

Testing trials

By **MERYL HYMAN HARRIS**
THE JOURNAL NEWS
(Original publication: September 23, 2003)

The anti-testing lobby is limbered up for a series of hearings beginning today by state lawmakers on the requirement that students pass five Regents tests to graduate from high school.

Announcing the formation of a new group yesterday, representatives of Time Out From Testing accused Education Commissioner Richard Mills of lying. The group also posited a theory that 44 percent of Yonkers seniors, and even more than that in some other big cities, won't graduate in 2004 because they'll flunk at least one Regents test; they also alleged the system encourages dropping out. The group, calling for an immediate halt to the testing, is a coalition of organizations, including Scarsdale's State Tests Opposed by Parents, which organized a boycott of the tests in 2001.

Deborah Rapaport of STOP said she intends to tell the state Senate Education Committee that life has changed since business people pointed out in the 1980s that Japan turned out better-educated workers, thus starting the school-reform movement. While then dependent on standardized testing to measure student accomplishment, Japan has since been unable to lift itself out of a long-term economic downturn, in part because its schooling is rigid, she said.

Recent news articles have pointed out that Japan is moving away from high-stakes national testing toward a more localized approach.

The new group said the state is writing tests that are "norm-referenced," a model requiring that only a certain percentage of top grades be accepted as passing. In saying the state wants all students to pass the tests, the commissioner is "lying because he's constructing a test that is just the opposite," said Jane Hirschmann of New York City, who heads the Parents' Coalition to End High Stakes Testing and is leading the coalition group.

Not so, said Alan Ray of the state Education Department. The tests are criterion-referenced. "That means they are designed to measure the Regents standards, and if students achieve an understanding of the standards, they will pass the tests."

But students can't understand the standards if teachers don't, said Walter Haney, a member of the group and researcher for the Center for the Study of Testing Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College.

Regent Saul Cohen of New Rochelle agreed. "I will continue to press for a syllabus, and I think we will get it," he said, adding that the Regents are in the process of rethinking the demand that all graduates must pass the tests with a 65-point score next year. These changes and the legislative hearings come out of recent test debacles, including the most recent Math A test disowned by the Education Department when a majority of students failed it.

Predicting future failure rates is not an easy business, and the Education Department does not agree with the new organization's prediction that so many will fail to graduate. But while Regent Harry Phillips of Hartsdale said there is no real way to predict success, he wouldn't be surprised if the failure rate is high. "We've got to do something," he said.

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