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FLAWED MATH TEST SHOWS FLAWED SYSTEM

By **MICHAEL GORMLEY**

June's math Regents exam debacle will trigger changes in how math is taught beginning in kindergarten as part of a systemic fix supported Wednesday by the Board of Regents.

"If this fiasco had never had happened, this never would have come to the fore," said Alfred Posamentier, dean of the School of Education at the City College of New York and member of a committee that investigated the test. "This is a wake-up call for the education system in New York state."

The independent committee of university, school and industry math experts appointed by the board dissected the test and found instruction and test questions weren't aligned with standards as well as unprepared and poorly informed teachers.

"What about all these casualties we've had over the years who were subjected to a test that was not aligned with the standards?" said Ann Cook of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which opposes standardized tests. "They are not tests to demonstrate a real understanding."

The recommendations supported by the board also met with concern that the new math A test wouldn't be rigorous enough for students to land jobs or slots in colleges.

"My fear is the message we are sending to these kids, to these parents, is, 'Well, this is good enough,'" said Regent Robert Johnson of Huntington. "I have a very real question that any of our standards ... are high enough."

"We need to make adjustments and press on," said state Education Commissioner Richard Mills, who said the changes aren't a retreat on standardized tests or raising academic standards. "It's a response to the data ... (and) the board has always said it will respond to the data."

"These are facts that cry out to the conscience of the state," Mills said. "There can't be any thought of going back."

The math panel found the state's standards weren't clear to teachers, the course guides were vague, there was less than half as many math experts in the state Education Department as needed, and technical problems in the test "resulted in the exams being inconsistent over time," Posamentier said. Teachers then relied on those past tests with the growing inconsistencies to prepare students, he said.

The board will also direct colleges and schools to adjust their teacher training methods to give them specific mastery of the subjects they teach.

"The teachers are not prepared in math," said Regent Geraldine Chapey of Queens. "They get math ed - 'how to' - but they don't know the math."

"Precious few teachers - less than 1 percent - know more geometry that is in that (high school) textbook," said Posamentier, who is a mathematics education professor.

The Regents unanimously adopted the report and initiated the first of several changes. The committee recommended:

- Providing teachers with a recommended grade-by-grade curriculum aligned with the standards.
- Requiring prospective and current math teachers to take not only more math courses, but specific math courses to better understand what they are teaching.
- Teaching math concepts in a concerted and more aggressive way beginning in kindergarten.
- Rewriting the math A test that temporarily resulted in untold failures of seniors in June who needed the credit to graduate.
- Reconfiguring the math A course to a one-year course instead of one and a half years of study.
- Refocusing the 35-question test that now covers 103 standards. Instead, the new test, expected to be available in June 2006, will test a deeper understanding of a more limited number of standards. Until then, the current tests will lose much of the troubled parts of the exam and increase the sections students had less trouble understanding.
- Reducing the loss of half credit on a question for mistakes in simple calculations.

The Regents also accepted a report from another committee on the physics Regents test, which for two years has been criticized by parents and teachers as unfair. Some of the state's top students scored poorly or failed the optional test.

The board's committee recommends the test be reconfigured with "new performance levels" to be handled by all students, not just the top college-bound students interested in careers in science.

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