

Attrition of Students from New York Schools

Invited Testimony at
Public Hearing “Regents Learning Standards and High
School Graduation Requirements” before the
New York Senate Standing Committee on Education
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Dr. Walter M. Haney
Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy
Lynch School of Education
BOSTON COLLEGE
Chestnut Hill MA 02467
Ph. 617-552-4521
Email: haney@bc.edu

I Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you.

My name is Dr. Walter Haney. I am a Professor of Education in Lynch School of Education at Boston College and a senior researcher in our Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy for last two decades. I am also currently Director of the Educational Pipeline project at Boston College, funded by Ford Foundation. (For more on professional background, see <http://www2.bc.edu/~haney/>). Also relevant is that I have previously served as an expert consultant to the New York State Education Department, the Office of the Attorney General of New York, and have been privileged to testify before committees of the New York legislature as far back as 1979.

By way of introduction, I would like to summarize the general points I would like to convey:

- 1.1 The rate at which students are graduating from New York high schools has been plummeting and the Empire State now has one of the worst graduation rates of any state in the nation.
- 1.2 Rates at which Black and Hispanic students are graduating from high school in New York are shockingly low.
- 1.3 Rates at which students in New York are missing between grade 9 and 10 have been increasing sharply over the last decade, a condition that bodes ill for their likelihood of persisting in school to graduation.

1.4 The increasing attrition of students from New York public schools prior to graduation is clearly associated with implementation of the new (ill-conceived) Regents graduation exams.

1.5 Conclusion.

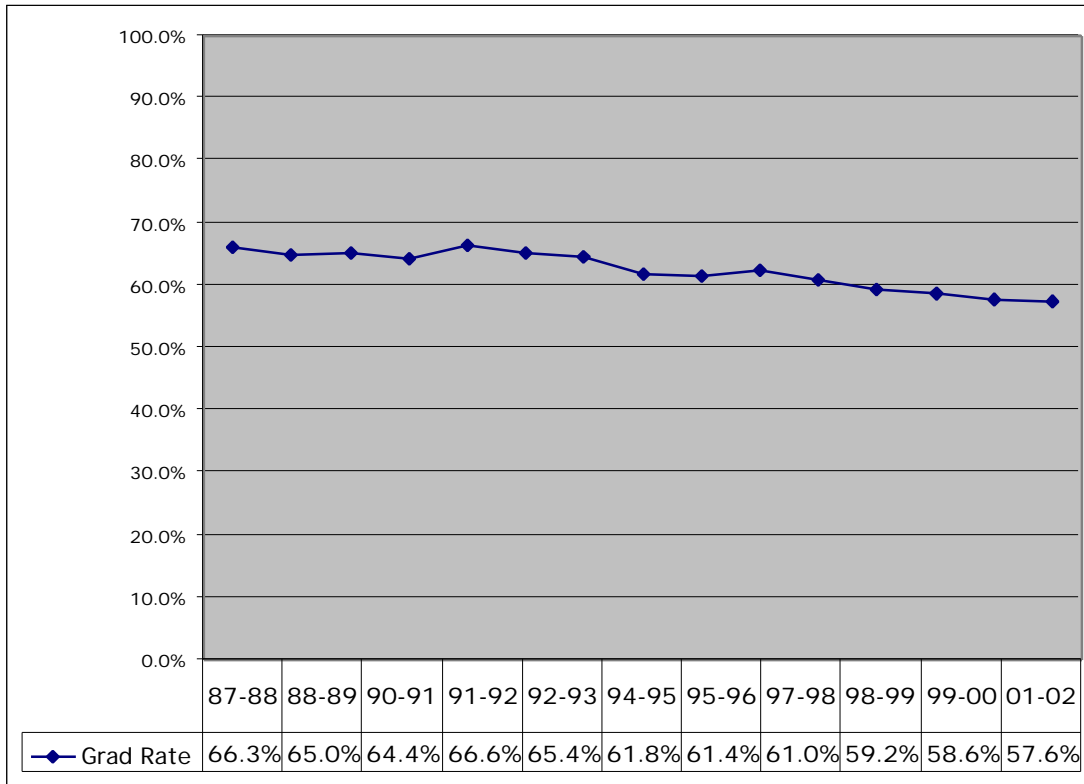
II New York High School Graduation Rates are Plummeting

Thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation, researchers at Boston College (myself, Anne Wheelock, George Madaus and a team of graduate students) have been analyzing data on grade enrollment and graduation over the last 20 years both nationally and for all 50 states. The main reasons for these analyses are that state-reported dropout statistics are often unreliable and most states do not regularly report grade retention data, that is data on the rates at which students are held back to repeat grades. Hence the best way of studying long-term rates of progress through K-12 educational systems is to examine data on grade enrollment and graduates over time. This national project grew out of a study of education reform in Texas (Haney, 2000, 2001) in which it was found that analyzing enrollment and graduation statistics could show what was really happening there when reliable statistics on dropouts were unavailable.

To provide context for the results presented today, I note two developments on the national education scene regarding high school graduation rates. First is that in the Goals 2000 Act of 1994, the federal government set out as a national education goal that we as a nation should aspire to a high school graduation rate of 90%. Second is that the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act sets out as one criterion for evaluating secondary education, “graduation rates for public secondary school students (defined as the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years)” [Sec 1111(b)(2)(D)(i)].

Available data on grade enrollments and graduates in New York may be used to calculate such graduation rates over the last seventeen years, defined as the number of graduates divided by the number of students enrolled in grade 9 three-and-a-half years earlier. The source data from which these rates have been calculated are provided in an appendix (as well as a brief discussion of alternative ways of calculating graduation rates). Here in Figure 1, I show a graph illustrating how graduation rates in New York have plummeted, from more than 66% in 1987-88 to less than 58% in 2001-2002. Since grade 9 enrollments in New York have been about one-quarter million in recent years, this drop is equivalent to 20,000 (8% of 250,000) students not graduating.

Figure 1: High School Graduation Rates in New York, 1987-88 to 2001-02



The decline in graduation rates in New York has been so great that New York now has one of the worst graduation rates in the nation. Table 1 shows the graduation rates for all 50 states from 1994-95 through 2000-2001. As may be seen, as of 2000-2001, New York ranked 45th among the states in graduation rate – only Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee had worse rates. In contrast to the New York graduation rate of 58% for 2000-01, New Jersey had a rate of 86% and Connecticut of 73%.

Table 1: High School Graduation Rates for the States, 1994-95 to 2000-01

	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	Rank 2000-01
Data Source	1,8	2,9	3,10	4,9	5,11	6,11	7,11	
Alabama	60.2%	57.8%	57.3%	59.8%	55.5%	58.9%	59.6%	42
Alaska	68.2%	64.7%	63.8%	65.0%	66.4%	62.3%	63.8%	36
Arizona	63.2%	58.4%	62.1%	61.5%	60.2%	59.3%	59.5%	43
Arkansas	73.1%	74.9%	69.8%	73.2%	72.7%	73.6%	73.2%	19
California	64.0%	65.3%	66.2%	67.3%	68.3%	68.7%	68.8%	31
Colorado	73.1%	71.9%	72.3%	71.5%	70.4%	70.5%	69.3%	29
Connecticut	75.0%	73.5%	74.1%	73.4%	71.8%	77.0%	73.1%	20
Delaware	64.7%	65.8%	66.7%	68.0%	64.1%	60.7%	60.6%	40
Florida	59.1%	57.8%	57.6%	57.0%	56.0%	55.2%	52.3%	49
Georgia	56.6%	55.0%	54.8%	51.3%	50.4%	52.3%	57.0%	46
Hawaii	75.0%	74.8%	62.8%	62.0%	59.7%	64.2%	61.0%	39
Idaho	79.5%	79.6%	78.9%	78.5%	77.8%	76.9%	78.0%	8
Illinois	75.5%	75.7%	76.5%	76.9%	75.4%	71.1%	70.9%	26
Indiana	70.1%	70.1%	70.4%	70.8%	70.7%	68.2%	67.7%	33
Iowa	85.1%	85.3%	85.4%	84.2%	83.1%	83.0%	82.8%	4
Kansas	77.4%	75.8%	74.1%	73.3%	74.5%	74.4%	74.5%	16
Kentucky	70.3%	68.1%	67.8%	66.8%	65.5%	65.8%	64.2%	35
Louisiana	58.0%	54.9%	53.2%	55.4%	55.3%	58.7%	59.6%	41
Maine	72.3%	72.4%	72.3%	78.5%	74.9%	76.6%	72.4%	23
Maryland	73.9%	73.9%	71.2%	70.6%	71.7%	73.3%	74.9%	12
Massachusetts	76.0%	75.8%	75.8%	75.6%	75.0%	74.8%	74.1%	17
Michigan	68.9%	69.6%	70.7%	72.2%	72.5%	64.8%	74.9%	13
Minnesota	86.8%	85.3%	77.3%	83.9%	84.7%	83.7%	82.3%	5
Mississippi	60.1%	56.8%	56.1%	56.4%	56.0%	56.0%	56.8%	47
Missouri	72.7%	71.4%	70.9%	71.8%	72.4%	73.1%	72.3%	24
Montana	85.6%	82.8%	81.0%	80.1%	78.5%	78.1%	77.3%	9
Nebraska	84.3%	82.9%	82.4%	84.7%	86.3%	83.8%	78.1%	7
Nevada	65.1%	65.4%	73.0%	69.9%	70.7%	68.8%	68.6%	32
New Hampshire	74.9%	74.9%	74.7%	74.5%	73.0%	73.9%	74.6%	15
New Jersey	83.5%	83.1%	85.8%	78.2%	79.6%	85.5%	86.3%	1
New Mexico	64.0%	63.4%	57.9%	57.9%	59.4%	60.3%	61.1%	38
New York	61.8%	61.4%	62.5%	61.0%	59.2%	58.6%	57.9%	45
North Carolina	65.5%	62.4%	61.3%	60.8%	59.8%	58.7%	59.1%	44
North Dakota	86.8%	89.0%	86.9%	85.4%	84.5%	84.1%	84.0%	2
Ohio	74.6%	69.7%	71.0%	73.2%	69.5%	69.6%	70.3%	27
Oklahoma	75.3%	73.0%	72.0%	72.1%	73.1%	72.8%	72.5%	22
Oregon	68.9%	66.6%	67.4%	67.2%	66.6%	67.4%	66.2%	34
Pennsylvania	77.3%	76.3%	75.7%	75.3%	74.9%	74.9%	75.6%	10
Rhode Island	72.6%	71.4%	71.0%	70.0%	68.6%	69.5%	69.7%	28
South Carolina	55.1%	54.1%	52.4%	52.2%	51.8%	51.0%	51.0%	50
South Dakota	86.6%	86.6%	82.0%	75.7%	71.9%	74.2%	71.7%	25
Tennessee	63.8%	63.4%	58.3%	54.9%	54.9%	54.8%	56.6%	48
Texas	59.7%	58.4%	58.9%	61.0%	60.6%	61.9%	62.4%	37
Utah	79.1%	78.4%	82.5%	82.3%	83.2%	83.9%	83.3%	3
Vermont	89.4%	89.9%	82.2%	80.9%	80.3%	78.7%	75.4%	11
Virginia	71.9%	75.5%	75.5%	74.3%	73.6%	73.9%	74.8%	14
Washington	73.4%	72.2%	71.4%	70.9%	70.6%	70.8%	69.3%	30
West Virginia	75.4%	76.1%	74.7%	75.3%	75.7%	74.8%	73.2%	18
Wisconsin	81.7%	80.4%	79.5%	78.8%	78.1%	78.0%	79.3%	6
Wyoming	78.2%	77.8%	77.7%	77.4%	76.5%	75.0%	72.8%	21

For 2000-01, New York had a graduation rate worse than Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas, all southern states with historically poor graduation rates. And regardless of comparisons with other states, the New York rate of less than 60% falls abysmally short of the national education goal of a high school graduation rate of 90%.

Other researchers confirm the finding that New York now has one of the worst graduation rates among the states. Using a different measure of high school graduation rate (one that adjusts for both grade 9 retention and migration), Warren (2003) found that New York suffered a more than 8% decline in graduation rate between 1992 and 2000. By 2000, according to Warren's (2003) calculations, New York, with a graduation rate of 60.5% ranked above only Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Using yet another way of calculating graduation rate, analysts at the Manhattan Institute, Greene & Forster (2003) report that for the class of 2001, New York had among the ten worst graduation rates among the 50 states.¹

III Black and Hispanic Graduation Rates Shockingly Low

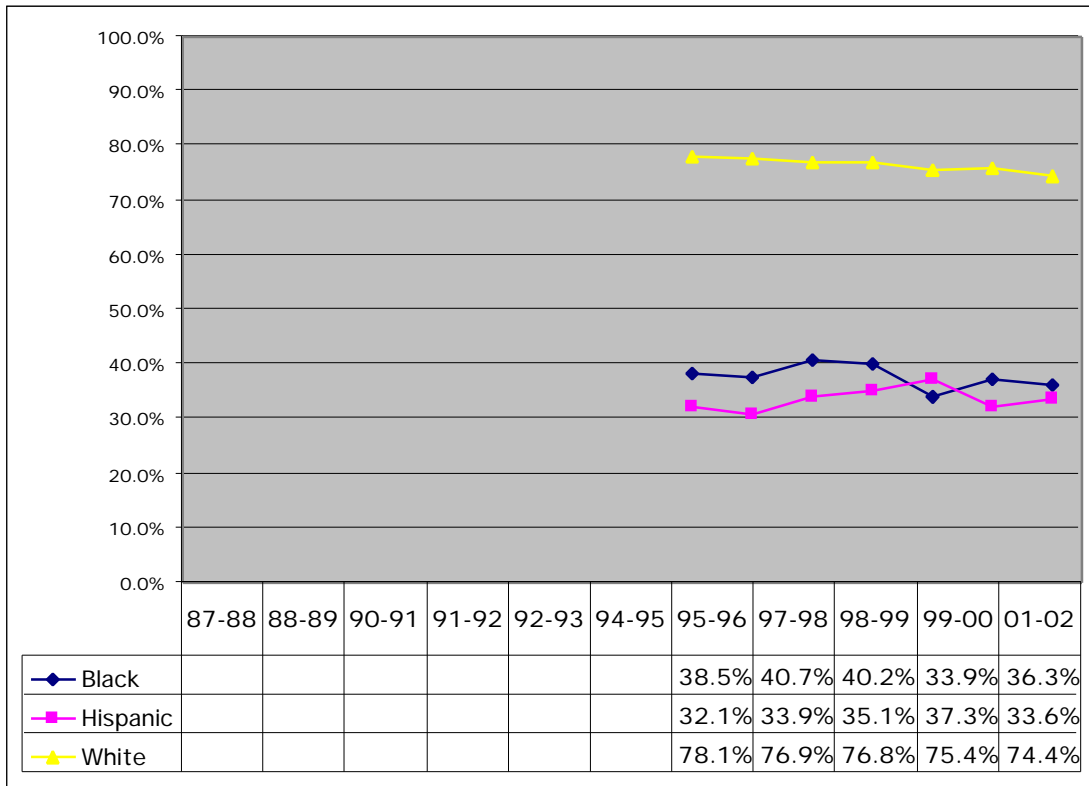
If the overall graduation rate in New York, abysmally low and declining, seems surprising, the graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students in New York are so low – less than 40% – as to be absolutely shocking.

Tracking graduation rates for minority students in New York is not easy. For reasons that are not clear, the NYSED historically has not reported grade enrollment data by race on an annual basis. Annual data on grade enrollments and graduates are available for New York only from 1992-93 onward. In contrast, such data are available for Texas back to the mid-1970s (Haney, 2000). The relative absence of disaggregated data for New York means that we can calculate New York grade 9 to graduation rates by race only from 1995-96 onward (the class in grade 9 in 1992-93 would be expected to graduate at the end of the 1995-96 school year, if doing so “in the standard number of years.”)

Figure 2 shows results from available data, with 2001-02 graduation rates of about 75% for White students but less than 40% Black and Hispanic students respectively. The recent Manhattan Institute report (Greene & Forster, 2003) confirms the relatively poor performance of New York public education with respect Black and Hispanic students. This report found that though New York had a graduation rate for White students in the middle of the pack across the states (ranking 22nd among 50 states for which data are available), the Empire state ranks near the bottom in terms of graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students – ranking 31st out of 33 states for Black high school graduation rates and 23rd out of 23 states in terms of Hispanic graduation rates.

¹ Greene & Forster (2003, Table 9) also estimate that among New York public high school graduates in the class of 2001, only 29% were “ready” for college. Their state estimates of “college readiness” rates, however, may be shown (in conception, calculation, and results) to be of dubious validity.

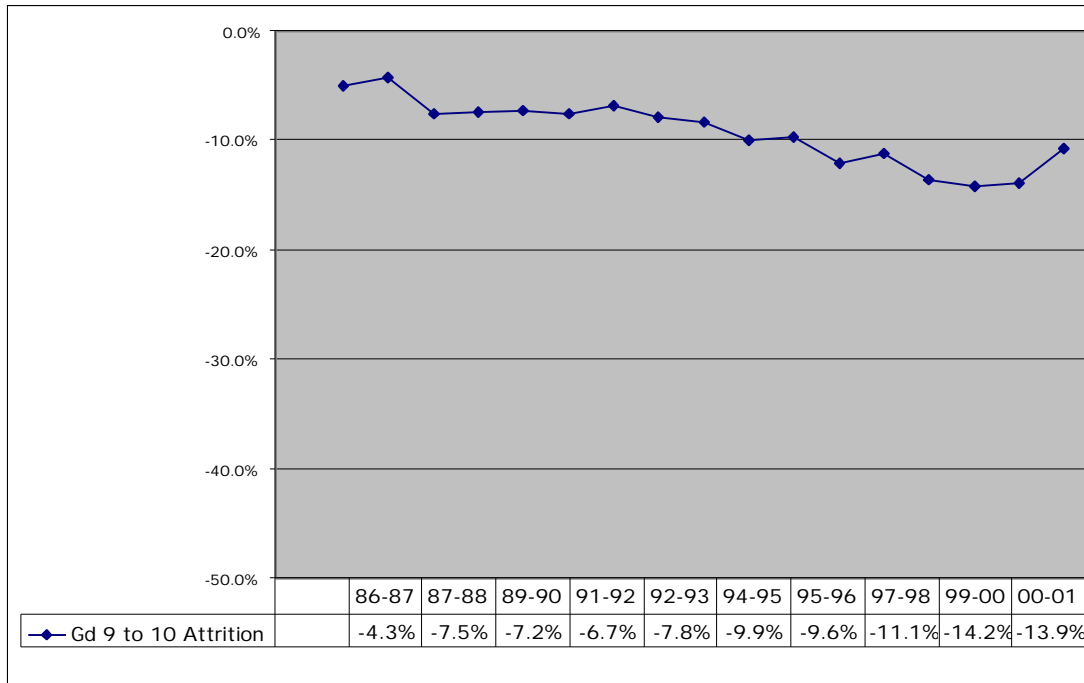
Figure 2: New York Graduation Rates by Race, Black, Hispanic and White, 1995-96 to 2001-02



IV Attrition between Grades 9 and 10

Why are graduation rates in New York so abysmally low and declining? Two apparent causes are increased rates of attrition of students between grades 9 and 10 and ill-conceived implementation of the new New York Regents graduation examinations.

Figure 3: Rate of Attrition of Students in New York between Grades 9 and 10



As shown in Figure 3, from the mid-1980s until 1993-94 less than 8% of students were “disappearing” between grades 9 and 10. By this I mean simply that there were 8% or less fewer students enrolled in grade 10 than in grade 9 the previous year. Without going into more detail here, it may be easily shown that from 1995 onward, the rate at which Black and Hispanic disappeared between grades 9 and 10 (18-24%) was triple the rate of White student attrition between the two grades (6-7%). The main reasons for attrition between grades 9 and 10 are that some students dropped out and some were held back to repeat grade 9. It is easy to estimate rates at which students were flunked to repeat grade 9 by calculating how many more students are enrolled in grade 9 than in grade 8 the previous year. Again, without going into detail, it is clear that rates at which New York students were flunked to repeat grade 9 have increased dramatically between the early and late 1990s.

This bodes ill for future graduation rates in New York because research suggests that flunking students to repeat a grade is not a sound educational strategy (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Recent evidence from Texas and other states indicates, for example, that

Haney, New York Attrition, 9/23/2003, p. 8.

70-80% of students who are flunked to repeat grade 9 will not persist in school to high school graduation (Haney, 2000, 2001). Indeed even the NYSED recognizes that, as stated in the June 2002 *New York: State of Learning* report, “The proportion of ninth grade students who repeat the grade . . . can be an important indicator of future dropout rates” (NYSED, 2002, p. 103).

V Attrition Associated with New State Exams

The increasing attrition of students from New York schools is clearly associated with implementation of new high stakes tests in New York.² The New York Board of Regents approved a plan for revising the state assessment system in April 1994. In the fall of 1995, the State Education Department (SED) published its strategy for raising educational standards for all students. The SED plan had three elements: 1) Setting high learning standards and revising the state system of assessment; 2) Building the capacity of schools to support student learning; and 3) Developing an “institutional accountability system with public reporting on how well students and schools are doing.”

The Regents approved new “learning standards in seven individual subject areas” in 1996. Also in 1996, the Regents approved regulations to phase out the old Regents Competency Tests and phase in the new Regents examination requirements beginning with the cohort of students entering grade 9 in September 1996. (Summarized from “Timeframe on implementing New York State’s reform initiative for raising learning standards for all students, October 2000, Kadamus binder, tab 2)

The new New York “learning standards” covered the areas of: 1) Health, physical education, and family and consumer sciences; 2) Mathematics, science and technology; 3) the Arts; 4) Career development and occupational studies; 5) English language arts; 6) Languages other than English; and 7) Social studies. Without wandering into a discussion of what is meant by terms like “consumer sciences,” let me say simply that within each of these seven areas, from two to seven “learning standards” were specified, so that altogether there were 29 separately specified “standards” (summarized from “Learning Standards for New York” State, n.d., Kadamus binder, tab 3). These 29 “standards” were specified at an extremely vague level of generality, and without any indication as to how they might pertain differently for children of different grades or ages. To provide some indication their vagueness, here is the first of the “Mathematics, science and technology standards:”

² I am quite familiar with the evolution of state testing in New York. I have long been interested in the history of Regents testing in New York. Also on November 16, 2000, at the invitation of Commissioner Mills, I participated, as one of five “national experts” on educational policy, in a day-long “mid-point” review of standards implementation in the State of New York. Additionally, in 2001, I served as an expert witness in a legal challenge to a decision by Commissioner Mills regarding Regents testing in alternative schools in New York that ran contrary to the advice of the State’s own experts (Haney, 2001 July). It is only fair to note that this challenge was unsuccessful.

Students will use mathematical analysis, scientific inquiry and engineering design, as appropriate, to pose questions, seek answers and develop solutions. (“Learning Standards for New York” State, n.d., Kadamus binder, tab 3, p. 2)

As has happened many times before in other educational jurisdictions, faced with such a broad array of vaguely-stated educational aims, and how to assess progress toward them, the NYSED decided to focus first on the basics of reading and math, or more specifically, English language arts (ELA) and math. Various versions of grade 4, grade 8 and Regents (or graduation) levels of ELA and math tests were distributed and pilot tested in 1996, 1997 and 1998. The first statewide administration of the new grade 4 ELA assessment took place in January 1999 and the first administration of the new grades 4 and 8 math and the grade 8 ELA assessments took place in June 1999 (Summarized from “Time frame on implementing New York State’s reform initiative for raising learning standards for all students, October 2000, Kadamus binder, tab 2).

The new graduation level ELA and math tests were also administered in 1999. The new graduation tests have been called by several different names in NYSED documents, for example, as “new Regents” exams, graduation tests or as “commencement level” examinations.

The 1999 memo from the NYSED cited above explained that while the old Regents Competency tests were being phased out between 1999 and 2004, local schools “may use 55-64 as the passing score on Regents examinations to meet local diploma requirements”, but that “a passing score of 65 is required for a Regents diploma” (Kadamus, April 1999, p. 2). In the future though, the memo made clear, graduation standards were to be toughened:

For students entering 9th grade in 2000, the passing score on Regents examinations in English and social studies will be 65 for either diploma.

Students entering 9th grade in 2001 will be the first class of students who must take and pass five Regents examinations with a score of 65 in order to graduate. The required examinations will be English, mathematics, global history and geography, United States history and government, and science. (Kadamus, April 1999, p. 4)

The intent behind these plans was clear. By 2004-05, all students graduating from high school in New York would have to pass a series of five academic tests based on the new “Learning standards” for the State. By then, it was clearly intended, the two-tier system of education in New York, whereby some students received Regents diplomas and some received “local” high school diplomas, would be eliminated.

The high school graduation testing plans announced in the 1999 memo neglected altogether four of the “learning standards in seven individual subject areas” adopted by the Regents in 1996: 1) Health, physical education, and family and consumer sciences; 2) Career development and occupational studies; 3) the Arts; and 4) Languages other than English.

If this discrepancy were not sufficient to raise doubts about “Standards Implementation” in New York, there was also the question of how the State could predict in April 1999 that scores of 65 would be required to pass each of the five tests before members of the class of 2005 could graduate from high school. It was implausible that the same passing scores would be required before the new tests had been developed, much less before passing scores on them had been validated.

Nonetheless, the NYSED has moved ahead with its plans. Here is how a June 2002 report described developments with graduation testing:

All general-education students who entered ninth grade in Fall 1996 were required to score 55 or higher on the Regents comprehensive examination in English to earn a local diploma. The number of Regents examinations required for graduation increased with each succeeding freshman class: mathematics was added in Fall 1997, global history and geography and U.S. history and government in Fall 1998, and science in Fall 1999. Freshmen who entered ninth grade between 1996 and 1999 can receive a local diploma credit by attaining a score of 55-64 on a Regents examination (if permitted by their district), but they need a minimum score of 65 for credit toward a Regents endorsed diploma. To complete graduation requirements, freshmen who entered ninth grade in 2000 will need a minimum score of 65 in English and social studies; freshman who entered ninth grade in 2001 will need a minimum score of 65 in English, social studies, mathematics and science. (NYSED, 2002 June, p. 5)

What this scenario makes clear is that the increased attrition of students from New York schools, both between grade 9 and graduation, and between grade 9 and 10, between the early and late 1990s, has been associated with implementation of new Regents graduation test requirements. Correlation between trends X and Y obviously does not prove causation, but other evidence strongly suggests a causal link.

First it seems no accident that the states with the lowest graduation rates at the end of the century – Florida, South Carolina, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Texas, and New York – all implemented high school graduation tests. And to be clear, these states had the lowest graduation rates not just in terms of results shown in Table 1 above, but also in terms of alternative graduation rate measures reported by Warren (2003) and Greene & Forster (2003). Florida, perhaps, presents the most cautionary example. Florida is the state with the oldest high school graduation test (excepting the New York Regents exams), going back to the 1970s. Though originally ruled illegal by a federal court as having required students to pass a high school graduation test without the state having shown students’ having had a reasonable opportunity to learn the material covered on the graduation test, Florida has now implemented a graduation test longer than any other state (save New York with the Regents examinations). Yet according to results in Table 1, as of 2000-01, Florida had one of the very worst graduation rates among the states (ranking 49th out of 50). And according to other analysts, using alternative measures of graduation rate, it had the 47th

worst graduation rate in 2000 (Warren, 2003, Table 8) and the dead last graduation rate among the states in 2001 – an appalling 56% (Greene & Forster, 2003, p. 18).

But what about the “odd-man-out” in this consideration of states? New York has had a “high school graduation test” in the form of New York Regents examinations for more than a century, far longer than any other state. If the original Regents graduation tests were employed with apparent success for more than a century, what is wrong with the “new” Regents graduation tests and why should they be causing such devastating attrition among New York high school students? This is a very large question, which I can begin to address only briefly in my concluding remarks

VI Conclusion

Regents’ graduation examinations have existed in the Empire State for more than a century. Given this history, it may seem strange that education advocates today are proposing a moratorium – a time out from testing. Skeptics may well ask whether to do this would not be an abandonment of objective educational standards, in effect a derailing of a decade-long and hugely expensive effort to implement “standards-based” reform in New York schools. (Recall that it was 1994 when the Regents approved a long-term plan for revising the state assessment system.)

As a way of urging you to seriously consider the proposed time-out from graduation testing in New York, in conclusion I would like to make five points.

First, in the decade since 1994, the high school graduation rate in New York has fallen sharply (from 65% for the class graduating in 1992-93 to less than 58% for the class of 2002). If Board of Regents’ plans for requiring all students who entered grade 9 in 2001 to achieve minimum scores of 65 on English, social studies, mathematics and science tests in order to graduate, it seems clear that the graduation rate in New York is headed to 50% or less. An ominous harbinger of such a possibility is that the rate of student attrition between grade 9 and 10 has doubled over the last decade, from 7-8% in the early 1990s to around 14% in 1999-2000 and 2000-01. With all due respect to New York officials, when high school graduation rates are falling rapidly toward a mere 50%, common sense demands a moratorium, a time to take stock and see what is happening to schools in the state.

Second, to base high school graduation decisions on standardized test results in isolation, irrespective of other evidence about student performance in high school, is contrary to recognized professional standards regarding appropriate use of test results. (See for example the statement of American Educational Research Association, <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm>). A simple way of communicating this point is to note how college admissions test results are used. There is not a single college anywhere in the nation that accepts all applicants who score above a particular point on the SAT (say a combined score of 1000) and rejects all applicants who score below that

point. Instead colleges make admissions decisions flexibly using test scores, grades and other information rather than making decisions mechanically based on test scores alone. It is worth adding also that decades of research on college admissions testing show that it is far more sound (more valid and with smaller adverse impact on minorities and females) to use test scores in this way (in what might be called a sliding scale approach so that students with high grades may be considered with lower test scores, but students with low grades need higher test scores to be considered for admission).

Third, documentation of widespread errors in test scoring, scaling, and reporting in the testing industry should make clear how unwise it is to make important decisions mechanically based on test scores in isolation (Henriques & Steinberg, NYT, May 20, 2001; Steinberg & Henriques, May 21, 2001, Rhoades & Madaus, 2003). Not surprisingly such mistakes have repeatedly cropped up in Regents exams in recent years, for example, on the Regents Physics and Math A retest exams in 2001, and the June 2003 Math A exam).

Fourth, recent research has demonstrated conclusively that “low-tech” tests like the Regents examinations (that is, paper-and-pencil tests in which students have to write long hand) seriously underestimate the skills of students used to writing with computers (Haney & Russell, 2000; Russell & Plati, 2001). A number of states, as a result, are experimenting with ways of administering tests via computer. Insofar as I am aware, New York is not one of them.

Finally, the “new” Regents tests are fundamentally flawed in conception and execution. The new high school graduation tests in New York are called “Regents” examinations, and passing scores on them have been “set” variously at 55 or 65 (though as mentioned previously, the “setting” of passing scores for a new test before the test is developed, administered and its technical characteristics evaluated, ought to arouse suspicions about the process.) Such features doubtless are intended to give the new tests trappings of the old Regents examination with which citizens of New York have long been familiar – and thereby burnish the new tests with some of the prestige associated with the old. But the new Regents examinations (and by the way, also the new state grade 4 and grade 8 tests) are fundamentally different than (and in my view irreparably flawed in comparison with) the “old” Regents subject matter examinations. The old Regents exams were based on clearly specified courses of study – indeed they were often used as “end-of-course” tests in high school classes. In contrast, the new Regents tests are based not on clear statewide curriculum standards or courses of study, but on extremely vaguely stated state “learning standards.” Perhaps partly as a result of this, the new tests have been developed using norm-referenced test construction procedures (based on classical and item response test theory). Norm-referenced test construction procedures are such that any items answered correctly by all students during pilot testing are excluded from operational versions of the test (see Haney, 2002, for discussion of this problem regarding another state’s “standards based” test). Indeed norm-reference tests are constructed by design so that 50% of examinees will get half of the test items incorrect. This simple feature of norm-referenced test construction may well come as a surprise to many. You may well ask in wonderment, if not in outrage, is it possible that

the NYSED has constructed new high school graduation tests so that a majority of students will fail? I cannot go into this matter in detail here, but if you have any doubt as to whether the new Regents tests have been developed using norm-referenced test construction procedures so that a majority of students will score below 55, I suggest you review the August 25, 2003 report by the "Math A Panel" – the group of experts appointed by Commissioner Mills to investigate the fiasco in the June 2003 administration of the Math A Regents test (Math A Panel, 2003).

In closing, I should acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to put aside decade-old plans, developed over an extended time, and implemented at great expense, especially when those plans have been widely promoted as intended to raise educational standards and reduce long-standing inequities in public education in New York. But if plans are not set aside to require freshman who entered ninth grade in 2001 to obtain a minimum score of 65 in English, social studies, mathematics and science Regents tests in order to graduate from high school, given the manner in which the new tests have been constructed, one may, with great confidence and even greater regret, make the following prediction. New York will soon earn the dubious distinction of being the first state in the 21st century (even before Florida) to sink to having a high school graduation rate of less than 50%.

Thank you again for the opportunity of speaking with you.

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Acknowledgements and Appendix

First I would like to acknowledge help of the staff of the Education Pipeline project at Boston College in preparation of these remarks. In particular, preparation of these comments in less than two weeks would have been impossible without help from Jing Miao, Lisa Abrams and Illeana Gruia. Also, I would like to express appreciation to the Ford Foundation for support of Education Pipeline project at Boston College's Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy. None of these individuals or institutions, however, is responsible for the substance of these remarks.

Second I would like to provide a brief discussion of alternative ways of calculating high school graduations rates. In Haney (2000), I calculated graduation rates for Texas in a number of different ways, e.g. from grade 9 to graduation three years later, from grade 8 to graduation four years later, and from grade 6 to graduation six years later. As far back as 1986 the Intercultural Development Research Association (1986) calculated "attrition rates" in Texas school districts defined as the percentage of students missing between grade 9 and grade 12 three years later, with the denominator weighted to take migration into account. Kaufman, (2001), Warren, (2003) and Greene, & Forster (2003) all provide recent useful discussions of different ways of calculating graduation rates. In these brief comments I have focused only on the simplest of the various approaches to calculating graduation rates, namely the number of graduates in year X divided by the number enrolled in grade 9 in years X-3. The source data from which these calculations have been made are provided in the attached table showing graduates and grade enrollments for New York public schools statewide from 1984-85 to 2001-02. For the sake of comparison, the table also shows graduation rates from grade 8 to graduation four years later. When rates of retention in grade 9 are high, the latter will generally not be as low as grade 9 to graduation rates. It should be mentioned that the data below have had to be pieced together from a number of different sources noted. For reasons that are not clear the NYSED appears not to have been participating fully in federal efforts to collect systematic data on education enrollments and graduates, as in the Common Core of Data or CCD.

Haney, New York Attrition, 9/23/2003, p. 17.

Finally, it should be noted that while the comments above focus on statewide patterns in graduation rates in New York public schools generally, graduation rates vary substantially across local education agencies. For example, in calculating graduation rates in the nation's 100 largest school districts for 1997-98, Haney (2001) found that while New York City Public Schools had a graduation rate of 49%, the Buffalo City School District had a rate of 55%. The on-line CCD (<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>), by the way, may be used to calculate graduation rates for any school district in New York, or the nation.

New York Enrollments and Graduates by Race (Total, Black, Hispanic and White) 1984-85 to 2001-02																				
State\Yea	84-85	85-86	86-87	87-88	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92	92-93	93-94	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98	98-99	99-00	00-01	01-02		
All Students																				
Grade 7	193823	184313	180834	180815	180283	184326	184451	188586	191664	194988	197519	199440	200259	203038	204605	206739	213426	217811		
Grade 8	198260	182211	174025	171808	172302	171331	178389	180718	184815	188274	191181	194347	196724	197148	200097	202221	203482	210369		
Grade 9	249428	237940	220033	207361	202098	203393	205901	214204	218802	225243	227040	235320	241927	245320	247917	252864	245291	245540		
Grade 10	234058	237015	227779	203499	191947	187596	189101	192056	197530	200597	202906	205205	206802	215097	212054	213708	217734	219003		
Grade 12	177510	170394	171545	172904	161593	148836	142514	141546	142822	143055	144139	142841	146738	146818	148315	150444	151043	153505		
Graduates	166752	162165	163765	165379	154580	143318	133562	134573	132963	132708	132401	134401	140861	138531	139426	141731	142000	142750		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 9 Enr	66.3%	65.0%	65.1%	64.4%	66.6%	65.4%	64.4%	66.6%	65.4%	64.5%	61.8%	61.4%	62.5%	61.0%	59.2%	58.6%	57.9%	57.6%		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 8 Enrol Yr X	78.0%	78.0%	78.7%	78.3%	77.2%	77.5%	74.2%	74.4%	76.2%	73.6%	72.9%	72.9%	72.9%	72.2%	72.2%	72.4%	72.4%			
Source: 1 National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 1987, 1990, 1992-2000. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000. 2 Data enrollment for 2000 - 2001 and 2001-2002 was obtained from Common Core of Data (http://nces.ed.gov/ccd) 3. The number of graduates for 2001-2002 are only estimates from Digest of Education Statistics 2002																				
Black Students																				
Grade 7									36116	37088	37234	37530	37665	37531	38209	38847	40964	42251		
Grade 8									34523	34556	35253	35531	36207	36420	36135	36789	37301	39012		
Grade 9									49092	50630	49980	52830	54815	55897	56665	57497	53744	53611		
Grade 10									42061	42677	43547	43192	43115	45481	43726	43261	44771	44326		
Grade 12									20356	20886	20938	20302	20990	20621	20780	21075	21328	21483		
Graduates									18939	18374	18728	18885	19084	20340	21233	18603	20798	20594		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 9 Enr									38.5%	37.7%	37.7%	37.7%	37.7%	40.7%	40.2%	33.9%	37.2%	36.3%		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 8 Enrol Yr X-4									55.3%	58.9%	60.2%	52.4%	57.4%	56.5%						
Hispanic students																				
Grade 7									29533	30641	31236	31786	31302	32113	32446	33389	36048	37293		
Grade 8									27680	28975	29848	30990	31095	30566	31651	31983	32938	35280		
Grade 9									40164	42568	43553	46655	48711	49223	48611	50182	46888	47316		
Grade 10									31983	33740	34641	35340	35659	38425	37538	36922	37950	37996		
Grade 12									13336	13904	14494	14758	15675	15778	16483	17206	17217	17451		
Graduates									11593	12108	12568	12910	13082	14722	16383	18191	15853	16317		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 9 Enrol Yr X-3									32.1%	30.7%	33.9%	35.1%	37.3%	32.1%	33.6%					
Grade YrX as % of Gd 8 Enrol Yr X-4									47.3%	51.0%	54.9%	58.7%	51.0%	53.4%						
White students																				
Grade 7									116638	117518	118842	119593	120226	121878	122172	122121	123123	124589		
Grade 8									113111	114818	116053	117087	118348	118614	120318	121074	120675	122033		
Grade 9									118074	119668	121035	122298	123667	124902	126826	128615	128437	127982		
Grade 10									112014	112365	112554	114038	114802	116853	116258	117723	119642	120886		
Grade 12									100171	99246	99521	98582	100223	100515	100957	101913	101913	103627		
Graduates									96084	94378	92970	92226	92877	93027	93907	93210	94783	94355		
Grade YrX as % of Gd 9 Enrol Yr X-3									78.1%	77.6%	76.9%	76.8%	75.4%	75.9%	74.4%					
Grade YrX as % of Gd 8 Enrol Yr X-4									82.1%	81.0%	80.9%	79.6%	80.1%	79.5%						
Source: 1. Common Core of Data (http://nces.ed.gov/ccd) maintained by NCS 2. The number of graduates for the academic year 1998-1999, ethnic groups were not available from CCD files and they were Education Department, Information, Reporting & Technology Services, Information sent by Peter R. Caruso and received by																				