

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

**NY State Standing Committee on Education
Rochester, NY, October 8, 2003**

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One Student's Story

Recently, a Rochester student was not able to graduate from high school because she failed to score higher than 55 on the Comprehensive English exam for grade 11.

But let me tell you a little more about Maria (not her real name). Maria was a student who entered our district from a small town in Puerto Rico in 6th grade. Maria had excelled in all other courses, achieving passing grades in all of her subjects. She received many recognitions for her citizenship and performance in school. She has a work ethic that most employers and teachers would relish in their staff and students.

But there's one small problem. Maria is not always a good test-taker. Her eligibility to graduate was dependent on one single state-administered standardized test. Because of a low test score, she did not graduate. She was devastated, as were her parents, friends and teachers. Maria and other students like her have their hopes and dreams shattered because the State of New York has failed to recognize that there are, in fact, alternative ways of assessing a student's knowledge and ability.

And like Maria, the vast majority of students likely to be impacted by this policy will be minorities—African-American and Hispanic.

It is my belief that not only is this policy and graduation requirement bad educational practice, but it will lead to more and more high school dropouts, including minority students.

I believe we have a serious problem affecting a large number of students who have had a very successful high school experience, having passed their classes and demonstrated mastery of these standards. These students and their parents are finding themselves in stressful situations where success on a test takes precedence over learning and enjoying academics. Their future hangs in a balance that can be tipped by a single exam.

II. The Need for Alternative Assessments

This high stakes requirement should not be the only means by which student success is measured. Just as colleges use a number of criteria in addition to a student's SAT score

when determining admissions, so too must our high schools be allowed to use alternative forms of assessments to determine eligibility for graduation.

You just heard from students from Rochester's School Without Walls, which has been using alternative assessments for years. Let me give you an example...

To assess student performance in 11th grade English, School Without Walls requires students to deliver a two-part presentation before a committee of teachers, students, and community members. For the first part, students must present a portfolio of their best writing in ten different genres and discuss with the committee how the portfolio demonstrates that they have met the goals for this subject. This is much like the oral dissertation required of doctoral candidates.

Secondly, the students must present a comparison of two great works of literature, then take questions from the committee on the points they have made. Unlike an exam, it is an *interactive exchange* that requires students to think on their feet and to defend and debate their ideas.

Alternative assessments facilitate *ongoing feedback* for students that can increase their chances to continue to grow and improve their learning.

In effect, this alternative assessment at School Without Walls requires students to demonstrate their **mastery of the learning standards** for English (critical analysis and higher-level thinking, in particular) more realistically than the ELA exam does. Students leave this class with a clear sense of themselves and their talents, an ability to draw on their knowledge to solve problems, and a capacity to work productively with others.

For years we have used "differentiated instruction" to help students of different learning abilities and styles successfully reach targeted standards. It is time for New York State to allow "differentiated assessments" to measure student learning toward state standards.

III. Revisit Existing Exams

In addition to asking the state to establish alternative means of assessments, I am also strongly recommending that the State revisit and **redesign existing assessments** that many of us believe are ineffective at measuring **student progress toward reasonable standards**.

The Regents Physics exam, for example, has been uniformly condemned as too difficult, an ineffective means of gauging student knowledge. This year statewide, only 53% of students who took the exam passed it. As a result, physics enrollment across the state is dropping precipitously. Many schools are no longer offering Regents Physics, an elective, despite the importance of physics as the basis for all science. In this respect, our students are being academically shortchanged.

Physics is a perfect example of a course that, by its very nature, lends itself to an alternative assessment that is **project based**, rather than exam based.

Similarly, the Math A exam is, locally, the exam with the lowest passing rate of those required for high school graduation. This year, only 33% of our students passed this exam, even after it was rescored. Students who have passed other required courses have not been able to pass the Math A. As the *only* assessment that fulfills students' high school math requirement, it is another barrier to graduation.

IV. Maintain High Standards

At the same time that I am strongly advocating for alternative forms of assessment and for redesigning some state exams, I also want to convey that I do in fact **support** maintaining **high expectations and high standards** for our students.

I applaud the State's work in developing the rigorous academic standards it first put in place in 1997, standards that have been highly touted by national education experts. However, we all know that for schools to be successful, we must find new ways to help all students meet these standards. Alternative assessments are one method of doing this, because they recognize that "one size does not fit all." Students have different learning styles and require different amounts of time to learn. The all-or-nothing, single-test approach does not work for everyone.

V. Replicating Successful Schools

New York State annually produces an accountability report citing those schools that are in need of improvement. It is expected that districts will develop specific plans to address the cited areas within each school, and typically there is a small amount of **school improvement funds that gets channeled to these schools...eventually.**

Successful schools all share certain characteristics that we read about in education research on effective schools. They have:

- Outstanding leaders who understand that leadership must be shared.
- Teachers who are fully committed to their students and high expectations for their performance.
- A proven curriculum and a commitment to continuous development.
- Parents and community involved in the life of the school.
- High quality after school, Saturday and summer programs that let no child fall through the cracks.
- Smaller school environments where students are known and there are established relationships among the students and their teachers.

Right here in Rochester, you can visit School #33 or the Children's School of Rochester, Wilson Magnet High School, School of the Arts or School Without Walls, as well as programs in many of our other schools, and see for yourself how these models of excellence are **making a difference for their students.**

But I believe that the State must do a better job of recognizing and rewarding these schools of excellence and the outstanding practices that exist within these schools. There

should be an incentive fund or a “replication of best practices” fund that successful schools receive so that they can continue to build on their successes and be able to share them with other schools.

As my colleague Adam Urbanski has said, we should make public schools more like private schools, without privatizing public education. This means less bureaucracy, smaller schools, more choice for parents, high standards for student conduct, and greater flexibility and autonomy to do what they do best. I personally am not so concerned about strict compliance with federal, state and local regulations and contracts when I know that there’s evidence that all students in a given school are achieving and progressing very well.

VI. Accountability

We are not asking for less accountability—far from it. Within the next week, Rochester will release its own “shared accountability report” in which we will recognize and provide real incentives for our high performing schools and those that are progressing well. At the same time, we will identify those that need targeted assistance and will hold these schools accountable for meeting higher expectations and performance. This district will be organized in a way that continues to promote and support excellence and best practices, and we will expect the same from all of our schools. We are already moving forward in this area in collaboration with our employee unions.

Speaking of accountability, I want to take this opportunity to also address some specific concerns regarding the recently enacted No Child Left Behind legislation. First, there’s no question that this legislation is intended to drive greater accountability for ALL, not some students. In that respect, I support the legislation.

NCLB stipulates that districts must provide **school choice for students** who attend low-performing schools, those failing to make adequate yearly progress for two years or more.

This choice provision as it currently exists is not workable at the secondary-school level, where **numerous schools may be considered “low performing” and, therefore, choice is not a realistic option.**

Further, this provision doesn’t support the real solution to the problem. Rather than transferring students out of low-performing schools and leaving those schools intact, we should take steps to **close those schools** and provide staff from our high-performing and progressing schools the resources to **replicate the programs and practices that they know will work for students.**

The law requires that we set aside funds to provide transportation for these students to higher performing schools. Instead, districts should be allowed to use these funds to create new schools of excellence, replicating programs that have proven to be successful elsewhere.

Setting aside funding for this purpose will lead to expedited change in schools and districts, a much better outcome than simply shuffling students from one school to another.

VII. Conclusion

In closing, we must not leave behind the “Marias” of the future. Instead of **predicating** her graduation on a single exam, let’s offer her the opportunity to ***demonstrate that she is ready to graduate.***

Alternative assessments allow students like Maria to demonstrate their ability to learn through research, investigation, and discovery; their proficiency in English, math, science and social studies through non-traditional measures; and their preparation to become effective citizens, intelligent consumers, and high-performing employees.

There is potential in every student. Let’s commit ourselves to finding the key that will ***unlock*** that potential.