the nation, with a cohort graduation rate of only 58%. New York ranks 45th on this measure, just above Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina. (New Jersey, by comparison, ranks 1st in the nation, with a graduation rate of 86%. An accountability program must be evaluated not only by how students achieve but whether schools are successful in keeping students in school.



Connecticut

Connecticut's statewide testing program consists of two tests: The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) which is administered in Grades 4, 6, and 8 in the areas of mathematics, reading, and writing, and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) which is administered in Grade 10, and which reports on student performance in four areas: Mathematics, Reading Across the Disciplines (based on a Response to Literature test and a Reading for Information test), Writing Across the Disciplines (based on an Interdisciplinary Writing test and an Editing & Revising test) and Science. The CAPT includes multiple choice and open-ended items, short essays, and performance tasks to measure what students can do with what they know.

The CAPT is required of all public high school students in Connecticut, and it is taken into account in graduation decisions, but it is not by itself a graduation requirement. The state's legislation (Sections 10-14n) specifies that the test cannot be used as the sole basis for graduation or promotion, but that it will be the basis for awarding the Certification of Mastery in the various areas. The state's overview of the state's testing program, issued by the State Board of Education in September 2000, included the following statement:

Connecticut Mastery Test and Connecticut Academic Performance Test results provide important information about student performance on a selected set of skills and competencies ... However, these results do not provide a comprehensive picture of student accomplishments. There is a danger that overemphasizing state test scores to evaluate a student's, school, or district performance can result in an inappropriate narrowing of the curriculum and inappropriate classroom instructional practices. Focused preparation for state tests should be a small fraction of a yearlong comprehensive curriculum that balances the competencies assessed on state tests with other critical skills and objectives. Teaching isolated skills for test preparation or using repetitive tasks that go far beyond reasonable practice do not represent good instruction. In addition, no one assessment – state or local – should be the sole basis for promotion, graduation, or other important decisions in the education of a student.

Connecticut gives districts the authority to establish graduation requirements and to decide locally how to incorporate and use the results from state tests. Connecticut does this by requiring each local and regional board of education 1) to specify the basic skills necessary for graduation, 2) to include a process for assessing a student's level of competency in such skills, which includes local performance assessments, and 3) to provide a course of study to assist students who have not successfully completed the assessment criteria to reach a satisfactory level of competency prior to graduation.

Connecticut, like Pennsylvania (see below), has a policy of reporting CAPT results on each student's high school transcripts. Students who meet or exceed the state goal standard in each content area receive a "Certificate of Mastery" in those areas. In addition, many 11th and 12th

grade students can choose to retake portions of the test on which they have not reached the state goal. Some Grade 10 students are exempted from the testing due to limited English proficiency.

The CAPT also serves as an accountability measure at the school and district level. CAPT results are reported for each school, each school district, and for the state as a whole and accessible through the department's website. Connecticut has designed its assessments to guide curriculum and instruction, and to enable the measurement of progress toward the educational goals established through Connecticut's Common Core of Learning. There are a variety of funding supports, technical assistance services, and professional development initiatives focused on improving the districts that are performing less well. These have contributed to steep increases in performance in the state as a whole and in most of the state's cities (Baron, 1999).

New Jersey

New Jersey's state testing program includes: the "Assessment of Skills and Knowledge" (ASK) which is administered in Grade 4; the Grade 8 "Early Warning Test" (EWT) and the Grade 11 *High School Proficiency Assessment* (HSPA). The assessments are aligned with the state's Core Curriculum Content Standards, adopted in May 1996. The HSPA is a comprehensive assessment that is criterion referenced, administered in the fall, and uses multiple methods, including multiple-choice, short- and extended response, and open-ended items. Open response counts for about 60% of the score in writing and about 25% in reading and mathematics.

New Jersey administers a state-developed alternate assessment for students who fail the graduation test. The Special Review Assessment (SRA) provides students with remedial coursework and an alternative form of assessment, and has helped tens of thousands of students to meet graduation requirements and to earn diplomas. The SRA policy developed from the recognition that some students, such as those in special education or with limited English proficiency, had learning needs that require different treatment than the regular standardized assessment system and that not all students adequately demonstrate their proficiency on standardized tests or other forms of statewide tests. The SRA was designed to provide a way for those students to demonstrate proficiency.

The SRA has 2 components: 1) remedial coursework; and 2) the administration of Performance Assessment Tasks (PATs). The remedial coursework is to begin in a timely manner after receipt of the individual score report indicating the students' failure on the HSPA. The coursework focuses on the specific areas of weaknesses as identified by the scores attained on the various tests of the HSPA. The second component allows the students to demonstrate attainment of knowledge through the completion of performance assessment tasks for each content area (reading, writing, math). The PATs are developed at a state level, and then administered and scored locally. Scorers are trained on the use of rubrics for scoring. Upon successful completion of the required number of PATs, the student has been deemed to demonstrate the appropriate acquisition of skills.

Beginning with the introduction of the HSPA in 2002, all students who did not score "proficient" on one or more tests are included in the SRA process. Students who are in the SRA process continue to take subsequent administrations of the HSPA until they show proficiency by the

score attained on the high school graduation test or demonstrate their knowledge by the successful completion of the SRA. A summary of the SRA Annual Survey for 2002 shows a total of 9,489 SRAs submitted by districts and approved by county offices. Of these, 7,559 were for general education students, 1,670 were for LEP and 260 were for special education. Beyond the number of general education students participating in the SRA, there are also approximately 7,000 students who receive special education exemptions from the high school graduation requirement.

In 2000-2001, New Jersey introduced an Alternate Proficiency Assessment for students with severe disabilities. The Offices of Assessment, Special Education, and Bilingual Education are working in close collaboration to identify and implement testing accommodations to better assess students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. In addition, there has been underway for the past three years a state-endorsed collaborative effort involving state officials, teacher unions, school boards, and members of the business community to develop additional alternatives to standardized tests in the form of “performance assessments,” to be administered for grades 3, 6, and 11. These assessments will be aligned with the state’s standards and are intended to augment the standardized tests required by the state and federal governments. However, unlike the standardized tests, the performance assessments will be based on scoring criteria known to students and teachers, initiating a more instructionally-centered approach to assessing proficiency and providing students with multiple ways to express and exhibit what they know, extending beyond the limitations of standardized tests.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's state testing policy is known as the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). The PSSA is a criterion-referenced assessment, based on standards adopted in 1999 for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening and Mathematics. Students are tested in 5th, 8th, and 11th grades in mathematics and reading and in 6th, 9th, and 11th grades in writing. Students’ performances on the state assessments are categorized as “advanced,” “proficient,” “basic” and “below basic” with 11th grade results recorded on transcripts.

The PSSA is intended to measure a student's attainment of the academic standards while also determining the degree to which school programs enable students to attain proficiency of the standards. Individual student scores, provided only to their respective schools, are used to assist teachers in identifying students who may be in need of additional educational opportunities, and school scores provide information to schools and districts for curriculum and instruction improvement discussions and planning.

All 501 districts and all students in Pennsylvania are required to take the PSSA, but it is not a high school exit exam required for graduation. The state’s policy on high school graduation indicates that students shall demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics on either the state assessments administered in Grade 11 or 12, or on local assessments aligned with academic standards. This means that local districts (including charter schools and Area Vocational Technical Schools) can develop and administer local assessments, use the state’s tests, or do a combination of both. Pennsylvania’s policy (Section§4.24) broadly specifies that, “the requirements for graduation shall include course completion and grades, completion of a

culminating project, and results of local assessments aligned with academic standards.” In encouraging districts to assess higher-order skills, the Pennsylvania’s policy on graduation defines that, “The purpose of the culminating project is to assure that students are able to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information and communicate significant knowledge and understanding.”

The Pennsylvania State Board, in adopting this policy in 2000, noted that it wanted to avoid over-reliance on a single instrument to make high-stakes decisions. Pennsylvania’s testing program does not deny diplomas, but, like Connecticut’s, it does reward those who do well on the state assessment by issuing differentiated certificates alongside the diploma. Starting in 2003, students who attain a score at the proficient level on the state assessment administered in Grade 10, 11, or 12 receive a Pennsylvania Certificate of Proficiency for that discipline. Students who attain a score at the advanced level of proficiency are granted a Pennsylvania Certificate of Distinction in that subject. Like New Jersey, Pennsylvania has also developed a specialized graduation option for students with disabilities. Children with disabilities are not exempt from the state assessments; however, those who satisfactorily complete a special education program developed by an Individualized Education Program can be awarded a regular high school diploma by the school district.

The information provided in this policy brief can be obtained from: New Jersey Department of Education (www.state.nj.us/education); Pennsylvania Department of Education (www.pde.state.pa.us); Connecticut Department of Education (www.state.ct.us/sde) and Connecticut State Board of Education (2001), *CAPT Second Generation Program Overview*.

	New Jersey	Pennsylvania	Connecticut
Areas and grades tested	Language arts, mathematics, science, arts, health and physical education (Grades 4, 8, 11), social studies, and world languages (Grades 8, 11) For graduation: Reading, writing, and mathematics on the HSPA	Reading and mathematics (Grades 5, 8, 11) Writing (Grades 6, 9, 11)	Reading, mathematics, and writing (Grades 4, 6, 8, 10) Science (Grade 10)
Title and nature of high school test	High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) administered in Grade 11 Criterion referenced assessment that consists of multiple choice, open-ended, and essay items. Student performance categorized as “advanced proficient,” “proficient,” or “partially proficient.”	Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) administered in Grade 11 Criterion reference assessment that consists of multiple choice, constructed response, and essay items. Student performance categorized as “advanced,” “proficient,” “basic,” and “below basic.”	Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) administered in Grade 10 Criterion reference assessment that includes multiple choice and open-ended items, short essays, and performance tasks.
Graduation requirements and options	Students must pass (score “proficient” or “advanced proficient”) in all areas of the HSPA to receive a NJ state diploma. Students who do not score “proficient” on one or more tests are included in the SRA (Special Review Assessment). SRA is locally assessed and consists of 1) remedial coursework; and 2) performance assessment tasks. Student may graduate by demonstrating their knowledge through the successful completion of the SRA or the HSPA.	State requires all students to participate in PSSA and to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics on either the state assessments or on local assessments aligned with the state’s standards. The state specifies that graduation requirements shall include: course completion and grades, completion of a culminating project, and results of local assessments aligned with academic standards Students who scored proficient or better in any subject area on the grade 11 PSSA or the grade 12 retest are eligible to receive a special Certificate of Proficiency or Distinction.	State requires students to take the CAPT but specifies that the test results cannot be used as the sole basis for graduation or promotion. Local and regional boards establish graduation requirements and can decide how to incorporate CAPT test results for the basis of awarding a high school diploma. Local districts must offer other performance assessments as a means for graduation. Students who meet or exceed the state goal standard in each content area received a Certificate of Mastery.