

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS TEAM

Melanie Willoughby  
Senior Vice President

Sara Bluhm  
Assistant Vice President  
Energy & Federal Affairs

David Brogan  
Vice President  
Environmental Policy &  
Small Business Issues

Christopher Emigholz  
Director  
Education Policy

Arthur Maurice  
First Vice President  
Economic Development &  
Taxation

Frank Robinson  
First Vice President  
Grassroots &  
Transportation

John Rogers, Esq.  
Vice President  
Human Resource Issues

Christine Stearns, Esq.  
Vice President  
Health & Legal Affairs

**To:** Chairman Cryan and the Assembly Education Committee  
**From:** Christopher Emigholz  
Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy  
New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA)  
**Date:** September 22, 2008  
**Re:** A-2250 (Cryan, Coutinho) – Eliminates SRA

---

Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing NJBIA the opportunity to testify on A-2250 and the broader issue of the use of the Special Review Assessment (SRA). My name is Christopher Emigholz, the Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy for the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA), and on behalf of the 22,000 businesses that we represent, I support the elimination of the SRA and tighter restrictions on the use of alternative graduation assessments. NJBIA is committed to improving the quality of education to improve our future workforce, and by increasing high school graduation standards, this bill will do just that.

**Need for Higher Standards:**

Employers from all over New Jersey will tell you that they have trouble in finding skilled employees, but there is also research to support this complaint. NJPRO, the nonprofit research foundation of NJBIA, recently released a report on improving the State's business climate entitled "Economic Policies and Solutions", and it found that 81% of employers said that the availability of skilled employees was their most important issue, employers' top concern. Yet only half of all employers were satisfied with the job that the State was doing to address this concern. NJBIA's own Business Outlook Survey also revealed that the State was not doing enough to prepare the workforce with only one-third of employers satisfied with high school graduates' readiness for entry-level jobs and less than one-third satisfied with many of the core competencies required in the workplace. The recent NJ STEPS report from the New Jersey High School Re-Design Steering Committee, which included Governor Corzine, Commissioner Davy and some of the State's key education associations, laid out a compelling case with substantial evidence for the need to increase standards in our high schools. There is no definitive way to know how much or how little the SRA is contributing to this lack of quality high school graduates, but it is probably fair to say that it is being overused in many schools and contributing to the problem. All of the evidence points to the fact that the bar must be raised in our high schools to make the high school degree more meaningful, improve the future workforce and maintain our economic competitiveness.

**Overuse of SRA – Lowering Standards:**

In 2006, 1 in 8 New Jersey graduates overall used the SRA, and 19 high schools had a majority of their graduates use it. These numbers are far too high for an alternative, which the SRA is meant to be. Imagine an employer hiring a new employee straight out of high school from one of those 19 high schools that overly relied on the SRA. More than half of the applicants could not pass the standard High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), yet still have the same high school diploma that everyone else does. Employers do not know what a high school diploma means and what kind of high school graduate they are getting. In addition, the graduates that passed the HSPA are lumped in with the students that could not because the diploma's meaning is in doubt. Reforms need to be undertaken to raise the standards required to graduate high school, push more students to take the standard test and strengthen the meaning of the high school diploma. This will help employers, as well as high school graduates.

Commissioner Davy, the State Department of Education and State Board of Education deserve credit for attempting to improve this situation with their actions several months ago to somewhat tighten restrictions on the SRA process, but it is unclear if that will be enough. Standardizing the administration of the test, moving to external scoring and mandating plans to reduce its usage in high-use high schools are all good steps in the right direction, but none of these reforms address the major problem with the SRA – too many students using it.

**Recommendations:**

The Department and State Board changed their original SRA plans from outright elimination to more modest reforms, but more needs to be done to dramatically reduce its use. If outright elimination is determined not to be the answer, the statute and code governing the alternative assessment needs to change. Only very few students should be eligible for an alternative assessment and the eligibility requirements should be specifically spelled out. Other states have qualifiers for taking the alternative so that only the appropriate students avail themselves of it. New Jersey should consider limiting the alternative assessment to only certain student populations that truly have no other alternative such as certain severely disabled students or students with a demonstrated and substantial hardship. Then for those few using the alternative, students should have to meet a rigorous set of standards including high attendance, high grades, and/or HSPA scores that were close to passing. The State should ensure that the alternative is never just another way to get out of high school for any and every student. It should just be for those that truly need it.

These reforms will require a change in statute because the SRA law currently reads “Any student who does not meet said requirements”, and my suggestion is that the SRA no longer be an option for “any” student. I would be happy to work with the Legislature, State Board and Department to help make this change.

**Response to Criticism:**

This reform would not be easy for all high schools, but ease for schools should never be the priority. High expectations of all learners are not easy, but are a critical part of educational success. Critics of limiting the SRA’s use often talk of increasing drop-out rates, but that may be overstated. I think it is an important thing to remember that New Jersey offers multiple chances to pass the HSPA, and more than half of all the students that failed a HSPA in their first attempt were close to passing. I am also sure that many high schools provide extra assistance to students preparing for the HSPA the first time, and additional help for students taking it again and again. Limiting SRA use will make students and high schools focus on preparing for the standard way to graduate high school, the HSPA, not necessarily increase drop-outs.

**Complimentary Bill:**

Lastly, NJBIA would like to take this opportunity to mention our support of A-1107 (Cryan, Lampitt, Fisher). If an alternative high school assessment continues to exist, A-1107 recommends that it not be part of the calculation of high school graduation rates. This would make high school graduation rates more meaningful and add to the transparency and accountability of New Jersey’s high schools.

NJBIA thanks you for considering our perspective on the SRA and hopes that we can work with this Committee, the State Board and Department to further limit the SRA and improve the future workforce.