

**NASSAU-SUFFOLK  
SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

**POSITION PAPER  
ON  
HIGH STAKES TESTING  
AND  
ASSESSMENT**

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## **PREFACE**

**Education has been the engine of progress since the beginning of mankind. And, as society changed, education changed, moving from the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato and the responsibility of man, to the basic "3R's" needed for one to function as a participating working citizen, to the complexities of today's technology in a global society.**

**At no time in history have we had to respond as quickly to reflect the changing times as we have had to since the end of World War II. Technology and global competition put us on a high-speed fast lane to move, and move, and keep moving to keep up with the ever-accelerating pace of change. Yet people looked to our schools to educate children to meet the needs of a society that would not, and could not, slow down enough to know what it needed from one year to the next. With increasing global competition and schools seemingly unable to adjust to the undefined demands of society, the new catchword for "good" education became "reform".**

**As reform became the modus operandi for change we found that nothing was changing faster than the different reform models that were being thrust upon the schools. Each model, in its own way was supposed to be the paradigm for the still undefined future. Yet no one has actually addressed what true education should really be beyond meeting the current demands of the business world. So today's reform manifests itself as a response to businesses' call for higher standards and to better prepare children to meet the demands of tomorrow's workplace. But are we preparing today's children for a better "educated" society? The reform systems that are put forward embrace the mantras of assessment and accountability. But there have been serious questions about true accountability and assessment in the present reform framework. Can high stakes tests successfully assess the knowledge of a student? What are educators being held accountable for other than schools meeting certain arbitrary test scores?**

**The construct of public education has now become the domain of federal and state governments and private business. With local educators no longer being entrusted to meet their responsibilities, federal and state governments have become the self-proclaimed crusaders for a better tomorrow and are deciding what and how children should be taught, how teaching should be done and what today's education should address.**

**In the following paper the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association looks at the current trend to reform education in New York through high stakes testing and to assess whether this "reform" is meeting the needs of today's children and tomorrow's society.**

# **HIGH STAKES TESTING AND ASSESSMENT**

Responding to the complaints that children were being awarded local diplomas that were meaningless, the New York State Board of Regents ordered school districts to end the granting of local diplomas. They then mandated that *all* public school students be required to pass a minimum of five Regents examinations in order to graduate with a required Regents Diploma. “High stakes testing”, the imposition of the requirement to pass specific tests in order to graduate or to be promoted to the next grade, was the Regents’ response to complaints of moving up in grade without mastering the specific grade level material (social promotion) or to graduating with watered down diplomas. The order to require Regents examinations for all public school students was inclusive of those in regular academic courses, and vocational or technical careers, as well as those students who were classified as having some type of physical, emotional or learning disability.

The current Regents’ policy of making high stakes tests optional for private, parochial and home-schoolers does not allow for a level playing field to measure the performance of all K-12 schools and students. Regents standards should apply across the board and provide for accountability by private and parochial schools. Evaluations of school performance are hindered when some schools are not required to report comparable data. From the students’ perspective, having comparable standards in place should facilitate instructional approaches and enhance student outcomes when a student moves from non-public to public schools.

In New York State, school districts were required to provide whatever services were deemed necessary in order to have students pass the Regents examinations. Local school districts were also required to identify and to provide educational assistance to those children who scored poorly on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math and English Language Arts (ELA) exams, even though the main purpose of these exams was to evaluate program, not individual performance. The services included Academic Intervention Services (AIS) such as before and after regular school hours tutoring and extended and expanded summer school sessions.

This was followed, on the federal side, by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which requires all states, no later than the 2005-2006 school year, to test every child in math and reading in grades 3 through 8. The new law links federal education dollars to those test results and requires states to provide public school choice, supplemental education services, and/or vouchers to parents of children attending public schools when a school has, what is defined as, a failing record for two or three consecutive years.

With the latest education movement toward standardized curriculum and standardized high stakes testing spreading throughout the country, it is imperative that the public fully understands the ramifications of this movement, including how these changes are affecting the education of the nation’s children. To do that, it is important that we pause for a moment to ask a series of questions.

First, “What is the goal of education?” Is it to impart a series of facts, figures and formulas and have them regurgitated to the classroom teacher thus proving that students have memorized them, or is it to give students basic information along with the training and opportunity to develop and employ critical thinking skills? We believe that the correct and proper goal of public education is the latter.

If we accept this goal as valid then the second question must be, “How do we best determine if the goal is being met?” We believe that standardized and high stakes tests, *used in isolation*, fail to accurately measure students’ knowledge and fail to capture the attributes of high-order thinking. In many instances they may stifle intellectual curiosity, experimentation, investigation, and exploration, which we believe are the basic constructs of a sound education.

The third question is, “Are American students being educated so that they may compete successfully in the global marketplace?” When we look at the productivity of the American worker, the number of technological innovations that have been created and developed within America’s workplace, and the number of American Nobel Laureates over the past two decades, it should be obvious that the American public education system has not failed. The dire predictions of “A Nation at Risk” were wrong. It is easy to see that Americans, the large majority of whom were educated in the public school system, have been leading the world in their respective fields. It is also important to realize that the American education system tends to introduce a broader curriculum encompassing a wider range of concepts than many other nations that tend to educate more intensely in a narrowly defined curriculum.

The final question is, “How can the public be assured that their hard-earned tax dollars are being wisely spent and that their investment in education is paying off?” Despite known failings within major urban areas, New York State’s public education has been doing its job effectively. School districts have and will continue to find ways to improve and respond to the changing education needs of all students.

Let us now explore the four questions posed and the reasons for our conclusions.

#### WHAT IS THE GOAL OF EDUCATION?

- *In the broadest sense this Association believes that the purpose of education is to give students the information and intellectual tools that they need to become responsible, contributing members of society. During the formal years of education students’ natural curiosity must be piqued as they are taught how to investigate, explore, experiment and analyze facts, figures, formulas and concepts. They must be taught to develop higher order critical thinking skills in the never-ending process of learning. This Association shares the goal that all children will leave elementary school with a firm grasp of the ELA and Math standards. The evaluation of each*

*child's strengths and weaknesses must be garnered from multiple assessments. This will also enable the middle schools to remediate deficiencies and inform instruction, so that students will remain on track to be successful in middle and high school. The physical and mental acts of learning should be stimulating, exciting and challenging as we attempt to instill the joy of learning in our students.*

Present day systems of education and so-called “public accountability” use content-based standards because they are *easily measured*, not harder, not better, just more easily measured. There would be nothing wrong with that system if the sole purpose of schooling were to simply impart a set of prescribed facts and figures. However, we believe as Gerald Bracey stated in Testing, Testing and More Testing that rigid standardized tests do not measure “creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, humor, reliability, enthusiasm, civic-mindedness, self-awareness, self-discipline, empathy, leadership and compassion”, all vital components in the education of our children. Eleanor Armor-Thomas, Chair of the Department of Secondary Education at Queens College stated, “the high dependence on standardized testing has resulted in the narrowing of school curricula and a low level of knowledge and skills.” There must be time allocated for the study and exploration of music and the arts, vital components of any person’s education, which are presently being sacrificed for additional test preparation time.

While we all support higher learning standards, this Association has a great concern that currently there is too much testing in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Instead, administering the ELA in the winter and the Math in the spring, along with the Foreign Language Proficiency Exam, would be a more educationally appropriate test schedule for this age group. Furthermore, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies and Science exams are unnecessary and may not be predictive of the high school Regents examinations which are subject specific.

As an example of what is happening to education at the present time, 80 instructional days a year are lost due to the need to set up, administer, train to score and score the 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA test in New York. Thirty days are lost for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Science Assessment, 16 days for the Social Studies 8<sup>th</sup> grade Assessment, and 12 days for the Math 8 Test.<sup>1</sup> This is a huge loss of instructional time in only one grade, days that can never be made up. With the implementation of the testing mandated by the NCLB Act we estimate similar losses in each grade.

We agree that the measurement of what has been learned in the classroom is vital to knowing if we are reaching the goal of preparing our youth for citizenship. But to do so by prescribing a specific set of facts and figures that must be learned by every 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, or 5<sup>th</sup> grader not only shortchanges the teaching of how to think and the discovery of ideas<sup>2</sup> but also ignores the fact that children mature and learn at different rates. New York’s Standards don’t say every child should be at the same place at the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> “Assessing the Assessments”, Curriculum and Instruction Committee, NYSCOSS, June 2001

<sup>2</sup> Kohn, Alfie, “Beware of the Standards, Not Just the Test”, Education Week, September 26, 2001

but the tests do. To expect that every 9-year-old child at the completion of 4<sup>th</sup> grade will have equally mastered the contents of a specific curriculum is to ignore the reality of childhood development. Noted educator Linda McNeil of Rice University has warned us that, “Measurable outcomes (testing of content standards) may be the least significant results of learning”. The same can be said of lock-step learning. Not only does the maturation of children vary greatly, a fact which directly affects learning, but also not every child can follow the same path towards educational success and achievement. The standardized tests are uniform, learning is not.

## **HOW CAN WE BEST DETERMINE IF OUR GOAL OF PRODUCING GOOD CITIZENS IS BEING MET?**

This question addresses the type of assessments being used and asks what is the most meaningful way to determine if our students are being better educated.

With test scores now the primary focus of the standards movement, we believe that what is being measured is how well our students are doing on the tests, not how well they are being educated. Should we be making decisions about a student’s future based upon the results of single high stakes tests (promote to next grade or fail to graduate)? Richard F. Elmore notes that, “The comparative appeal of standardized tests is easy to see: they are relatively inexpensive to administer; can be mandated relatively easily; can be rapidly implemented; and deliver clear, visible results...Rather than a single-event assessment, broader assessments, including students portfolios, demonstration projects, exhibitions, teacher evaluations of students as well as test results better support making appropriate judgments about a student’s academic abilities.”<sup>3</sup> Given this, why insist on single-test assessments? Perhaps this is because the single tests also allow the advocates of such tests to maintain control of the education process and to remove educational judgments from the classroom teachers and school districts.

New York’s high stakes, single assessment graduation system says, “one size fits all”. Yet children have vastly different cognitive and intellectual capabilities. Even with sustained support and great effort, some of our students will not be able to reach all the standards as measured by the five Regents exams. We cannot establish a system that is so inflexible that we diminish the opportunity to pursue occupational/vocational education. There must be graduation options for students for whom it may be inappropriate to pursue or who are unable to earn a Regents Diploma, yet have achieved reasonable standards for high school completion. A reasonable safety net, not just an IEP diploma, must be maintained for special education students.

Single-event assessments are harmful to those students who “choke” or “freeze” when confronted with ticking clocks and test booklets. Along with these students are those for whom English is not their first language, students with learning disabilities, and occupational/vocational education students, all of whom fail standardized tests at

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<sup>3</sup> Elmore, Richard F. “Unwarranted Intrusion”, Education Next, Spring 2002

higher rates. The absence of broad assessment measures that can accurately paint a full picture of these students' accomplishments is a telling failure.

To truly evaluate the job public education is doing in New York State and if our students are being prepared to be globally competitive requires more than the single assessment offered by single tests. It requires the judgments of educators who are with our students day in and day out and it requires multiple measures of assessment to see how their knowledge is being applied. Only then will we be able to judge how well our children are being educated.

#### **ARE OUR STUDENTS BEING EDUCATED SO THEY MAY COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE?**

The greatest difficulty in being able to answer this question is that no comparative analysis is available of specific curriculum content in each subject, e.g. math, science, language arts, social studies, etc. in each country. However, it is commonly accepted that American education tends to cover more sub-topics within a specific field of study.

If we can identify any standard for excellence, we can look at the results of the Nobel Prizes that have been awarded since 1983, the year the Carnegie Foundation report, "A Nation at Risk", was published. Since 1983, the Swedish Nobel Committee has awarded 40 prizes in Chemistry, 17 going to American-born and educated researchers. Twenty of 44 awards in Physics, 17 of 29 in Economics and 21 of 40 in Medicine went to Americans. These results speak well for American education.

Finally, the productivity of the American worker is unchallenged. For the past twenty years American productivity has led the world. Whether the measure is productivity or research, the American graduate has held their own in the global marketplace. When we react by altering our system of public education based upon flawed international comparisons, ignoring the other factors that measure how our workers compare to the rest of the world, then we get an incorrect picture of the successes that have been ours alone.

#### **HOW CAN THE PUBLIC BE SURE THAT THEIR HARD-EARNED TAX DOLLARS ARE BEING SPENT WISELY AND THEIR INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION IS PAYING OFF?**

The Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association is not advocating the elimination of testing as a means of assessing student's performance. Nor are we rejecting accountability for teachers, administrators and boards of education. We agree that the only way to evaluate a school system's effectiveness is to develop a set of flexibly constructed criteria that student performance can be measured against. Test results themselves should have value. That value can only exist if the test is aligned with the curriculum and the curriculum is aligned with the standards and the scaling of such tests is open and validated. At this time there appears to be more interest in drastically changing a system that continues to successfully educate the vast majority of students enrolled in public schools than in helping to educate individual students. We believe that society must never lose sight of the fact that tests should exist to benefit students.

Tests should enable educators to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses and to assist them in formulating a plan to help them in the classroom. Actual test questions, as well as test methodology, need to be made available to practitioners. The argument that releasing test questions creates a burden by requiring the development of new test questions which then requires field testing, etc., has validity but the argument is insufficient to offset the benefits which would result from an open truth-in-testing policy.

The results of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and Math tests must be received in both a timely and useful manner and definitely prior to the end of the school term. This will allow educators to make better decisions about a student's need for summer instruction and for better AIS scheduling. These earlier results, accessible to both schools and parents, must also provide item analyses to "diagnose" individual areas of strengths and weaknesses. This will allow for the improvement of target strategies, as well as staff development and budget decisions to ensure success at every level while we strive to improve the academic performance of all our children.

We reject the over generalized statement that "all children can learn". We believe that all children can learn *to the best of their individual capabilities* and that it is the recognition of the existence of the differences in those capabilities that makes education so difficult and complex. We cannot support the current thinking that the only way to evaluate students' performances and to determine if the system is "working" is to make determinations based on the results of a single test. Recognizing that children mature, learn and test differently, have different capabilities, and come from different environments, cultures and life experiences, requires that we ensure that each student is afforded an equal opportunity to develop intellectually, based upon his/her own time line (within reason), and to prove him/her self using different but appropriate assessment methodologies.

A passing grade of 65% has been designated as "prepared to begin college-level study". Obviously, that cannot be the standard for everyone. The passing grade of 55% represents a level of achievement significantly higher than that of the RCT. We should consider keeping the "55%" for a diploma that would be an alternative to the Regents diploma. Furthermore, a career/technical/vocational pathway could require two Regents (Math and English) with satisfactory completion of career specific assessments. Our society needs trained technicians and workers with specialized skills. We certainly don't want more dropouts or students opting for GED courses. We also don't want increased Section 504 referrals for general education students, all because there is no opportunity for an alternative local diploma. The only current alternative, an IEP diploma, while appropriate for a small percentage of students, is not an appropriate alternative for most others.

It is imperative that public education be given the flexibility to re-institute multiple assessment techniques in place of single assessment high stakes tests. How can society consider our students to be well educated when term papers, documents that

require reading, researching, testing, writing and thinking are excluded by New York's reliance on high stakes tests.

According to the Education Policy Analysis Archives, "If the intention of high stakes testing is to increase student learning then the policy is not working". The requirement of high stakes tests may show increased scores but those increases are the result of increased test preparation and the exclusion of some students from the testing process.<sup>4</sup>

*The Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association recommends the replacement of all high stakes tests with a combination of multiple assessment methods including portfolios, research projects, term papers, written exams, oral presentations, "classroom performance, student's performance on nationally-normed tests and individual histories of academic performance and performance assessments for Career and Technical Education Students"*<sup>5</sup>.

*The Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association believes that there must be alternative paths to the Regents Diploma. We agree that each student must be brought up to the highest level of his/her individual capabilities. But to require each student to achieve the same level and deny them recognition for their successes is unrealistic and hurtful. It is also currently proving to be dangerous to society as dropout rates continue to rise dramatically. A June 19, 2002 Cornell University study on Regents Standards vs. Dropout Rates noted an increase in dropout rates. Since 1999 31% of English language learners (those for whom English is not their first language) have dropped out compared to 17% in 1998<sup>6</sup>. These are students who are lost to our schools and too often lost to society.*

*The Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association supports the Nassau, Suffolk and Southern Westchester school superintendents' recommendations that the "State Education Department develop an accountability system that tracks students longitudinally and measures their improvements over time, which would provide a more accurate measure of a school's success (or failure) in improving students' academic abilities as measured by tests."*<sup>7</sup>

The proponents of the current education reform movement, citing the improvements in test scores in some of our weakest schools, claim that the new system of rigid, inflexible standardized testing is working. Many educators question precisely what is working. If we are using the rising test scores as the sole criteria for determining if

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<sup>4</sup> Education Week, April 24, 2002

<sup>5</sup> "Position Paper on the New York State Education Reform Model", Superintendents of Nassau, Southern Westchester and Suffolk Counties.

<sup>6</sup> New York Times, June 23, 2002

<sup>7</sup> Superintendents' Position Paper, *ibid*

education is improving, understand that it is easy to raise scores by fixating on preparing students for the tests. Class time dedicated to answering test questions, the continuous taking of practice exams, the repeated drilling and memorization of facts and figures can always raise test scores. Are these children receiving a better education or are they just becoming better test takers? Are these “dramatic” improvements significant and long lasting, or will they prove short-lived and meaningless?

In conclusion, we believe that the rigidity of high stake testing creates a mold of conformity and fails to accurately measure the depth or breadth of a student’s knowledge.

If we are truly to educate our children for the future then we must recognize that education requires individual exploration and growth and teaching. Only multiple assessments have the flexibility to recognize that individuality. The narrow emphasis on test scores makes education a competitive sport rather than an exciting journey to meaningful knowledge. We must remember that standardized tests only assess what is measurable. We value learning how to think, yet it is difficult to measure critical thinking. To succeed in society, we not only have to raise standards we have to raise good, thinking people. We believe that high stake tests and the present form of assessments create a negative learning environment that sacrifices true learning, high order thinking, and intellectual advancement for test scores.

While good data are important for “diagnosis”, a single test can never represent the entire worth of a child, a program, a school, or a school district. Test results published in newspapers become a contest between schools and digress from the true purpose of testing. Tests help us to assess and improve student learning. Tests, along with other assessments, will help us identify students and programs and acknowledge strengths and address weaknesses. Our school boards, administrators, staff and community will work together to solve them.

If public education’s goal were simply to prepare students to pass standardized tests then education would be simple. If simply passing a standardized test were proof that our children are well educated then educating them would be simple. If every child were a carbon copy and each child came to school with the same background and same life experiences then educating them would be simple. But education is not simple. The process of teaching and learning is a complex, difficult and challenging task. While the standards are uniform, learning is not and that must be recognized if our goal is to truly educate every child to his or her true capabilities.

Nassau and Suffolk school boards have a proud and proven record of educational excellence. We will continue to work to have our public schools successfully serve every child.