

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

**NY State Standing Committee on Education
NYC, September 23, 2003**

**Testimony submitted by Deborah Rapaport
Parent of Scarsdale Public School Graduates**

My name is Deborah Rapaport and I am here as a parent of 4 children, 3 of whom have graduated from Scarsdale public schools and one who is currently in 11th grade. I have a Masters degree and have completed a substantial portion of a doctoral program at Teachers College. I have worked for the Board of Regents at Regents College where part of my function was test design and administration. I have been active at the HS level as PTA president and in many other roles. I am here representing a group of parents who, as volunteers, have spent a great deal of time studying the issues regarding the NYS mandated tests, including the Regents Exams.

I apologize for the repetition that I'm sure you will hear today, but there are certain themes that must be echoed. I hope I will add some new perspectives as well.

No one can object to improving education and to promoting high standards. The question to be asked is how those objectives can best be achieved, and how can they be accomplished without doing any harm, which must be a primary consideration.

When and why did the main thrust of education reform become testing? It began in the early 80's with the report "A Nation at Risk" and was, thereafter, promoted by the Business Roundtable, chaired by Louis Gerstner. At that time, US test scores were below those of Germany and Japan, causing great anxiety. Fast forward to the mid 90's and you find a very different picture. Japan has been in a decade long recession from which they seemingly cannot recover. In Dec 2003 Tina Cross, a member of the 1999 All USA Teacher First Team reported her findings after a professional trip to Japan. She concluded that the widespread worries of Japanese educators, teachers, parents and business leaders included stress since students seem to burn out very young; lack of creativity, where each student inevitably creates a similar project, following traditional style; and mediocrity. While its students shine on standardized tests, Japan's system turns out consistently average graduates, with few examples of individual brilliance. "The Japanese realize their emphasis solely on testing is simply not working and are modifying their educational system, just as we are catapulting ourselves into the disastrous practices they are abandoning". (USA Today, Dec 3, 2002) I was in Japan 2 ½ years ago and had the opportunity to see and read similar discussions in the Japanese media. In Great Britain, a similar phenomenon was reported, "England's schools are emerging from the wringer of accountability testing just as American schools are being fed into it". (Mike Baker, Education Week, Oct. 31, 2001)

Patrick Bassett, in an Education Week article published in June 2002 said “What’s at stake with the push of governments at all levels toward centralized control, standardization, and uniformity? The imposition of state curricula and testing crushes the best freedom that American families have to determine the best educational environment for their children. Homogenizing the American educational system with high-stakes tests and state-mandated curricula will not rescue all of the failing schools, but it could destroy the models of educational excellence that already exist.”

There are many objections to the NYS program of mandated assessments and the high stakes Regents exams and I have studies, articles, and research papers to substantiate the positions I am offering here.

Fundamentally, standardized tests have limited usefulness and their current widespread use and proliferation goes far beyond that usefulness. Tests are appropriate to diagnose an individual child’s needs and are **one** way to determine if content taught in a particular classroom is being learned, along with reports, essays, class participation, etc. Testing agencies themselves say that tests should not be used for high stakes educational decisions and that testing on this scale can’t be accomplished without errors at every level. Every test has a margin of error, there are errors in scoring, there are incorrect questions and answers. Some of these errors have caused NYS children to be denied diplomas, denied promotion and required to attend summer school, and include frustration and loss of confidence.

Remember, a child who fails one of the required Regents Exams will not receive a NYS diploma.

Testing supports the weakest teachers and punishes the good ones. Last week I heard William Ouchi, a UCLA Professor of Management who just published a book titled *Making Schools Work*. When asked about the uses of testing he said, “tests bolster the weakest teachers”. As a retired social studies teacher who taught global studies recently told me “You are teaching for a test that you have never seen, it’s unprofessional.” A HS English teacher describes his experience with the English Regents; “During this preparation I found myself saying things to students I would never say if they were writing an essay for my class. Don’t make connections to your own life....Don’t be creative. Just give them what they want. It doesn’t matter what you really think.”

The tests themselves, the scoring, and the review materials all cost money. The costs of the tests themselves are just the tip of the iceberg. And the same companies who write the tests also publish the text books, the review books, the teacher manuals and even provide the remediation. The costs of administration and scoring, of remediation, of tutoring and of the publications related to testing, just to name a few, are borne by individual school districts. That money would be far better spent on smaller classes, teacher training, early intervention for at risk children and improved facilities.

The use of test scores as the critical factor in assessing education is based on a business model. We have all seen that the pursuit of the bottom line, to the exclusion of anything else, has corrupted business. In education, the bottom line is improving test scores. The participants will have to make sure that test scores go up. Even worse, the only measure of improvement is more test scores. There are no independent measures of academic performance, no outside

auditing, no other questions like “are students doing better in college, are they performing better in the work place, do they like going to school and plan to continue their education? The most effective way to improve test scores is test prep, not good teaching and that is what is happening in class rooms.

The use of so many state mandated tests does not improve education for the high performing systems and schools and is detrimental to creative teaching and learning. Despite the best intentions of a teacher and of a school district, if the bottom line is test scores, teachers will teach to the test and the other material will be considered extra. As is well known, excellent private schools do not use state mandated tests because they compromise the quality of the teaching.

Testing on this scale is promoting fraud and cheating on the statistical reporting such as the data reflecting drop out and push out rates. No system wants to admit that the result of high stakes testing is increased drop-outs. Look at the number of recent news reports from NY and other states related to ‘cooking the books’, NY and Houston being the most glaring examples.

Educationally and psychologically, there is ample evidence that testing is actually antithetical to the goals of producing educated, self - motivated adults and it discourages independent thinking and creativity. According to Richard Reich, former US Labor Secretary, “our schools are morphing into test-taking factories. Standardized tests have nothing to do with preparing students for what they’ll do when they leave our schools. They do not measure, and, in fact, discourage creativity, out of the box thinking, originality, the ability to listen and to communicate.” (Education Week, June 20, 2001)

The objectives of the tests are unclear: are they intended to measure student achievement, individually or in groups, teacher and school performance? There is no consistent educational evidence that teacher performance can be measured by student test scores.

Tests are not objective despite the widespread assumption that they are. Any test that has an essay, and what good English or social studies test doesn’t, is graded by an individual who is given a rubric for what constitutes good, better or failing. I have a part of the teacher guide for grading here and it is clear that what my standard of “good” is may not be yours despite 104 pages of instruction. In fact, an 11th grade English teacher told me that when her northern Westchester school first administered the ELA – the English Regents, the school was unhappy with the scores. So the teachers were told “don’t be so tough”. She has left teaching because it was no longer about learning, reading or writing, it was all about the test. She’s now teaching GED students who dropped out of high school (most of whom are younger than 20).

And finally, let me read a sentence from a Kaplan publication which was distributed to parents in a Westchester elementary school. if your child can understand this (identifying the main idea), “she’s on her way to a successful career as a standardized-test taker.”

Is this really the kind of education we want?

Thank you.

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