

Listening to all voices



Betty A. Rosa
Commissioner of Education

Before she passed away in March, my dear friend, Regent Beverly Ouderirk, made me promise that I would speak with a student whom she had mentored. I recently had the chance to speak with him, and now I understand why Bev was so insistent that we talk.

It turns out that Jonah, who now works for a well-regarded think tank, developed a strong interest in education policy based on what he had witnessed

as a high school student in upstate New York. "There were so many kids at my school who definitely could have achieved at high levels, but they just weren't being served by the kinds of learning we were being asked to do," Jonah told me. "By the time they get to high school, a lot of students have already checked out; they don't see themselves being able to do the work, so they eventually stop trying."

He continued, "These were students who were really interested in their classes when they were younger – but somewhere along the way, they had come to believe that the schooling they were getting just wasn't for them. It seems to me," he concluded, "that we could support a lot more students if there were some alternative pathways to achievement."

When Jonah shared these observations with the school superintendent at the time, she told him that

the state's rigid graduation requirements limited the district's ability to pursue innovative approaches. They had to teach in certain ways, she explained, to ensure that students passed their Regents exams and graduated.

Three years ago, in this very newspaper, I wrote a column calling on the Board of Regents and the State Education Department to begin the work of rethinking what a high school diploma should mean and what it ought to signify. I was Chancellor of the Board of Regents then, and my colleagues on the board, like Jonah, had expressed concern that the current system simply doesn't work for all students.

Since the publication of that column in February 2019, the Board of Regents and Education Department have worked on this issue, unabated, even as the pandemic raged on. We held regional information meetings where we gathered valuable public input. And at the Regents meeting in September, we announced the appointment of a Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures.

The Commission's 64 members represent an incredibly diverse cross-section of stakeholders from every part of the state. It's a large group, but our commitment is that all voices must be heard, respected, and considered.

Over the next two years, the Commission will present recommendations to the Board of Regents regarding measures of learning and achievement that may better serve New York's diverse student population. Specifically, they will consider measures that will more accurately reflect student knowledge and readiness for college, careers and civic engagement.

The response from certain quarters has been predictably close-minded; the headline of one newspaper's editorial warned: "Lower Standards Will Leave Children Behind." It's the same old knee-jerk response we have come to expect. The skeptics would have you believe that there is only one way for students to learn and demonstrate their knowledge.

That view is antiquated. Logic dictates that a single examination, administered by pencil and paper on a single day, simply cannot capture the kinds of deeper and more meaningful learning that we are seeking to provide all students. As Regents Chancellor Lester Young has so eloquently explained, "This work is not about lowering standards, it's about making sure the standards work for all of our state's students."

When children recite the pledge of allegiance in school each day, they are not promising fidelity to the stars and stripes that are sewn onto a piece of fabric. Rather, they are promising to uphold the values of our Republic that the flag represents – "for which it stands." In the same way, the Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights mean so much more than words written on ancient parchment. These documents represent our nation's foundational philosophy – that we are all equal and share certain basic human rights. And when a high school student crosses the stage to receive a diploma, we want that piece of paper to represent something very special, too. In New York State, a high school diploma must stand for educational excellence and equity; it must signify access and opportunity for all students. The work of redefining what a high school diploma means and signifies is well underway – and we could not be more excited about what that means for New York's students, families and communities.

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THE GATHERING

TWO DAYS OF FUN AND LEARNING

- December 1st & 2nd | Courtyard Marriott | Saratoga Springs, New York -

High Level Professional Development for Boards, Superintendents, Business Officials, Building Leaders, Guidance Counselors, Social Workers and Educators

THURSDAY DECEMBER 1

SCHOOL AID SUMMIT
"AFTER FULL FUNDING FOR EVERYONE"

State Education Commissioner Betty Rosa
Hon. Shelley Mayer (Senate Education Cmte. Chair)
Michael Rebell (Director Center for Educational Equity, author and lead attorney CFE and CEE lawsuits)
Panel of Advocates: NYSCOSS' Bob Lowry, ASBO's Brian Cechnicki, and RSA's Dave Little



THURSDAY NIGHT HOLIDAY FUN & FOOTBALL

Join us Thursday evening for Saratoga's Annual Victorian Stroll (holiday lights, music, rides, food, and shopping)! Then come back to the Marriott for our Bills vs. Patriots Party!

FRIDAY DECEMBER 2

STUDENT CENTERED SUMMIT
"SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE"

National Educational Policy Leader, Brad Mitchell
SED Assistant Commissioner, Kathleen DeCataldo on new student safety guidelines
YMCA on prepping students for civic participation
Democracy Ready NY will discuss holding successful tough classroom discussions
Panel discussions on civil discourse in the classroom, legal considerations, and resources available to schools



DID YOU KNOW?

Conference registration is eligible for BOCES Aid

Conference costs are eligible for Federal Rescue Aid

The discounted hotel rate is extended through weekend

REGISTER ONLINE!
<https://bit.ly/rsawinter22>

Event Hosted By:

Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES and the Rural Schools Association of New York