

## **Component Regents testing facing criticism**

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A little-used safety net for high school seniors at risk of not getting a diploma faces an uncertain future itself.

Component retesting allows a senior who has twice failed the English or Math A Regents exam to take just the section of the high-stakes exam the student failed, rather than having to retake the entire test. The option has been available to struggling students since 1998, when local districts began to phase in the state's high educational standards movement.

With all high school students now required to pass five Regents tests before getting a diploma, the option of retaking just a small portion of the tests — which in their entirety can take two days to complete — seemed like an obvious solution to students and districts under tight time restraints.

"I do think it's an excellent idea, especially, say, for math, because there are certain aspects of math that children just grasp more than others, and they may need just a little more time to pick up," said Helene Wiener, whose twin 15-year-old sons attend Yonkers schools and who both easily passed the controversial Math A exams. "I think that it gives the students a much better opportunity to be able to take and pass these tests."

Although component retesting is offered only for the English and Math A tests, it originally was envisioned as continuum. As new graduation requirements were put in place, a component retest for each new Regents was expected to follow.

But the program has never been particularly popular and is expensive to create and administer. An expansion planned for last spring was canceled, and even the tests now given might not be available after this year.

"We have looked at the data — who's taking it — and the numbers are small," said Anne Schiano, assistant director of curriculum and instruction for the state Education Department. "Right now, we're looking at the entire package under No Child Left Behind and state mandates. I believe the plan is they'll continue because we did offer them in May. I just don't know if they'll be on board for January. That's being looked at as we speak."

Current data on the tests are unavailable, Schiano said. During the 2000-01 school year, 1,860 high school seniors statewide took sections of the Regents English test while 177,000 took the entire English Regents; about 2,500 students took pieces of the Math A test and 192,000 students took any Regents math test.

"Math A — those numbers are low because it hasn't become a requirement until now," Schiano said. "That may climb."

Local school districts are aware of the program and track their academically weakest students as they take their Regents exams, administrators said. Because schools have remedial and tutoring programs available, most students who fail the tests the first time are put in those programs.

But when even that isn't enough, the opportunity to take a piece of a failed test is appreciated, educators said.

"Conceptually, it's an excellent idea with opportunities for struggling students who fail the Regents English and Math A tests not to retake an entire Regents exam," said Phyllis Glassman, deputy superintendent of Ossining schools.

Three students at Ossining High School last year took the Math A component retest and one took the English retest, she said.

"The process is rather cumbersome, to identify these students, see the areas in which these students need additional support and scoring matrix and record-keeping," she said. "I'm hoping in the next few years it becomes more streamlined."

Glassman sits on the assessment committee of the New York State Council of School Superintendents and also is on the state Education Department's district advisory group, where she and other educators learn about upcoming tests and other educational initiatives, and give input on current practices.

She said she noticed that the Education Department staff that oversaw curriculum and testing had decreased since the state's economy began declining, and said she could understand why component testing appeared to be on the back burner.

The lack of data proving the tests help struggling students is one of the reasons why the state Education Department canceled a planned expansion. Last spring, the state told districts it would introduce component retests in Regents global history and geography, and in U.S. history and government. Passage of those Regents exams also are required for a high school diploma.

But the state withdrew the plan. Component retests are expensive. They are actually expanded Regents tests, because each component must be a complete, original exam, and the same security precautions must be taken as with regular Regents tests.

Schiano said it cost the state about \$700,000 a year to develop and give English and Math A component retests. In a tight economy, adding new tests just wasn't feasible, she said. "With the pressures of our accountability and limited resources, can we really continue doing this?" she asked. "Do we have the resources to continue? It's money and staff."

Several educators said they would like to see component retests made available for other subjects instead of limiting them to exams required for graduation.

But several others said the component retests were of limited value as it is, especially because the reliability of some current Regents tests are in doubt.

The Math A Regents test was recalled this spring after more than 3,000 students who needed a passing score to graduate failed it. Complaints included the fact that the tests requested students to answer questions on subjects that were not part of the curriculum and that scoring was inaccurate. Some questions had more than one correct answer. Some allegedly correct answers were not.

Because the retests are given just once a year in the spring, the timing is poor for students who really need to pass, said Ileana Eckert, assistant superintendent for secondary education for North Rockland schools.

"It doesn't appear the timing of the test is conducive to helping seniors," she said. "It might have been better if they had offered it in the summer."

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