



2015 POLITICAL ACTION PROJECT

During NEW Leadership™ New Jersey, you will be divided into small groups to work on the political action project. The action project is a role playing exercise that will require you to research a current public policy issue and work with your group to prepare a presentation for the last day of the program. Each person in the group must participate in the presentation on Tuesday.

The topic for this year is **PARCC Testing**. The shift from previous state versions of standardized tests to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Career and College (PARCC) has renewed the debate surrounding standardized testing in New Jersey. For this exercise, we will be examining a bill that has passed in the New Jersey Assembly and is currently sitting in the New Jersey Senate. Each group will be assigned a position; either for or against the bill, or as a member of the New Jersey Senate Education Committee.

You may find that you are assigned to a group that takes a position or approach that you would not take in “real life.” *This is a learning exercise!* It is important, especially in politics, to understand the perspectives and strategies of your opposition.

The Action Project is a role-playing exercise. Each of you will portray an individual who has a stake in this issue. Think about the following questions: *Who are you? Who do you represent? Why do you care about this issue? Why should decision makers care about your opinion?*

The action project will involve several skill-building aspects:

1. Working in a group across differences
2. Researching an issue
3. Identifying constituencies, coalition partners, opponents and allies
4. Crafting a message to articulate your group’s position
5. Preparing an issue brief or press release
6. Making a presentation to encourage support for your position

Action Project schedule:

- Saturday morning, June 6: Receive your group assignment.
- Sunday morning, June 7: Meet with your group and begin developing a message and strategy.
- Sunday afternoon, June 7: Consult with policy experts, work in groups
- Monday evening, June 8: Complete your presentation
- Tuesday morning, June 9: Action Project presentations

As you proceed with this exercise, please keep the following in mind:

People are likely to be articulating arguments and using research that they don't necessarily support or believe. Although you may disagree with the opinion expressed, please show respect for the individual.

Advocacy groups work not only toward achieving their policy goals, but also to promote their issue stances and educate the public. Effective advocacy groups and coalitions utilize a variety of skills and strategies.

Think about how you can use the skills and contributions of each group member in your research, organizing and presentation. It is good to play to people's strengths, but equally good to support people in trying something new and taking risks.

Work hard to produce an excellent action plan. However, remember that in this short time, no one expects you to achieve perfection.

Try to be realistic, but also be creative! Use your imagination and have fun!

Action project final presentations:

Tuesday June 9, 9:30 – 11:30 am at the Ruth Dill Johnson Crockett Building

Presentations on Tuesday morning will take two forms:

Press Conference at the State House:

Groups 4 and 5 will participate in a press conference in support of the bill. Each group will have 10 minutes to present their statement at the press conference and answer questions from the press. Members of the Eagleton Institute of Politics/CAWP staff will be acting as members of the press and asking questions.

Committee Hearing:

Group 1 students will serve as members of the New Jersey Senate's Education Committee. The Committee will hold a hearing on the proposed bill. The committee chair will open the hearing.

Groups 2 and 3 will testify before the committee. Each group will have 10 minutes to present testimony at the hearing. Group 1 (legislators) will have a 5 minutes to ask questions of each group testifying.

All members of each group are required to participate in the presentation on Tuesday morning.

Overview of Action Project Topic Introduction: PARCC Testing

For this action project you will focus on a bill currently in the NJ Senate, S2767. The bill establishes a statewide mandate that requires all school districts to have a policy in place, beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, that allows parents to opt out of PARCC testing. Bill S2767 would allow a parent or guardian of a student to provide written notification to a school that the student will not participate in PARCC assessment tests.

Standardized testing has long been a subject of debate in education policy. In New Jersey, the transition from the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) and High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) tests to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Career and College (PARCC) test has continued that debate. Twelve states have adopted the PARCC assessments, which were created in partnership with Pearson Education. Field tests were conducted in Spring 2013 with 44 schools and expanded to include 1200 schools in Spring 2014. Spring 2015 saw the first round of mandated statewide PARCC testing, accompanied by protests and clashes over allowing students (or their families) to opt out of the exams.

New Jersey Governor Christie has shifted his position on the PARCC assessments. The Governor voiced his support for the Common Core standards and chose to join the PARCC consortium in line with that support. In July 2014, the Governor issued an executive order creating a task force to investigate the effectiveness of state testing. In response to growing tensions around the issue, the Governor also agreed to lessen the test's impact on teacher evaluations through 2016. However, he ultimately supports standardized testing that he believes keeps schools and teachers accountable in a uniform manner because of his belief that individual student grades can be subjective and inconsistent. Under Governor Christie, the **State** Department of Education supports PARCC, believing that New Jersey students need technological access and understanding in order to grow academically.

The coalition We Raise NJ, which consists of the NJ PTA, NJ Principals and Supervisors Association, NJ Chamber of Commerce, NJ Council of County Colleges, NJ School Boards Association, NJ Association of School Administrators, and New Jersey Campaign for Achievement Now (JerseyCAN), supports PARCC testing.

The coalition supports revamping assessments as time warrants; the NJASK and HSPA tests were in place since 1989, and they believe it is now time to move forward. They advocate for a "monitor and adjust" approach, which entails watching the assessments roll out, including administration and student performance, and making adjustments where necessary to ensure student success. They believe that the PARCC testing could help make students more competitive upon graduation. As for parental opt-out, they stress that high numbers of opt-outs jeopardize federal school funding. They are also concerned that high opt-out levels undermine the "monitor and adjust" approach because a reduced number of participants may skew results.

The NJEA has been adamant in its opposition to PARCC. They oppose "high stakes" testing that they believe takes away from teacher freedom and classroom time. They also strongly oppose the

use of testing in teacher evaluations. The NJEA supports opt-outs because they contend that parents know what is best for their children. They stress that children should not be punished for the decision to opt out by being forced to sit and stare at the computer while their peers test.

Save Our Schools NJ is against the PARCC testing, believing that the increased focus on a new nationally-based assessment places too much pressure on students and reduces academics to a test score. They also oppose “high stakes” standardized testing because they believe that test scores should not influence important decisions like funding, teacher employment, and student advancement. Save Our Schools NJ believes PARCC is expensive and places too great a financial burden on schools, many of which are already struggling. They also fear testing-centric curriculums that could limit good teachers’ positive impacts and may encourage some people to leave the profession or discourage others from ever entering. Save Our Schools NJ supports opt-outs and encourages protections against punitive actions taken by schools in response to opt-outs.

Speak Up NJ has opposed the PARCC as well for many reasons similar to Save Our Schools NJ’s concerns. They believe that focus on the implementation and administration of PARCC will divert attention and funding away from other curricula. They also voice concerns about the debatable reliability of standardized test scores, which they believe are an ineffective measure of student learning and teacher effectiveness.

Bill Summary

SENATE Bill No. 2767

SYNOPSIS

Allows parent or guardian to exclude student from administration of certain assessments.

STATEMENT

This bill allows a parent or guardian of a student to provide written notification to a school district or charter school that the student will not participate in the administration of an assessment developed by the consortium of states known as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC assessments). No later than September 30 of each school year, a district or charter school shall provide information to parents and guardians regarding the PARCC assessments that will be administered during the school year. The parent or guardian would be required to provide written notification no later than 14 days before the administration of a PARCC assessment that the assessment is not to be administered to the student.

A school district or charter school would be required to provide educationally appropriate alternative activities for a student who, under the bill, is not participating in the administration of a PARCC assessment. Any such alternative activity must occur in a room other than the room in which the assessment is being administered.

Nothing in the bill is to be construed to exempt a student from any high school graduation requirement established under current law.

Action Project Groups

Group 1

You will serve as member of the NJ Senate Education Committee. This committee will be presiding over hearings on Bill S2767. Your responsibility as a committee member is to arrive prepared with thoughtful questions for each group. A committee chair will open and preside over the hearing. At the end of the hearing you will cast a vote that you believe best serves the public interest. You will be asked to articulate the reasons for your vote. The committee will have 5 minutes to ask prepared questions of each group testifying.

Group 2

You are representing **organizations that are in favor of Bill S2767, mandating that districts allow students to opt out of PARCC testing.** The New Jersey Education Association, Save Our Schools NJ and Speak Up NJ all support tenets of Bill S2767. You will testify at a public committee hearing in support of Bill S2767. The group will have 10 minutes to present testimony at the hearing. Group 1 (the committee) will have 5 minutes to ask questions of your group.

Group 3

You are representing **organizations that oppose Bill S2767, mandating that districts allow students to opt-out of PARCC testing.** You will testify at a public hearing on S2767. The coalition We Raise NJ which supports PARCC testing includes such organizations as NJ PTA, NJ Principals and Supervisors Association, NJ Chamber of Commerce, NJ Council of County Colleges, NJ School Boards Association, NJ Association of School Administrators, and New Jersey Campaign for Achievement Now (JerseyCAN). The group will have 10 minutes to present testimony at the hearing. Group 1 (the committee) will have 5 minutes to ask a set of prepared questions of your group

Group 4

You are a coalition of citizens who are going to hold a press conference in support of Bill S2767. You are an ally of Group 2. Each group must prepare a press release and present a 10 minute press conference to encourage public support for your position. You will be questioned by members of the press.

Groups 5

You are a coalition of citizen who are going to hold a press conference in opposition of Bill S2767. You are an ally of Group 3. Each group must prepare a press release and present a 10 minute press conference to encourage public support for your position. You will be questioned by members of the press.

Action Project Resources

You may want to review these resources before you arrive. You will be given your group assignment and additional resources on Saturday June 6.

7 things you should know about PARCC standardized tests | NJ.com |
http://www.nj.com/education/2015/01/7_things_you_should_know_about_parcc.html

Taking the PARCC: Parents test new state exams | NJ.com |
http://www.nj.com/education/2015/02/parcc_parents_take_test.html

Parents respond to PARCC exams.

Parents revolt against new standardized PARCC test | dailyrecord.com |
<http://www.dailyrecord.com/story/news/local/new-jersey/2015/02/15/parents-revolt-new-standardized-parcc-test/23344333/>

Criticisms, support and links to more information about PARCC tests.

Legislators, School Districts Scramble to Put PARCC Policies in Place | njspotlight.com |
<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/15/02/08/legislators-school-districts-scramble-to-put-parcc-policies-in-place/>

This article focuses on how different schools and districts will let students opt-out.

Fine Print: PARCC Opt-Out Bill Passes Unanimously in State Assembly | njspotlight.com |
<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/15/03/26/fine-print-parcc-opt-out-bill-passes-assembly-unanimously/>