



October 8, 2003

BOARD OF REGENTS MULLS REDUCING PASSING SCORES Math And Science Eyed

By **KATHLEEN LUCADAMO**

Students, cross your fingers.

The state Board of Regents may decide today whether to scale back math and science standards in high schools.

The 16-member board will debate whether to keep the pass rate on math and science exams at 55 or raise them to 65. Under a board requirement starting in 2005, students who score lower than 65 won't get to graduate.

Already, thousands of students are flunking the exams and school officials fear that number will multiply when the higher standards kick in.

"We put in a very strong policy about standards and assessment. Part of the responsibility of the board is to consider the consequences of such a policy," Regent Member Merryl Tisch said.

The board was to take up the issue at its November meeting, but bumped up the conversation for today's monthly meeting. Members may still wait until next month for the vote, Ms. Tisch predicted.

The conversation will be fueled by the results of an investigation on last year's physics and math Regents exams today, which are due today.

Parents, students, and school officials cried outrage last June when the average grade on the math exam was 46 - five points lower than the results in 2002.

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills assembled a 13-member panel to examine the test. The panel concluded the test was too hard, and he invalidated the scores for juniors and seniors.

The tests are being rescored on a curve for freshmen and sophomores. More in-depth findings on the exam are due today along with a report on the difficulty of the physics exam.

Only 40% of the students passed the last physics exam, which prompted Regents Chairman Robert Bennett to launch a study of the test.

But the math and physics exams aren't the only source of testing controversy.

Time Out from Testing, an anti-highstakes testing group, yesterday released flaws they found on the English, global studies and geography, U.S. history, and living environment Regents. They asked a team of 50 college professors, journalists, and other educators to take and evaluate the tests.

A Columbia University literature professor, Robert O'Meally, wasn't impressed with the English exam.

On the multiple-choice portion, he said, a student trained in testing would find the answer, but the one who mastered literature would struggle with a few choices.

"I find that disheartening," he said.

A snippet from Readers Digest wasn't appropriate for a literature test, he said after finding one on the exam. "The student who has fallen in love with Dickens, Toni Morrison, and Shakespeare is being asked to evaluate a piece of fluff. It's a travesty," Mr. O'Meally said.

"Students who do poorly on this test aren't necessarily going to do poorly at Columbia," he said.

The multiple-choice questions on global studies exam were "a peculiar mix of the trivial, the self-evident and the historically inaccurate," and the living environment Regent could hurt the practice of science education, Time Out testers found.

"A single instrument shouldn't determine a student's future," said a cochairwoman of Time Out, Ann Cook.

Copyright The New York Sun 2003. All Rights Reserved.