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55 WILL REMAIN PASSING GRADE ON REGENTS TEST AT LOCAL OPTION

By MICHAEL GORMLEY

The state Board of Regents on Wednesday temporarily extended a 55 percent passing grade at local schools' option for state Regents examinations required for graduation from high school.

State education officials estimate that 15,000 to 20,000 students who score between 55 and 64 percent would graduate under the new, temporary extension.

State Education Commissioner Richard Mills said the action isn't a retreat from higher academic standards or from the use of standardized tests to gauge student achievement.

"The board has always said it will respond to the data," Mills said. "Fifty-five is too low. Fifty-five is temporary."

"I think the house of cards has started to collapse," said Ann Cook of the New York Performance Standards Consortium that opposes standardized test. "This recommendation sort of misses the point. So he set the passing score at 55, but it's a passing score on tests that are clearly flawed ... what he's done it seems to me is really camouflage the real problem."

The decision will be reviewed before the fall of 2005 to see if the 55 grade remains or is increased to 65, as the state Board of Regents has long planned to do.

The 55 passing grade would be in effect for all students now in high school and for those entering ninth grade in the fall of 2004.

"We are now at a moment that requires midcourse adjustment," Mills said. "The moment also requires a two-part message: adjust in light of the data, and press on."

For students with disabilities, the new passing policy will be in existence at least through the fall of 2009, officials announced.

The board adopted 55 as a passing grade when it began requiring passage of the Regents high school exams for graduation in 1995. The plan had been to raise the passing grade to 65 for the English, U.S. history and global history tests needed by this year's senior class and for the minimum mathematics and science test scores to go to 65 in June 2005.

State schools Chancellor Robert Bennett said he expects the board will accept Mills' recommendation as well as an independent panel's recommendations to revise standards and curriculum to better prepare students to take the Regents Math A examination.

Changes will be made to the exam itself beginning with the January test, Mills said. A new math test will be devised that will cover material learned in one year, rather than the current year and a half, he said.

Mills said the state will also offer schools a recommended Math A curriculum, action the Board of Regents hasn't taken before in other subjects.

In August, the state rescored the Math A test taken in June by adding several points to all tests and allowing hundreds of students to pass the test needed for graduation. Shortly after the test was taken, Mills gave schools the option of discarding the scores and substituting coursework results for upperclassmen who needed a passing grade to graduate.

The Math A exam tests algebra and geometry as well as probability and statistics. The passing grade is 55.

The state also made changes in its physics Regents exam after two years in which some of New York's top students failed to pass or earn grades similar to their class grades.

The state also made changes in the way its English Regents exams were written by committees of New York state teachers after literary passages were rewritten and edited for sensitivity concerns and for space.

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