



## **Regents exams criticized**

### **Education group says mandatory state tests are too difficult and are keeping students from graduating**

By RICK KARLIN, Staff writer

*Tuesday, September 23, 2003*

More than half of Albany High School's class of 2004 may not graduate this spring because of tougher testing requirements, predicted a group of educators who want a moratorium on the state's mandatory Regents exams.

"In our view, they should take time out," said Jane Hirschmann, who is among a broad coalition of parents, teachers and administrators expected to testify in New York City today before the Senate's Education Committee on whether the state's five Regents high school graduation exams have become too onerous.

State Education Department officials agree that many urban districts, including Albany, have high percentages of students who don't graduate from high school in four years. But urban schools have long struggled with graduation rates and blaming the Regents exams is disingenuous, officials said.

"They are trying to attribute historical problems to the Regents exams," Education Department spokesman Alan Ray said. He added the predictions fail to account for students who may have been held back for a year or haven't yet taken the exam.

In the class of 2002, 62 percent of Albany High seniors scored 55 or higher on the English Regents exams, noted Martha Foote, a researcher for the group, which calls itself Time Out From Testing.

With the passing grade tentatively scheduled to go from 55 to 65 this year, Foote projects that only 51 percent will pass.

The group based its conclusions on past performances and a recent study by state and university researchers that indicates the failure rate will increase with the number of kids taking the exam.

Albany school officials disputed the group's prediction, arguing that it's impossible to predict future performance.

But according to the state's annual report card on the schools, less than half of Albany High's class of 2002 graduated on time. Classes are defined as cohorts, or the same group of students that started as freshmen four years before their graduation date.

The verbal jousting is a preview of the likely education debate in the Legislature this fall.

In addition to the state Senate hearings today, the Assembly will hold its own hearings later this fall, followed by joint talks in the state Capitol.

The hearings come amid fears that the Regents exams, made mandatory in the mid-1990s as a way of raising academic standards, will lead to more dropouts.

Critics, including the operators of alternative schools, and parents in high-performing districts such as Scarsdale, Westchester County, have complained that the Regents exams in social studies, English, math and science amount to a one-size-fits-all approach that places too much emphasis on test preparation.

Those complaints gained momentum last June when Education Commissioner Richard Mills threw out the results of the Regents Math A exam after an outcry over the approximately two-thirds failure rate -- which threatened to keep thousands from graduating high school.

Time Out's graduation projections looked at several school districts including Poughkeepsie, which is the hometown of Senate Education Committee Chairman Stephen Saland, and Rensselaer, which falls in Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno's district.

Like his counterparts in the Albany school system, Rensselaer Superintendent Gordon Reynolds said he put little stock in projections of failure rates.

"That sounds a little extreme," he said of the projection that 29 percent of Rensselaer's seniors won't graduate.

But he added that the Regents exams, especially in math, may ultimately pose an impassable barrier for a fair amount of students. "Some kids may never pass Math A," he said. "Those kids are going to get tagged as dropouts."