

NY EDUCATION REFORM COMMISSION HEARING
TESTIMONY: JULY 18, 2012

BY

DANIEL DRMACICH

(Retired Rochester City School District Principal of School Without Walls
and
Chairman of the Rochester Coalition for Justice in Education)

“WHAT THE CUOMO EDUCATION COMMISSION SHOULD KNOW
ABOUT THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN NYS

1. The skills students need for becoming successful citizens, workers and college scholars are not taught nor emphasized through the NYS Standards, Curriculum or Regents Exams. The current college graduation rate for all Caucasian students who graduated from high school is 54%, and approximately 14% for Blacks and Latinos. Businesses & colleges are complaining of having to provide remedial training to the large majority of entry-level workers, and in many communities, participation for citizens in local elections is often under 10% of the voting population. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, ([www.ascd.org/21st Century Skills](http://www.ascd.org/21st_Century_Skills)) and Dr. Tony Wagner of Harvard University (Closing the Global Achievement Gap, 2009,) have identified seven major skill groups necessary for student competence as scholars, citizens and workers:

- Critical Thinking and Creative Problem-Solving,
- Collaboration across networks and Leading by Influence,
- Agility and Adaptability,
- Initiative and Entrepreneurialism,
- Effective Oral and Written Communication,
- Accessing and Analyzing Information
- Curiosity and Imagination

Given our NYS curriculum and tests, which drive teaching and learning, we can expect that few, if any, of these skills will be emphasized in the classroom. Dr. Larry Lazzote, the founder of the “Effective Schools” movement, stated that: “You not only teach what you test, but you teach HOW you test.” Given our current NYS testing system & resulting teaching methods, we can only expect more failures by our students in college, in the world of work and as participating citizens.

Solution: Lobby with the NYS Assembly and Board of Regents to drastically overhaul the NYS curriculum to emphasize the 21st Century Skills. All NYS syllabi, curricula and teaching strategies should reflect student growth & development in 21st Century Skills. All teaching content should be flexible to meet student needs, interests

and the demands of society, and should reflect the development and application of these skills to the real world.

2. High-stakes, standardized testing unfairly discriminates against many children. For example:

- **As a result of volumes of research studies, it has been concluded that over 80% of a student's success in school (and on tests) is based upon family income level (Class & Schools; Rothstein, 2007). Those students who face a myriad of problems stemming from poverty, are highly likely to drop-out or perform poorly in school. These conditions include:**
 - ✓ **Lead poisoning, which has an irreversible impact on cognitive development and behavior. It's been estimated that over 10,000, of Rochester's 30,000 students suffer from this problem.)**
 - ✓ **Inadequate health care,**
 - ✓ **Poor pre-natal care & low birth weight,**
 - ✓ **Poor nutrition & obesity,**
 - ✓ **Poor parenting skills & parental supervision,**
 - ✓ **Low self-esteem,**
 - ✓ **Stress from living in violent & drug-laden neighborhoods,**
 - ✓ **Little intellectual stimulation at home,**
 - ✓ **Unemployment, and**
 - ✓ **Lack of positive value-development**

Can you imagine teaching a classroom filled with students having one or more of these issues facing them on a daily basis?

- **English as Second Language (ESL) students, who have spent limited time in the U.S., but are expected to pass Regents Exams, in English, in order to graduate. The best example of this comes from the former superintendent of Fairport, Dr. William Cala, who several years ago, had 3 top students from foreign countries, who despite being accepted to top colleges and having demonstrated high competency in many skill areas, but, could not pass the Regents English Exam, and therefore could not graduate nor be awarded with a local or NYS diploma. Volumes of research confirm that foreign students need approximately seven years to become competent enough to master an English exam.**
- **Special Education Students, some of whom have major disabilities, are forced to take Regents Exams (despite recommendations by their teachers that they not take the exam,) before they are allowed to take the less rigorous local exams. The important question with Special Education students is: "Should their teachers have more authority to decide, with parents, what the best educational direction is for their students?" Would their time be better spent preparing for a vocation**

or pursuing a special interest that could evolve into a productive career?

- **Vocational-oriented Students:** Currently, all vocational-oriented students must prepare for and pass the 5 Regents Exams in order for them to graduate and/or be able to spend extra time in their interest areas. Does it make sense for a student to receive extra remediation on Regents classes if they would enjoy & benefit more from “Plumber’s Math,” “Business English,” and an internship with a real plumber? This does not mean lowering standards for vocational students. Many college-track students would have tremendous difficulty with the carpentry, mechanical, plumbing and electrical skills many of the vocational students have, and are tested for. The emphasis is simply different.
- **Students with Learning Styles other than those that are reflected on Regents Exams:** Many students “freeze-up” with high-stakes testing and, as a result, do not perform well on these tests. What’s wrong with a team of certified teachers and/or a college professor assessing a portfolio of the student’s work from the year, or projects that demonstrate that they know how to think like a historian or scientist?
- To demonstrate the unfairness of high-stakes, standardized tests, consider the number of additional, stellar lawyers there would be in the legal profession if it were not for the infamous “Bar Exam.” Would it not make more sense for lawyer candidates to do performance-based assessments on the application of law to the real world, rather than having to memorize minutia for passing a test?

Solutions:

1. Rather than focusing on student test results, & comparisons among students and school districts, a new paradigm of assessment should be implemented: individualized standards, curriculum and assessments, based upon each student’s learning style, interests, goals and parent input. Rather than test score reporting, students and parents will receive “growth and development” reports from teachers indicating how well students are progressing toward each 21st Century Skill. Assessment is then individualized, and it is used as a learning experience, rather than a game of “wad-ja-get?” Proficiency tests would be performance based, much like those used by NYS Performance Standards Consortium Schools, in which evaluation is linked to 21st Century Skills and application to the real world. These performance-based tests often reflect student interest in content and medium for demonstrating their knowledge and understanding. For example, a student may choose to demonstrate their competency in critical thinking and writing by comparing two great works of literature, of their choice, through an in-depth research paper and an accompanying personal work of art.

To satisfy bureaucratic needs for comparative information, NYS could continue to participate with the “gold standard” National Assessment of Education Performance (NAEP) sample testing.

2. Introduce legislation that will create a better education environment for urban students, by de-concentrating the poverty they are forced to learn in, by:
 - (A.) Creating financial incentives for suburban school districts to collaborate with urban districts to create metropolitan, regional or magnet schools that will attract poverty stricken and middle class students. (Socio-economic integration has been the only research-based method of reform to significantly increase the effectiveness of education for large groups of poverty-stricken students. (See Rothstein’s Class & Schools, and Grant’s Hope and Despair in the American City.)
 - (B.) Seek equity-based funding to reduce the average size of urban student’s class size to approximately one teacher to every 10 students.

3.High-stakes Testing, including Regents Exams, are very poor predictors of future success, due to the following research-based evidence:

- As mentioned above, Regents Exams do not test for the skills needed for college, citizen or career success.
- An increasing number of colleges (800 and growing) are making SATs and ACTs optional for admission, due to their low correlation with student success.
- A much better indicator of success, according to many studies, would be a student’s “EQ” or emotional quotient. EQ refers to an individual’s capacity to lead, be led, listen actively, solve problems collaboratively, to “work hard,” and to be able to empathize with others, among other things.
- Over 100 professional organizations, including the National Academy of Sciences, American Research Association and even major testing companies, like Pearson, strongly recommend that one test score should not be used to determine promotion or failure of individual students.

Solutions:

A much better approach to fairly assessing students’ proficiency, growth and development is the use of multiple measures of student performance; including homework, projects, class participation, performances, class tests and student presentations, according to such leading researchers as Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, of Stanford University. Even Mayor Bloomberg has finally admitted that, after 7 years of failed education policy in NYC, the NYC DOE will now use “other measures” to determine promotion. The NYS Performance Standards Consortium model mentioned, above, is an excellent model for creating a multiple-

measures form of assessment. (Data Report on NY Performance Standards Consortium, 2012)

4. “Teaching for the Test,” a common consequence of using high-stakes, standardized testing decreases significant learning, according to volumes of motivational research studies. (Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, University of Rochester. And Daniel Pink, Drive.)

- Using student choice, focusing on student interest, and giving students descriptive feedback, rather than using test scores to label students, results in much more significant learning by students.
- Results by the NYS Performance Assessment Consortium Schools, a group of approximately 34 NYS Schools which were given a waiver from most Regents Exams, by the Board of Regents, has shown that Consortium School graduates have a significantly higher college graduation rate than students who graduated from traditional, urban high schools. (Foote, 2007)

Solutions:

Consider creating two or more parallel pathways to graduation in NYS; one using the traditional Regents Exam-driven model, and at least one optional model following the NYS Performance Standards Consortium model. The options would provide parents and students with meaningful options, and a built-in research model for customer satisfaction and effectiveness at developing successful citizens.

5. There are many unintended, negative consequences to high-stakes, standardized testing. Among them are:

- “Campbell’s Law” states that any socio-economic goal that is reduced to one number, will result in corruption. (Grading Schools, Rothstein, 2008.) We see this in schools in the following forms:
 - ✓ Teachers, teaching to the test, rather than emphasizing 21st Century Skills,
 - ✓ Student Cheating,
 - ✓ Teacher & Administrator manipulation of scores,
 - ✓ Unrealistic, unobtainable goals; NCLB expectation that all students, by 2014, will read at above grade level.
 - ✓ Monetary & other rewards given for performance by students & teachers, rather than for intrinsic rewards,
 - ✓ State Education Department officials using “cut-scores” or “curves” to raise or lower student performance, based on overall student outcomes. For example, several years ago, the Regents Biology passing score was lowered from 65% to 39%.

- As a result of failing a Regents Exam, students are more prone to “drop-out,” by 50%. If a student fails the exam twice, the odds of dropping out increase to 90%.
- Despite volumes of research that supports student-learning styles, the Regents Tests all are “paper & pencil” styles, thereby causing students with predominant learning styles in other domains, to be at a disadvantage for passing the test, once again, increasing drop-out potential.
- An incredible amount of class time and money is spent preparing students for the exams, reviewing past exams, grading the results and calculating results, rather than focusing on more meaningful learning activities. More testing does not equal more learning.

Solutions:

See “Solutions” for #3, above.

6. “Race to the Top” funding and U.S. Department of Education waivers that require more student testing and evaluation of teachers and administrators based on student test score results, is not based upon any empirical evidence or research, and is fundamentally, a flawed process.

- Please refer to Ryan, Deci & Pink research on how this form of coercion and extrinsic rewards is counter-productive to all elements of a school organization. Perhaps the worst result is that the testing obsession influences students, teachers & administrators to all believe that the test result is all that matters, an ultimate form of corruption to the learning process.
- There are too many variables to base a teachers performance on student test scores, including: test quality, environmental conditions for testing, illnesses, student mistakes on the bubble sheet, and amount of conditions of poverty and other psycho-social issues that students face.

Solutions:

Eliminate test results from teacher and administrator evaluation processes, and use multiple-measures; including observations by administrators and peers, student feedback, and portfolios that demonstrate competency in applying research-based, intrinsic-motivational strategies to lesson plans. However, make teacher termination, due to inability to significantly improve, a more timely, accurate process, through the use of collaborative administrator and peer review.

7. The blanket use of high-stakes, standardized testing to evaluate students, teachers, administrators, schools and school systems, discourages individual and organizational innovation and creativity.

Educational experimentation, innovation and creativity, for more effectively facilitating the growth & development of students for effective citizenship, scholarship and careers, should be a given for an effective educational organization. However, the current system completely discourages these practices due to the high-stakes nature of testing results. All members of the organization place their greatest emphasis on “test prep” for results, rather than intellectual and character development, as well as the joy of learning.

Additional evidence includes:

- **The Regents requirement that all students attending public schools, including charter schools, must pass the 5 Regents Exams in order to graduate. How many “out-of-the-box” secondary schools, with significant variations in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and content are there in NYS, other than NYS Performance Assessment Consortium Schools? There are few if any, due to this requirement being the primary focus of high schools.**
- **Many students who have other interests in the arts, vocations or specific academic areas, but have difficulty passing Regents Exams, are not permitted to participate, or are able to only minimally participate in their interest areas until they have sufficiently prepared for and/or passed the tests. This practice discourages significant, meaningful learning, and encourages depression, stress, boredom and drop outs.**
- **Volumes of research indicates that potential creative, teacher and administrator candidates are discouraged from either joining the education profession or from maintaining their current teaching positions, thereby choosing alternative careers. This fact directly relates to concerns for creating a stronger, respected and innovative teaching force and school organizations that can effectively meet the needs and interests of students, as well as the demands of society.**

Solutions:

See “Solutions” for #4, above.

Thank you for reading and critically examining my testimony on how it relates to New York State’s education issues. I look forward to your questions at the July 18th hearing in Buffalo.