



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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October 24, 2013

Colleagues,

During times of change and transition, it's important to clarify the values and vision underlying our decisions, policies, and practices. Since we began four years ago to implement the Regents Reform agenda focused on ensuring that all of our students graduate college and career ready, issues and concerns have arisen. It's not surprising; any endeavor as significant and important as this will always have need of adjustment.

While the number and frequency of state assessments has remained relatively constant over the last decade (and is largely dictated by requirements in federal law), the Board of Regents, the State Education Department (SED), and I recognize that a variety of pressures at the state and local level may have resulted in more testing than is needed and in rote test preparation that crowds out quality instruction.

Of course, testing is an important part of the instructional cycle and necessary to monitor student academic progress and contribute to decisions at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. **However, the amount of testing should be the minimum necessary to inform effective decision-making.** Test results should be used only as one of multiple measures of progress, and tests should reflect our instructional priorities. That is why New York State's Common Core assessments emphasize critical thinking, reading challenging texts, opportunities for students to write with evidence drawn from texts, and math questions that require students to demonstrate their mathematical reasoning through real world application. Students are best prepared to succeed academically through rigorous and engaging instruction, not rote test preparation.

Teaching is the core of our work. The goal is not to create more tests or more teaching to the tests. In order to begin to address concerns about testing that is not needed and rote test prep, this past Monday (October 21), **the Board of Regents discussed a comprehensive initiative to keep the focus on teaching in New York State schools.** That initiative includes the following:

- Eliminate Double-Testing in Grade 8. Currently, eighth grade students who take accelerated math are required by the US Education Department (USED) to take both the Regents Exam in Algebra and the Grade 8 Mathematics exam. Thanks to SED's advocacy, USED is now willing to consider allowing these eighth graders to take only the Regents Exam. The Board has authorized me to send USED a proposal to

amend the New York ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) waiver to reflect this change.

- Offer smarter testing options. As part of New York's next waiver request to the USED, SED is exploring offering Native Language Arts tests for English language learners. And we are preparing a request to allow students with severe disabilities who are not eligible for the alternate tests to be tested based on instructional level rather than chronological age. We are exploring options to reward districts when students demonstrate proficiency on both traditional Regents Exams and an optional high quality Career and Technical Education (CTE) assessment. We are also looking at future funding options to allow us to eliminate field testing for multiple-choice test questions and reduce the time necessary for field tests of constructed response questions.
- Offer grants to help districts reduce local standardized testing. Using Race to the Top funding, SED will offer grants to local school districts to support the principle that "Teaching is the Core." Grant recipients would commit to review all local assessment practices to ensure that all local tests help inform instruction and improve student learning. And grant recipients would receive funding to support high quality Common Core instruction and classroom activities that support evidence-based decision-making (including multi-disciplinary projects, research papers, oral presentations, etc.).

The slides that were presented to the Board on Monday can be found at <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2013Meetings/October2013/AssessmentUpdate.pdf>.

Although the work is complex, the vision is simple. The best preparation for student success is a great teacher providing great instruction. To make sure students get that great instruction, teachers, students, parents, and the public need feedback about student progress. State assessments – which provide comparable results across classrooms, schools, and districts – are an important part of that feedback process. The Regents and the Department will continue to look for ways to reduce testing that is not needed without sacrificing the valuable information assessments provide. We welcome your input.

We all know learning rigorous content and taking rigorous assessments can be challenging for students. The best way to prevent those challenges from turning into stress for our students is for the adults in their lives to be supportive and affirming. Assessments are only a moment for students to demonstrate what they know and can do, so that adults can determine how to help students achieve even more. A positive approach to the right level of assessments can help students avoid stress and perform to the best of their abilities. If we provide students with the proper support and the right message, challenging content will build their knowledge, skills, and confidence.

We also know it is okay to challenge students; school is the time for both challenge and support. It's far better to challenge students now, when teachers and parents are there to help them when they struggle, than to continue to let our students leave school without the right tools and knowledge to become successful adults. The tragedy of walking out of high school into a lifetime empty of opportunity is far too real for too many of our students.

There are approximately 64,800 minutes in the typical school year. Each year, a maximum of 540 of those minutes are devoted to State tests in Grades 3-8 ELA and math – less than 1% of the school year. It's what we do with the other roughly 64,000 minutes that will determine how successful our students become. As we focus on good teaching and rigorous learning standards, please consider using [EngageNY.org](http://www.engageny.org) materials to prompt the conversations that establish school- and district-wide goals (visit <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-metrics-expectations-2013-2014>).

Lasting and meaningful improvements in teaching and learning happen only when educators work together to improve over time with the proper supports. We must teach our way through this moment. Teaching is the core.

Sincerely



John B. King, Jr.  
Commissioner