

**Public Hearing
Regents Learning Standards
and High School Graduation Requirements**

**NY State Standing Committee on Education
Albany, October 22, 2003**

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Chair, Board of Directors, The Institute For Learning Centered Education**

It is my purpose, solely, to address the impact of the New York State assessment process on schools and student performance. I am neither uniformly for, nor against, the policies of the commissioner of education. I recognize there must be some form of standardized assessments, but not necessarily anything resembling what currently exists. I am a child advocate and all of my work, and the work of the Institute for Learning Centered Education, is devoted to improving the ability of all of us to raise student achievement.

The state and nationwide focus on standards is positive, as are many of the initiatives of New York State, under the leadership and guidance of the current commissioner. The search for meaningful ways to assess student performance and hold people accountable for results is positive. The standardized assessments, in New York State, have had the effect of “encouraging” many teachers to increase their focus on challenging students to develop strategies for critical thinking.

Another positive result of standardized assessments and standards is that teachers are now thinking more about their learning objectives and whether their practices are enabling students to achieve them. Standards are helping force a shift from gut level lesson planning (“as long as my lesson tangentially addresses the topic, it is relevant”) to a more research based approach – “what is the pedagogy that will enable students to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can perform competently?” Standardized assessments should focus teachers, students, and parents on exactly what we want students to be able to perform competently and the assessment should be of the student’s performance.

Reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that the negatives from the way we are approaching standardized assessments in New York State far outweigh the positives.

1. Because the standardized assessments are being used to hold schools accountable and because of the enormous publicity they generate which encourages the public to believe that standardized test results are a true measure of a school’s (and its staff’s) success, our focus and our priorities are getting way out of whack. Due to insufficient levels of funding, receding levels of community and parental support, and increasingly difficult challenges posed by a changing society, public schools are being confronted with increasingly difficult problems to address at the same time they are being held accountable for doing more with less.

As one example, I cite the Troy School District – practically within walking distance of this hearing. Why don’t you walk through the halls of one of the schools in Troy and speak with the teachers, teacher assistants and others that you are holding accountable with your standardized assessments? These people will give you first-hand testimony of the devastation to their schools that is being experienced because of budget cuts. They will tell you that they once had a system of supportive services that might have been a model for other schools; now they have too few staff, too few, if any, social workers available to address the many student problems that require

this kind of expertise, and a staff morale that indicates many of the better teachers and administrators will take jobs in neighboring districts as and when they become available.

It would be laughable to speak of holding people accountable for the results when deteriorating conditions require school staff to be miracle workers just to hold the line on student achievement, if the consequences weren't having such a devastating effect on children. How can we avoid leaving children behind, when the public is falling behind in its ability to provide every school with the capacity to raise student achievement?

To cut to the chase, Troy is only one example of what is happening in many schools around the state (and nation). The legislature, Board of Regents and commissioner are using standardized assessments to hold accountable the many dedicated and caring and expert individuals in our schools. This would be fair only if, simultaneously, you were assessing the capacity of each school to raise student achievement. In other words, create a level playing field BEFORE you start telling people whether they are succeeding. What you are doing is equivalent to publicly ridiculing the manager of the Detroit Tigers for failing to win a pennant with one of the lowest payrolls in major league baseball. In fact, one can list any number of baseball teams that have not come close to winning a pennant in years, and can't be expected to, because of limited and diminishing resources. Of course, there is occasionally a team like the Minnesota Twins that will have success for a year or two, but this is the exception, not the rule, just as, occasionally, a school with limited resources and difficult challenges can produce outstanding test results for awhile.

In fact, it's ironic that books are written and movies are made about those rare situations when an individual becomes the catalyst for turning around a school that has limited capacity to improve student achievement. If this weren't such a rare occurrence, it wouldn't warrant such public attention when it happens.

In summary, the emphasis on standardized assessments is focusing attention on the accountability of people working in the schools and it is taking time, money, and effort away from where the real focus needs to be – what are we doing to be sure that every school has the capacity to improve student performance? Who is holding legislators and other public policy leaders accountable for leveling the playing field for the people we are holding accountable?

2. The second reason that the negatives of the current process of standardized assessments are beginning to far outweigh the positives is that the assessments are not an accurate measure of student performance. How do we know this?
 - a. University and private sector complaints: representatives of universities and the private sector have been complaining for years that they are spending billions of dollars to prepare new students/employees with the skills (mostly critical thinking) that they expected them to have when they graduated high school. Often they are talking about the "A" students. In other words, when the then chairperson of IBM (1991) said that IBM was spending 60 billion dollars a year to tutor new employees because high school graduates did not have the skills they were expected to have, he was basically saying that there is something wrong with our system of assessments.
 - b. Research: the research is voluminous that tells us we need to use multiple forms of assessment if we are to accurately assess what a student knows, understands, and can apply competently.

To the credit of the test designers, standardized assessments are becoming more performance oriented every year. Unfortunately, the progress is too slow and the reliance on assessments of content retention

continues to be too heavy. There is ample research to validate the need to explore an entirely different process for assessing student performance if we are to get an accurate gauge of what students know, understand, and can perform competently. There are pilot projects all across the country (including some in New York State) that demonstrate conclusively that alternative forms of multiple assessments can be effectively designed and implemented. The technology needed to develop assessments that are alternatives to the Regents exams is available; it needs only to be creatively applied. This is where much effort is needed.

If I locked you in a kitchen with a one-burner stove (no oven), four potatoes and a can of corn beef and told you to make a four course meal that included a casserole, how would you feel if I also said, "I will hold you accountable for the results and I will let the public know how your meal compares with the meals of three local restaurants? What would be your reaction?"

Think about it. This is what you are doing to many of the wonderful teachers, administrators, parents, community members, students, and others who are making a dedicated effort to raise student achievement. I understand that these are difficult financial times and we all have to bite the bullet. But our focus should be multifold:

- How do we assist schools, other than trying to intimidate them by publicizing their scores on test results that aren't even giving us an accurate assessment of their efforts to improve student performance?
- How do we maintain high standards of achievement for all students, given the current way schools are funded?
- What avenues need to be explored to improve assessment to support effective classroom practice?

The expertise and the technology exist to convert our current system of standardized assessments to a much different, and more efficient system of multiple assessments, primarily performance based. It cannot be accomplished overnight, but we should be taking longer strides toward making this a reality sooner rather than later. The public will have confidence in standardized assessments, and we will all have a vehicle for holding schools accountable, only when we design a system of assessments that guide students toward achievement of state standards through a process that accurately assesses student performance. As we are designing valid and reliable assessments, we must also hold ourselves accountable for leveling the playing field by making certain that every school has the capacity to raise student achievement. The possibility of leaving no child behind is only as viable as the capacity of the school with the fewest resources to raise student achievement.

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