

**CALL TO ACTION: GRADUATION FOR ALL!**  
**A Report on the State of High School**  
**Education in Jersey City**  
**September 8, 2009**

Danielle Farrie, PhD  
Education Law Center  
973-624-1815

Mahmood Ketabchi, Lead Organizer  
P.C.U.E. – S.E.O.C.  
201-918-2918

**Introduction**

Parents and Communities United for Education (PCUE), the Jersey City chapter of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC), is a grass root organization dedicated to organizing public school parents and community members to improve Jersey City school system. PCUE works for changes that will provide *all* the city's children with a high quality of education, regardless of economic status, neighborhood environment, race, and ethnicity. Over the last year, PCUE launched a successful campaign to assure that school officials test all our schools for lead in the drinking water, notify parents and the community of the testing schedule and test results, and provide all public school children with safe water. Education Law Center (ELC) advocates on behalf of public school children for access to an equal and adequate education under state and federal laws, focusing especially on improving public education for disadvantaged children, and children with disabilities and other special needs.

The rally on September 8, 2009 is focused on highlighting the urgent call to graduate ALL our youth/children from high school and provide them a quality education that prepares them for college and the world of work. The State has implemented rigorous new requirements for high school graduation. The plan requires all students to complete a set of college prep courses, including advanced math and science courses, and to take new end-of-course exams currently under development. Changes are also being made to the process and administration of the Special Assessment Review (SRA). If the district does not address the reasons why Jersey City schools have performed so poorly in the past, these schools will never be able to adequately prepare students to meet the new graduation requirements. We are calling for new policies and practices to transform Jersey City high schools and to ensure that all students get the education they deserve.

We are providing data on the current state of Jersey City high schools to highlight the need for dramatic improvement.

### **High School Assessments: HSPA and SRA**

Results of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade assessment demonstrate that far too few students are adequately educated in Jersey City high schools. In 2008, 64 percent of students passed the HSPA in language arts and 49 percent passed math. These rates vary dramatically by school, with nearly all students in McNair, a selective magnet school, passing both sections, while at Snyder, less than half of the students passed the language arts section and a dismal 22 percent passed the math section (see Figure 1).

Jersey City has made little progress in improving test scores over time. Jersey City students drastically under-perform compared to the rest of the state, and this performance gap remains wide and persistent. In 2008, Jersey City students performed 21 percentage points below the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks in language arts, and 25 percentage points below AYP in math (see Figures 2 and 3).

Passing the HSPA is a requirement for graduation. With pass rates so low in Jersey City, many students use an alternative assessment to receive their high school diplomas. In the class of 2008, nearly 400 seniors, roughly one-third of the graduating class, used the Special Review Assessment (SRA) after they failed to pass the HSPA. The high schools in Jersey City vary widely in the extent to which the SRA is used. While all graduating students at McNair were able to pass the HSPA, nearly half of the graduates at Ferris did not and graduated through SRA. While the SRA is a useful alternative for some students, the relatively large proportion of students using this route in Jersey City suggests that the process is being overused. Jersey City schools should be doing a better job of adequately educating students and providing them with the skills necessary to pass the HSPA (see Figure 4).

### **Graduation Rates and Attrition**

According to the Department of Education's (DOE) method for measuring graduation rates, one in four Jersey City students fail to graduate (see Figure 5). The method used by the DOE does not distinguish how long it takes students to graduate. The students graduating in 2008 may have taken four, five, or even six years to complete high school. In order to get a precise estimate of the graduation rate, the method used by the DOE requires accurate accounting of the number of students who dropout of school. Because many students 'disappear' from the system, but are never officially counted as dropouts, the graduation rate may actually be overestimated. For example, while Jersey City reported that 108 10<sup>th</sup> graders dropped out of school in 2006-07 (the last year for which data is available), there were 289 fewer 11<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in 2007-08 than 10<sup>th</sup> graders in 2006-07. While some of this discrepancy can be explained by out of district moves or retention policies, it is likely that schools are under-reporting the number of students who dropout.

Figure 6 shows attrition rates between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades for each high school. In Jersey City overall, there were 2,161 9<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in the fall of 2004-05 school year. Four years later, this size of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade class shrank to 1,461, a 32% drop. While this data should be interpreted with caution (many high schools have a 9<sup>th</sup> grade 'bulge' as a result of high levels of retention, and it is possible that students leave Jersey City high schools but enroll elsewhere), the district clearly needs to address high levels of attrition and dropout from schools.

### **Preparation for College and Work: SAT**

While there is no data available to tell us how Jersey City students fare once they leave high school, their performance on the SAT exams can tell us how prepared they are for college work. Figure 7 shows the SAT scores and participation rates for Jersey City schools compared to the state. Because the SAT is required for admission at many colleges and universities, the participation rate can signify the extent to which students are considering post-secondary education. While overall participation rates for the district are not that much lower than the state (70 percent v. 74 percent respectively), students at some schools are clearly more college focused than other. For example, all McNair students took the SAT while only 60 percent of Lincoln students did. Average SAT scores show that Jersey City students are not performing well. All schools except McNair have average scores far below the state average on both the math and verbal sections of the test. The average scores at Snyder and Lincoln are between 140 and 160 points below the state average.

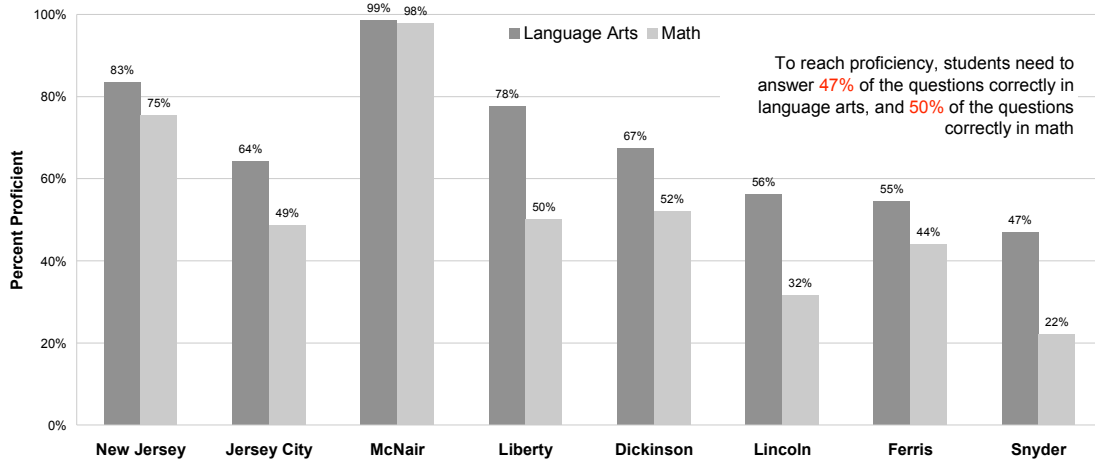
### **A Call to Action**

The data presented demonstrate the current failings of the education system in Jersey City. With so few students able to pass the relatively low bar set by the HSPA, the district seems poised for failure when expectations are raised under the secondary redesign initiative unless significant changes are made. How will the students pass rigorous courses and high-stakes end of course exams when schools are not currently preparing them to pass the HSPA?

P.C.U.E. is calling for the district to implement bold and innovative policies to ensure that all students in Jersey City graduate high school well prepared for college or work. To that end, P.C.U.E.'s proposals call on district officials to build genuine partnership with parents and the community, to provide effective student support programs, to support our teachers and school staff, and to upgrade computer technology labs and make them accessible to all students. These proposals have been developed over the course of a few months through discussions and fact finding with parents, students, teachers, and district administrators. Our proposals are also informed by best policies and practices advocated by parent organizations, youth groups, and educators, or they are implemented by other schools districts.

Figure 1.

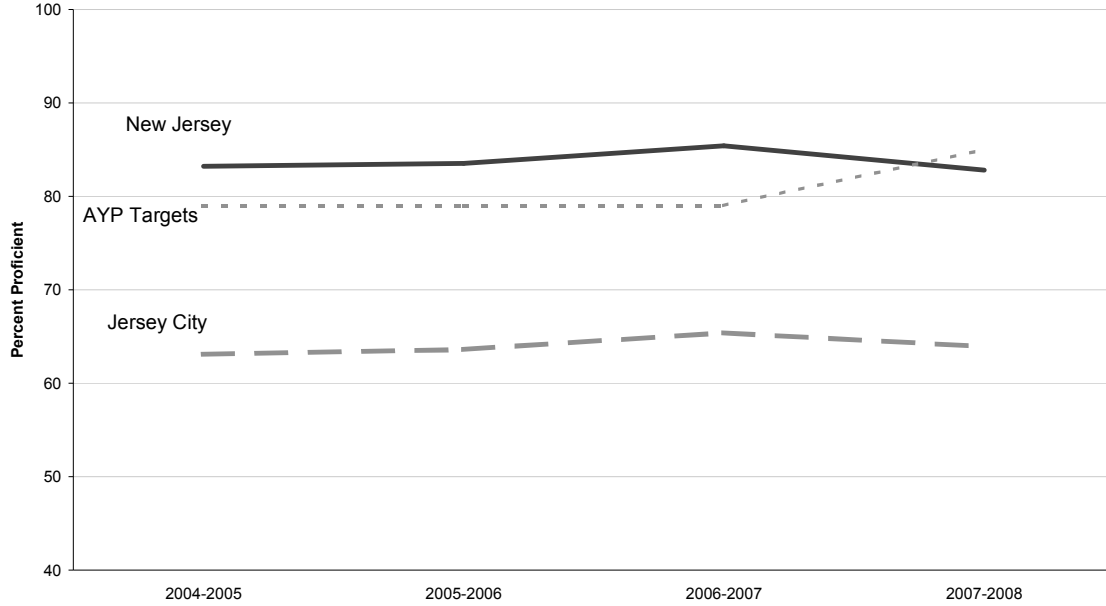
**In 2008, nearly 500 students in Jersey City failed the Language Arts section of the HSPA, and nearly 700 failed the Math section**



Source: 2008 School Report Card

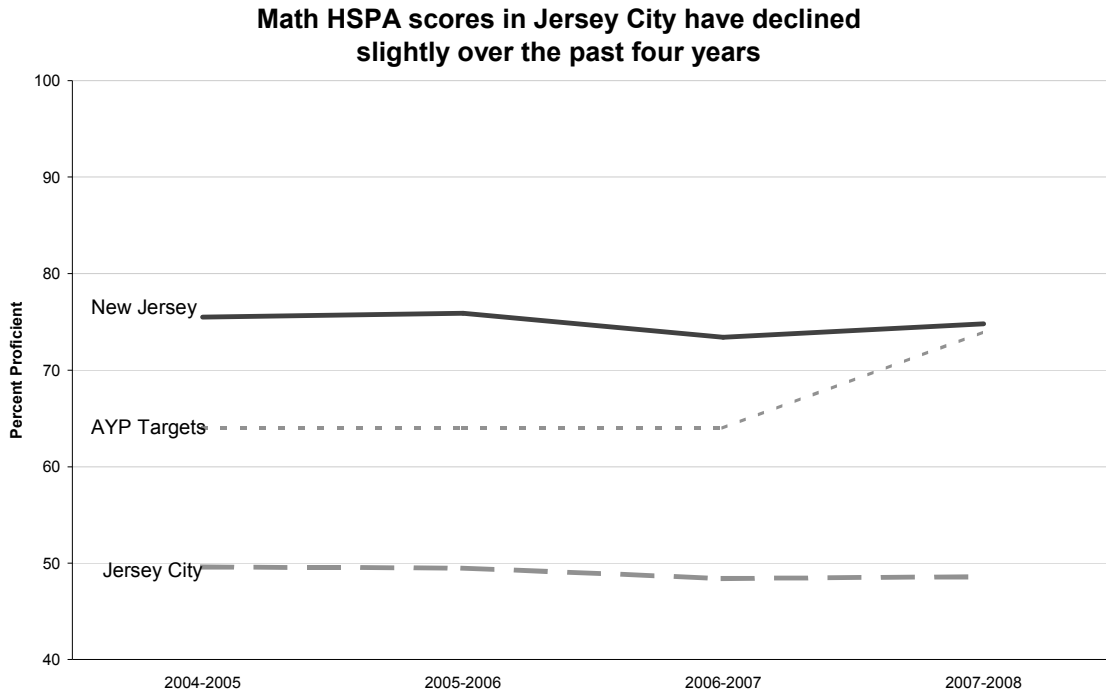
Figure 2.

**Language Arts HSPA scores in Jersey City have remained relatively flat over the past four years**



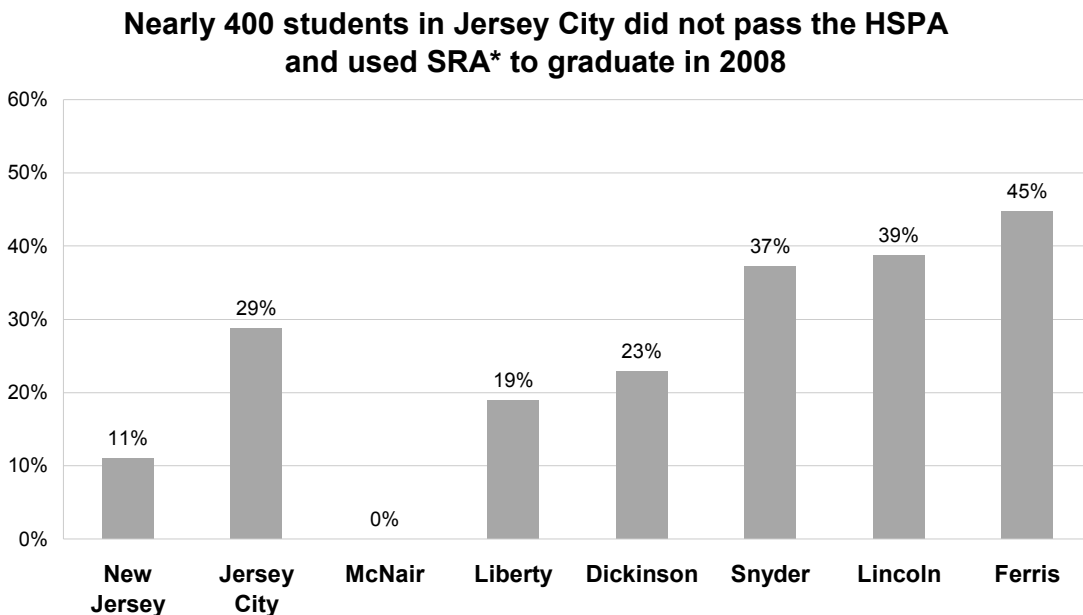
Source: 2005-2008 School Report Card

Figure 3.



Source: 2005-2008 School Report Card

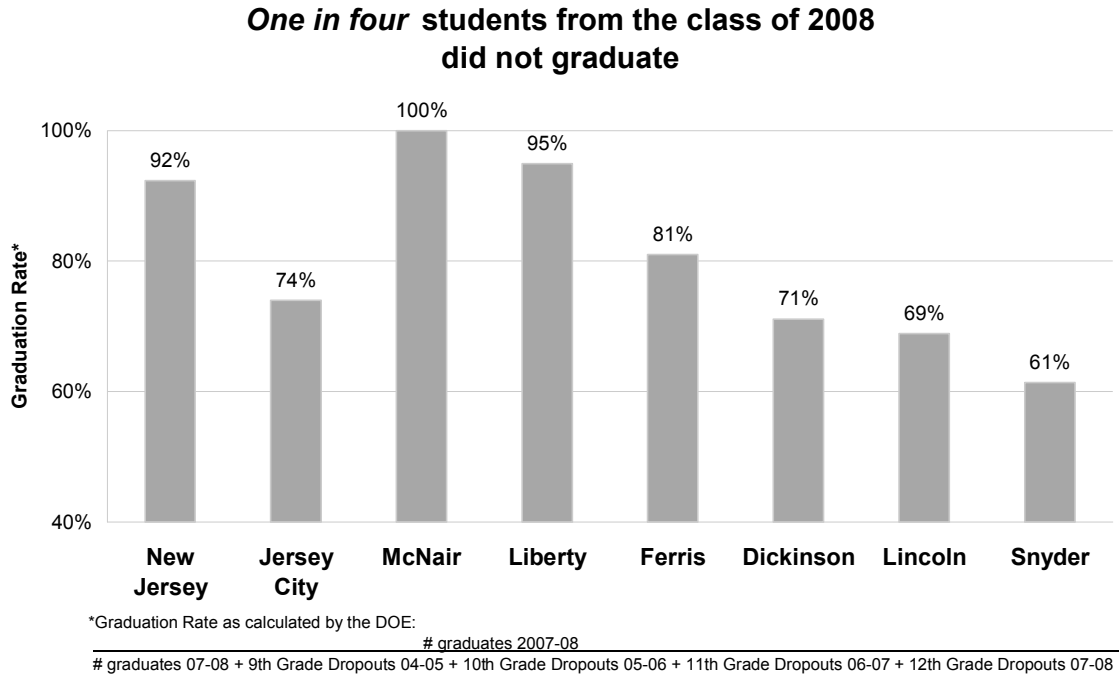
Figure 4.



\*SRA = Special Review Assessment for those students unable to pass the HSPA (11th Grade Assessment)

Source: 2008 School Report Card

Figure 5.



Source: 2008 School Report Card

Figure 6.

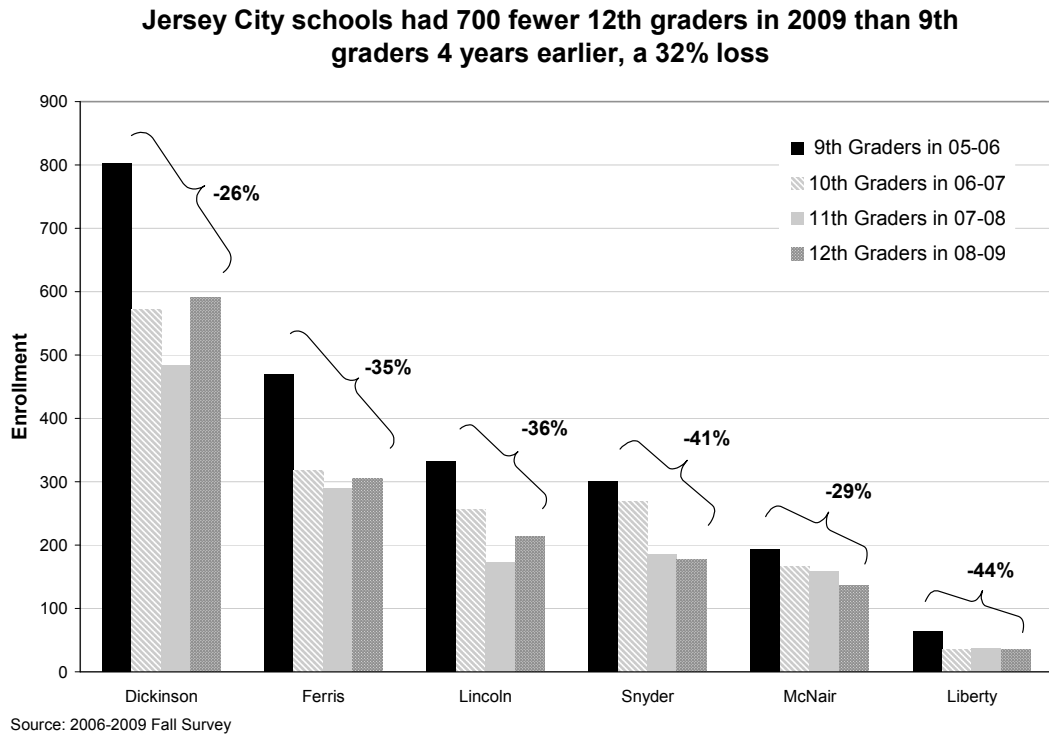
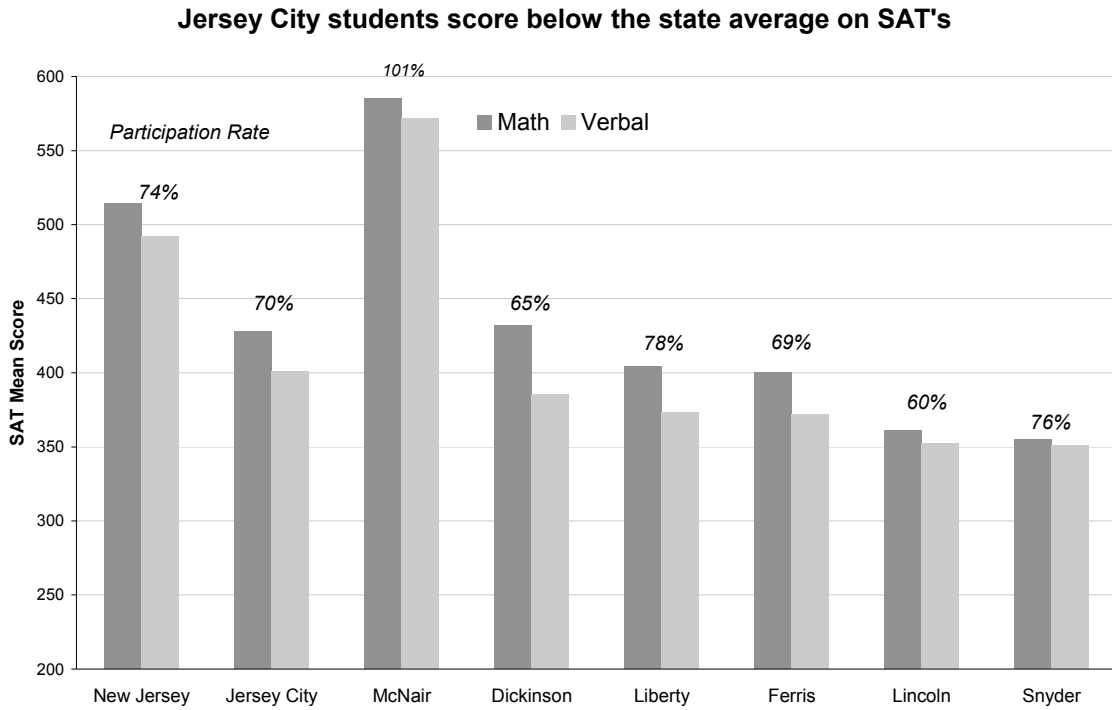


Figure 7.



Source: 2008 School Report Card