

**Public Hearing
Regents Learning Standards
and High School Graduation Requirements**

**NY State Standing Committee on Education
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My name is Dr. Jacqueline Ancess. I am the co director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, & Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. I am the author of two books, one on assessment and the other on high schools that succeed with students classified as at-risk of failure and drop out, getting them to graduate and go on to post secondary institutions at high rates. The Center I co direct is thirteen years old and conducts education research on assessment, accountability, instruction, small high schools and big high school restructuring, the minority achievement gap, and dropouts. We also work with schools to provide professional development to help them achieve at higher rates. Before coming to Teachers College, I worked for the New York City public schools for 23 years where I was an English and reading teacher in the south Bronx, the founding director of a junior high school in East Harlem, District 4, and director of educational options for the superintendents of Manhattan's former Districts 3 and 2.

I am testifying today because I believe that the current testing policy in New York State is harmful to children, particularly poor children of color.

It is based on a set of statistical lies. You will hear testimony that the high school graduation rates are going up. Don't believe it. The data are not based on the 9th grade cohort figures. When they are, the graduation rates are declining. You will hear that high percentages of

students are passing the English Regents. Don't believe it. These percentages are also not based on 9th grade cohort data. The Commissioner has stated that 90% of students are passing the Regents. If that is so, how come the high school graduation rate is not 90%? That question needs to be asked of him.

The New York State Testing System is based on a false notion of accountability. The current testing policy is an accounting, not an accountability system. The NY testing policy identifies students who pass and fail tests. It does not tell us how to improve achievement. That would be accountability. The current system does not eliminate harmful practices that cause student failure. That would be accountability. It does not ensure effective teaching practice. That would be accountability. There is only one kind of accountability that matters and if you have had a child or a grand child who has failed, or you have a relative or friend whose child has failed, you know that the only kind of accountability that counts is when the teacher says, "The student is failing. What do I, the teacher, need to do to get this student to learn? And whatever it takes, that is what I will do. I will do what it takes to get the student to learn." This is the only kind of accountability that matters, and the current testing and punitive accountability policy NY has adopted discourages and undermines that kind of teacher accountability because it disdains and tries to eliminate teacher judgment and problem solving.

The NY State testing system deprives students of the best teachers because the best and brightest teachers do not want to teach in a test driven educational system. The best and the brightest want to challenge students' intellects with the powerful ideas of literature, history, and science, not the banalities demanded by the tests. They want to elicit students' voices in well crafted writing, not their robotic compliance with formulaic essays. Instead, intellectually silenced by NY's testing policy, the best and the brightest are leaving teaching.

The NY State testing policy deprives students of rigorous intellectually challenging curriculum. A former East Harlem principal whose school consistently had the highest rates of reading and math achievement in the district and is now one of the local instructional superintendents in the Department of Education's new school system despairs that test prep has become the curriculum. She worries that the emphasis on tests has driven content out of the curriculum, particularly for students who are the most vulnerable learners, those who rely most on what school provides. She is concerned that while New York's middle class and affluent private school students can experience a curriculum rich in the arts, science, history, and technology projects, public school students are inundated with narrow test prep exercises because the NY state's testing policy punishes teachers, principals and students because of a single score on a single test.

The NY State testing policy deprives students of the kind of pedagogy that elicits high levels of achievement. In ten years of research on New York City's most vulnerable students, we at NCREST have found that students attribute their high graduation and college admission rates to instructional practices such as in-depth inquiry projects, performance assessment projects, oral defenses, extended writing assignments, and opportunities to work closely with teachers and revise their work, none of which is valued or rewarded by the current NY testing policy. Over and over again in 10 years of research, students tell us that the learning for standardized tests is quickly forgotten where performance assessments demand deep understanding and produce enduring learning.

The NY State testing policy creates inequity by depriving all students from showing what they know and can do. We know that one size teaching and learning do not fit all. All responsible psychometricians and researchers assert that a single test is an inadequate measure to determine

high stakes action on a student. Why does Commissioner Mills' assessment policy pretend that one test will adequately measure the learning of all students?

The NY State current testing policy stifles passion in teachers and students. You are probably wondering why I bring up passion, what passion has to do with successful education. Well, a couple of weeks at the Department of Education event to announce the Bill Gates 50 million dollar grant, a reporter said to Bill Gates, "If a student asked you, what do I have to do to become a billionaire, what would your answer be?" Gates responded. Don't begin by thinking about making a billion. Begin by finding what you feel passionately about and follow it. The current testing policy constrains teachers from following their passion and students from developing theirs. If being a billionaire is a metaphor for success, which I believe it is, the current New York State testing policy is an obstacle to personal and professional success and it needs to be changed. New Yorkers deserve better.

Lastly, I want to say, in the final analysis the testing policy relies on the judgment of the education commissioner. This commissioner has demonstrated a pattern of manipulating data, of supporting bad tests that cause harm to children and families, of convening experts only to disregard their findings when he disagrees with them, of being unresponsive to serious testing flaws until hounded by the media, of promoting educationally irresponsible testing instruments that are neither valid or reliable and then permitting them to determine the futures of children's lives. Attention must be paid and questions must be asked and this must be done now.