



Debate continues over fairness of state Regents exams

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ALBANY -- New York should stop requiring that students pass the Regents exams to graduate from high school, a new statewide group called Time Out From Testing said Monday, a day before the state Legislature's first hearing on the topic.

The state needs to "restore balance, accuracy and sanity" to the testing system before requiring exams for graduation, said Charles Fowler, superintendent of schools in Hewlett-Woodmere, Nassau County.

Fowler is a member of Time Out From Testing, a group of parent, teacher and community organizations that want standardized testing to be re-evaluated. The state currently requires that students score at least 55 out of 100 on Regents exams in English, math, science, global history and U.S. history to graduate.

The group warned that thousands of students might not graduate if the passing score increases to 65, as it is set to do under the state Education Department's plan for raising standards. The Board of Regents, which sets education policy in New York, will decide in November whether to stick by the plan or keep 55 as the passing cutoff.

A state spokesman said the tests, phased in as graduation requirements in the late 1990s, have succeeded in raising student achievement.

"The graduation rate in the state is holding steady, and each year, even as the requirements are tougher and tougher, kids are meeting the standards," said Tom Dunn, spokesman for the state Education Department.

The education committees of the Assembly and Senate begin hearings on the graduation requirements Tuesday in New York City. Lawmakers are considering whether to propose legislation that would roll back the standards.

"(Lawmakers) don't want the children in their districts failing out of school," said Jane Hirschmann of the Parents Coalition to End High Stakes Testing.

A student's grade-point average, attendance and teacher recommendations, as well as other factors, should be considered when it comes to graduation, not just standardized test scores, said Hirschmann, who called the state education system "totally dysfunctional."

But the state Education Department said Regents exams are developed by teachers, who have the students' best interests in mind. Dunn acknowledged that there were problems with the Math A test this year, but that did not prevent students from graduating - the tests were thrown out for 11th and 12th graders - and a panel is currently reviewing the exam. More than 60 percent of students had failed the test.

Testing critics plan to argue at Tuesday's hearing that, based on performance by the class of 2002, many students won't graduate if the passing cutoff score is raised to 65. They say in Rochester, 46 percent of test-takers won't make it, in Yonkers 44 percent won't and in Poughkeepsie 38 percent won't.

A national researcher said New York has one of the worst dropout rates in the nation. Walter Haney of the Center for the Study of Testing Evaluation and Educational Policy said 40 percent of students drop out instead of graduating.

But the state, which measures dropouts differently, said the annual rate of students dropping out has risen from 3.6 percent in 1995-96 to 5.7 percent in 2001-02. Officials attribute the increase mostly to a change in how dropouts are counted in New York City.