

Common Sense Changes to Testing made by the Board of Regents and Commissioner King

In the last Fillmore School Newsletter, I wrote about the positive aspects of the Common Core Curriculum Modules. I also shared my concerns related to the way in which the Common Core Modules were rolled out and that I was concerned about the New York State testing program. Since that time, Commissioner John King and the New York State Board of Regents have received a lot of feedback from parents, students, educators and community members in regards to the problems associated with the state wide testing program. I am hopeful that this feedback will continue to lead to constructive, productive changes by the New York State Education Department.

In the November 2013 issue of On Board, Commissioner John King, spoke about changes approved and endorsed by the Board of Regents to the New York State Testing Program. I feel these changes are both necessary and beneficial to students. On Board is a Journal produced by the New York State School Boards Association.

Commissioner King began the article by saying, “the Board of Regents and I recognize that a variety of pressures have resulted in more testing than is needed or in rote test preparation that crowds out quality instruction.” The Commissioner went on to say that in an effort to begin to address these concerns the Board of Regents approved a series of initiatives to keep the focus on instruction in New York State and reduce testing. The first part of the bullet is taken from the article. I wrote the significance of every initiative following the listing of the bulleted change.

- **Eliminate double-testing in grade 8:** Currently, eighth-grade students who take accelerated math are required by the U.S Department of Education to take both the Regents exam in Algebra along with the Grade 8 mathematics exam. We are seeking a waiver from that federal double-testing requirement. **What does this mean?** Currently the 8th grade math Common Core Curriculum is significantly different than the 9th grade Integrated Algebra Curriculum

which 8th grade accelerated students learn. This means accelerated students often score poorly on the 8th grade exam in spite of doing well on the Integrated Algebra Regents Exam since the Regents Exam is what they prepared for. This is a change that makes sense.

- **Students with Disabilities:** Currently we are seeking a waiver to allow students with severe disabilities who are not eligible for the alternate tests to be tested based on instructional level rather than chronological age. **Why does this make sense?** This regulation has troubled me as much as any state testing regulation in the past. I have watched students with severe learning disabilities who read on a 1st grade level, struggle and be brought to tears, because they are 14 years old and have to take the 8th Grade ELA exam according to the State regulations. Now, these students will take the first grade exam based on their achievement level which will give them an opportunity to show what they have learned.
- **Testing of English language learners (ELLs):** We're requesting a Federal waiver to allow students new to our country to take a Native Language Arts (NLA) assessment rather than the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment. The department will seek funding to create NLA assessments that give students the opportunity to take this exam when it would best measure the progress of Spanish-speaking English Language Learners. **Why is this fair?** Students who speak Spanish as the primary language are not going to be successful on the ELA exam until they can speak, read and write in English. The results of the English Language Arts Exam do not accurately measure the abilities of these students currently.
- **Reduced testing time:** To address concerns from the public regarding the amount of testing time, the department is requesting funds to implement state of the art printing and distribution processes for the grades 3-8 tests. The upgrades will enable us to substantially reduce the number of questions that need to be field tested separately from the April test administration. Additionally, "estimated

time on task” (how long it will take the student to complete a test) is decreasing in math in all grades and in ELA in grades 5-8. The tests in these grades will have fewer questions and are shorter. Further, the “session time” (how long students will have to complete a test) is decreasing in math in all grades. **Why less is more?** Being a former teacher, I know that it is important to measure what a child knows in a reasonable amount of time which is based on their age level. In the past, grade 3-8 NYS Exams have included field test questions. Field test questions provide test creators with data to determine in advance approximately how many students will answer the question correctly and incorrectly. Test creators use this data to determine which questions will be selected for future tests, thereby allowing test creators to select questions that higher percentages of students answered correctly or incorrectly in previous years. Difficult questions that test creators include as field test questions often frustrate and confuse many students. Field test questions are now being reduced on all state exams.

- **Testing our youngest students:** We support the drive to prohibit standardized testing of students, pre-K through second grade. The state does not require “bubble” tests for our youngest students, and we encourage school districts not to administer them at the local level either. **How does this benefit students?** Public school districts measure the mathematical and reading abilities of younger students with brief tasks that are administered by a teacher or teacher aide. These tasks are not typically stressful for students and they provide schools with the knowledge they to either enrich or remediate students. There is no need for formal standardized testing at this level. Placing testing pressures on young students can be detrimental to the learning process and promote test anxiety.
- **Funding to help districts reduce local standardized testing:** Using Race to the Top funding, SED will offer grants to local school districts to support the principle that “Teaching is the Core.” Grant

recipients would commit to review all local assessment practices to ensure that all local tests help inform instruction and improve student learning. **Testing always costs money.** Grant funding to reduce local testing and make sure that tests are informative and improve instruction and student learning. Public school districts have been using local test data to identify what students need support for years. I am really interested to see if the state supports these measures and provides significant grant funding for it. Once again this is a step in the right direction.

I am pleased that parents and students have joined educators statewide to point out to the Board of Regents and Commissioner what is not working with the state testing system. The changes to the testing program listed above were proposed to the Board of Regents and the Commissioner years ago by educators in the field and they were largely ignored because they did not fit into the “educational reform” agenda. It is great to see that most of these measures were already approved. They represent what is best for students. It is clear that the tide is turning. Our State Education Department is listening and beginning to make changes to the testing program that benefits both students and educators. We need to continue to support these and other “common sense” measures in the future. I am thankful our Commissioner and Board of Regents are both beginning to make educationally sound decisions that are best for our students and teachers, when it comes to testing.