



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Commissioner of Education
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March 24, 2014

Dear Superintendent,

Thanks to dedicated educators all across our state, New York is poised to lead the country toward a more rigorous and challenging system of public education that better prepares our children for college, work, and life. No state has worked harder than New York to elevate the quality of education in our schools. Thank you for all your hard work to implement the new standards.

In the coming weeks, you will administer the statewide math and reading exams. (See the assessment schedule here: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/schedules/2014/ei-schedule-14.pdf>) This is an important opportunity for you to help your students, parents, teachers and principals understand the value of high standards and the role that assessments play in helping our students to meet them. It is especially important that you communicate now to help correct misinformation that can cause anxiety and frustration among students and teachers. When everyone understands how the assessments help us better identify student strengths and needs and better support the growth of classroom teachers, the anxiety will lessen and students will feel more comfortable.

When you communicate about test procedures, there are a few critical points to reinforce:

- The best preparation for testing is good teaching. In my visits across New York in the past four years, I have seen many inspired and passionate teachers share new lesson plans that help students learn to problem-solve, think critically, read analytically and communicate clearly. That's what these new assessments measure. Rather than rote memorization or test taking tricks, these new tests require real analysis of and response to real-world problems and authentic texts.
- Every question on the New York Common Core Assessment was written for New York, reviewed by New York educators and field-tested with New York students. This is New York's assessment of our standards and the curriculum taught by our teachers. Do not let anyone say otherwise. Additional information about how the questions are designed can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-assessment-design>.
- Parents and educators know that performance on a single assessment does not tell the whole story about what a student knows and can do. It's simply one way to determine the overall progress of our schools and our students. Moreover, although placement and retention decisions are made at the district level, the Department neither requires nor encourages districts to make promotion or placement decisions using student performance on state assessments in grades 3-8. If districts choose to consider state assessments in grades 3-8 when making promotion or placement decisions, they should make adjustments to ensure students are not negatively impacted by the Common Core transition and should use multiple measures for this purpose – not grades 3-8 state assessment results alone – including the judgments of a student's teacher and principal.

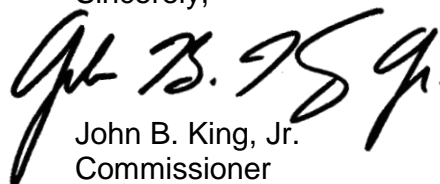
- As we all learned last year when we first administered the Common Core assessments, the test is harder, and the proficiency rates will be lower than on the old tests that did not reflect the higher standards. This does not mean our teachers are any less effective or our students are any less prepared. It simply means we have set higher aspirations as we work to help our students be truly college and career ready.
- The Board of Regents has worked to ensure that students, educators, schools and districts are not disadvantaged by the transition to the Common Core. Criteria for intervening in under-performing schools were adjusted to focus on growth scores, not just proficiency levels. In fact, no new districts were identified as Focus Districts and no new schools were identified as Priority Schools based on 2012-13 assessment results.
- Educators should understand that their evaluations are never based exclusively on test scores, but rather on a range of measures, including principal observation. Last year's evaluations identified just one percent of teachers in the lowest category (ineffective), and these teachers need to remain in that category for two years in a row – despite receiving additional support through an improvement plan – to even be considered for the new due process dismissal procedure established in the evaluation law. In the meantime, we have - collectively - spent hundreds of millions of dollars on teacher training, curriculum development and support since the standards were adopted in 2010.

Attached to this letter is a set of resources for your use along with information to help guide understanding of what the assessments measure and how to interpret student performance. These include assessment questions, test guides, data analysis reports, and descriptions of what students at each proficiency level know and can do. See attached Appendix A for these resources and descriptions of what they include.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of communicating clearly and consistently to your students, parents and teachers that assessments are simply a tool to tell us where we are and help us get better. Appendix B includes a sample parent/guardian letter modeled on one sent by one of your colleagues. It is our hope that as you, your principals and teachers get more comfortable with the new state assessments, you will reduce local standardized testing or test prep programs and dedicate as much learning time as possible to providing a well-rounded curriculum that meets our highest expectations of a great education.

Please remember that our success as a state relies entirely on the professionals managing our districts, leading our schools and delivering classroom instruction. Thanks to leaders like you and the dedicated educators in your district, New York will continue to lead the nation in providing a high-quality education for every student we serve – regardless of circumstance, disability, zip code, language status, or academic history. If we continue to work together, get smarter in our work, solve problems, and reflect on our practice, we can help all our students reach the higher standards we've set for them.

Sincerely,



John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner

Appendix A: Resources to Support Parents and Teachers

Released Questions with Explanations

Each year, a portion of questions from the actual test will be released. For each question, an explanation is provided of why the wrong answers are wrong and why the right answers are right. For questions that require students to write or solve problems, samples of graded student work are provided. Sample questions can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-common-core-sample-questions>.

In addition, all Regional Information Centers (RICs) offer reports that allow educators to see the percentage of students that got each test question correct and (for released test questions) the percentage of students who selected each incorrect response. Educators can use this information to help understand whether their instruction, assignments and classroom assessments reflect the learning standards with the same rigor and depth that are demanded on the statewide assessments.

Information about the Test: Test Guides

A test guide is available for each grade and subject that contains specific details about the number of questions on each test, which standards are measured on each test, and how students will be graded on their performance. Test guides can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/test-guides-for-english-language-arts-and-mathematics>.

Understanding the Levels: Performance Level Descriptions

Every student's performance on the assessment is characterized as being in one of four performance levels, with Level 3 representing proficient performance on standards for the grade level. For each performance level, NYSED worked with educators from across the state to determine the specific knowledge and skills required for student performance to be classified in that level. The descriptions are available at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/performance-level-descriptions-for-ela-and-mathematics>.

Educators can use these detailed descriptions to map where their students' classroom performance falls along the learning trajectory represented by the grade-level standards. These descriptions can also be used to help parents – and students – understand the knowledge and skills required to be on grade-level and, therefore, on track to graduating high school with viable options for college and career.

Appendix B: Exemplar Letter to Parents/Guardians

Dear [Parent/Guardian]:

Beginning in April, our elementary and middle school students will be taking the 3-8 NYS Assessments in ELA, Math and Science. Click here to view the schedule [PDF]. (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/schedules/2014/ei-schedule-14.pdf>) To help students prepare for these tests, I want to share with you some important tips to make your child feel as confident and comfortable as possible on testing days.

Reading and writing on a regular basis is one of the most important factors for success on any assessment, regardless of the content area. The more a child reads and writes the more likely they will be to reach their highest potential on any test. Encourage your child to read different kinds of texts to help them increase their vocabulary development and become familiar with different styles of writing that will help them to become stronger students overall.

Some students become anxious when tackling standardized tests. While it is important to acknowledge the value of a test, it is equally important to remind them that a test is simply one measure of performance. The more relaxed and prepared a student is about an exam, the more likely they are to perform their best and truly demonstrate their best learning.

There has been much publicity recently about state testing and the Common Core and there is a lot of misinformation being presented. The Common Core State Standards adopted by the Board of Regents in 2010 emphasize critical thinking, careful reading of fiction and non-fiction, writing with evidence, effective communication of ideas, and real-world problem solving in mathematics.

While testing has become an integral part of students' education at every level, we recognize the concerns you may have about the upcoming testing and want to not only alleviate any fears your child may have, but also any concerns you may have about the use of these assessments in placement or grading.

We do not use these assessments as a sole determination in any type of program placement. We simply look at them as another measure of performance we have, in addition to many other valuable measures. Each child is unique; we look at the whole child in school, not how they perform on any single assessment. We certainly do not want any of our students to stay home simply to avoid taking one of these tests for fear of this.

If you have any questions about other ways you can assist your child at home or questions about the testing, please do not hesitate to contact your child's teacher, principal or reach out to me directly. Thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,

[Superintendent/District Administrator]