

It's schools that fail the test

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When New Jersey high school students flunk all or a part of the standard graduation examination -- the High School Proficiency Assessment -- a backdoor route to a high school diploma opens.

It's called the Special Review Assessment, an alternative to the HSPA seen by some as unfair and by others as critically important for students who are not English-proficient or who suffer from severe test-taking anxiety. The HSPA is given only in English. The SRA is given in Spanish, Portuguese and Gujarati.

Last year the state Education Department announced plans to phase out the SRA. This fall's incoming high school freshmen were slated to be the first class that would have no choice but to take the HSPA. But now, shortly before resumption of the school year, the state has begun to backpedal, prodded in part by a new study that says it would be a mistake to abandon the SRA.

The state must not get weak-kneed and cling to the SRA as it is now constituted.

State Education Commissioner Lucille Davy wants to tighten the rules for use of the SRA so that it has the same rigor as the HSPA, which is administered over three days in 90-minute intervals and scored out of district. The SRA, however, is administered by local districts, and students have virtually no time limits on completing the test. Davy is looking at having the SRA scored out of district and clamping down on the time allowed for taking the test.

These are reasonable stopgap measures, but the state has to strike at the heart of the problem. And that's the quality of education students get, beginning in elementary school. In some cases, students are asked to pass portions of the HSPA even though they've never studied the subject, such as algebra.

During the 2006 school year, 12 percent of seniors -- roughly 13,000 students -- relied on the SRA to graduate; the year before, the number was 15,000. It may be that the drop occurred because the state had threatened to abandon the alternate test, so teachers and students got serious about the HSPA.

In the state's poorest districts, a third of the students relied on the SRA. At 19 schools in Newark, Jersey City, Camden, Trenton, East Orange, Irvington and Pleasantville, half the graduates used the SRA last year. But the problem is not limited to the cities. The largest growth in the use of the SRA has occurred in the suburbs. Last year, 8 percent of high school graduates in middle-income districts used the SRA, a 124 percent increase, and 3 percent in the wealthiest districts, a 144 percent jump.

All of this ought to be troubling to parents, educators and students. Many students are graduating without the skills needed to compete effectively in the job market or in college.

Ending the SRA outright would have dire consequences. Dropout rates would likely increase, but continuing the charade of awarding diplomas that are hardly worth the

paper they are printed on is just as bad.

The use of the SRA is a manifestation of a bigger problem: failing school districts. Correcting that problem will eliminate the need for the SRA in all but the rarest situations.

The long shots

By [Matt Friedman](#) - August 28, 2007
<http://www.politicsnj.com/long-shots-11266>

Some candidates will admit they're long shots, that the odds are stacked against them. But they don't consider themselves "kamikaze candidates."

Take Rev. Clenard H. Childress, Jr. who's running for the State Assembly as a Republican in the 34th District. Talk to him about his campaign, and you can tell he's a man of faith.

"Most of what I do is long shots, trust me. But I believe our message resonates with the community, and we're looking forward to a spirited debate," said Childress, a Montclair resident who is running with Robert Bianco; there is no Republican state Senate candidate.

To say that North Jersey's urban core is dominated by Democrats is an understatement.

In many of the urban districts, like the 33rd, Democratic state Senate nominee Brian Stack is running against, well, nobody. But in the part-urban 34th and the neighboring 35th, which is dominated by the City of Paterson, there are a few Republicans willing to throw their hats in the ring.

Childress, a former Democrat who lost an Assembly primary in 2005 and just switched parties in January, is running in a district with its second biggest chunk in East Orange, a city that's 90 percent African-American. The district has a 3-1 Democratic registration advantage and is currently represented by three Democrats: State Sen. Nia Gill, Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver and Assemblyman Thomas Giblin, all of whom are up for re-election.

When Childress ran two years ago, he was picked to run on a ticket with two-term incumbent Peter Eagler, who had been dumped by the Essex Democratic organization. But when Eagler found out that Childress was strongly pro-life (he serves as the Regional Director of the Life Education and Resource Network (LEARN), a group that equates abortion with genocide) and an opponent of gay rights, he dropped his re-election bid, leaving the Montclair Minister alone on the ballot.

Childress said that his door to door campaigning brings out some surprise when voters hear him utter the word "Republican."

"There are some raised eyebrows when I say 'Republican,' but I do point them to my website and let them know that our values are the same," said Childress, who says the "status quo" Democrats who represent his district don't share some of his values.

And despite the district's strong Democratic tilt, Childress is unabashedly pro-life and anti-gay marriage, something that he thinks may appeal to more

socially conservative black voters.

"I believe it is proven whenever marriage is protected, in other words one man, one woman to raise children," said Childress. "Children always receive the worst if there's only one parent there."

Assemblyman Thomas Giblin, a former Democratic State Chairman who was elected to the Legislature two years ago, disputed Childress's contention that he was part of a status quo. He said he's been very active on local issues, particularly education, having restored several budget cuts that he said would have impacted East Orange.

"I would hope that the voters of the 34th district vote for me on my qualifications and my past record, not necessarily on my party label," said Giblin.

Giblin's running mate, Assemblywoman Sheila Oliver, said she hadn't seen much of Childress campaigning and speculated that he was trying to boost his profile to seek an elected position later on in Montclair.

David P. Rebovich, Managing Director of the Rider University Institute for New Jersey Politics, said that long-shot candidates often fall into three categories: those seeking to boost their political profiles, those seeking greater name recognition for personal reasons and those tapped by the party to at least make the incumbents campaign a little, thus tying up at least some money that could be sent to other, more competitive races.

As for Childress's conservative social views, Rebovich doubted that they would resonate with the district's large African-American community.

"While of course there's considerable evidence that shows that strong numbers of African-Americans are pro-life and anti-gay marriage, these positions don't typically translate into support for Republicans," said Rebovich.

Next door in the 35th district, Chauncey Brown III, another African-American Republican candidate, stands alone as the only member of his party's legislative ticket.

That's in contrast to 2005, when Brown placed third in a five-way race for the Republican Assembly nomination.

Brown, a fire captain and member of the Paterson school board, grew up here in New Jersey's third largest city to politically involved parents. His father, Chauncey Brown, Jr., held several positions in the cabinet of former Republican Paterson Mayor Lawrence Pat Kramer. His mother, Bettie J. Brown, was the city's welfare director and is currently its Republican municipal chairwoman.

"I'm the person who's going to be the benefactor of their hard work," said

Brown.

This district's numbers aren't as heavily Democratic as those of the 34th, with Democrats holding only a 10 point registration advantage on Republicans, but they're still daunting. In 2005, Assembly incumbents Nellie Pou and Alfred Steele each beat their Republican opponents, Deborah Shortway (who passed away shortly before the election) and Rinaldo D'Argenio, by nearly 40 points.

But Brown is banking on the credibility he's established as a school board member in Paterson, which dominates the district, to make him a competitive candidate. He noted that during his first election to the school board, he was the second highest vote getter out of ten candidates.

Brown said that Paterson has been largely ignored by the state government, and that any property tax relief offered by Democrats was insufficient.

"I don't believe the democratic legislators in our district are serving the people and the children," said Brown. "You're talking about a budget that is astronomical and there has been no relief from the state side."

If past election results are to be believed, Brown doesn't stand much of a chance against two well entrenched legislators. But hope springs eternal.

"I think I have a better shot than just about anyone else. I'm African-American, I'm coming out of Paterson, I have a great shot," said Brown. "If you win Paterson, you win the election."