

Comsewogue School District

CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

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JOSEPH V. RELLA, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

August 7, 2013

Senator Kenneth P. LaValle
28 North Country Road
Mt. Sinai, New York 11766

Dear Senator LaValle:

Today (August 7th) the State Education Department (SED) released test scores for grades 3-8 ELA and Math tests administered last April. Our scores, as well as the scores of students across the State have dropped significantly – 30 to 35 percentage points.

We've all heard the expression: "If it sounds too good to be true – IT IS!" I believe the converse is also correct: "If it sounds too BAD to be true – IT'S NOT!" And so it is with the test scores. They are not true. They are not connected to student learning in any way. So what changed this year to cause such a drop in scores? What changed this year was not our students' intelligence or the talent and skill of our teachers and administrators. What changed was the curriculum and the tests. What changed was inadequate curricular materials from SED. What changed was giving the tests before students were properly prepared.

The construction of the tests and the setting of the passing scores has always been a mystery but the outcome – most students scoring a "1" or a "2" – NOT PROFICIENT – was a foregone conclusion as far back as November, 2012, long before any child sat down to begin four hours of testing over two days for ELA followed by 4 hours of testing over two days for Math. Last spring, SED Commissioner King stated that "scores would likely drop by 30 points." This past March, SED Deputy Commissioner Ken Slenz predicted that ELA and MATH proficiency rates would fall between 30% and 37% of students scoring proficient. Not surprisingly, they did.

In Commissioner King's memo to parents and families (attached) announcing the release of the test scores, he stated:

"I want to make it very clear that the change in test scores (including, possibly, one in your child's score) does not mean that students are learning less or that teachers and schools are performing worse than last year. [sic] Proficiency rates – the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards – on the new Common Core assessments cannot be compared with last year's proficiency results since the old scores are from an old test based on the former standards."

Proficiency rates (passing rates) changed. I think we've been here before. In the 2009-2010 school year, about 90% of our students were proficient in ELA and Math. During the summer of 2010, we woke up to learn that the passing scores had been changed retroactively (too many students had achieved proficiency on SED's tests). After the change, about 65% were proficient. Today, about 35% are proficient in ELA and Math – right within SED's predicted 30%-37% range.

It's hard to make sense of all of this – even for adults. Children will not understand how they went from doing very well to failing in three years, but not to worry, the Commissioner is telling them that they aren't learning less. They won't understand. I DON'T UNDERSTAND! So who benefits from this? One of my colleagues provides an answer in today's *Washington Post*:

“The bottom line is that there are tremendous financial interests driving the agenda about our schools – from test makers, to publishers, to data management corporations – all making tremendous profits from the chaotic change. When the scores drop, they prosper. When the tests change, they prosper. When schools scramble to buy materials to raise scores, they prosper. There are curriculum developers earning millions to create scripted lessons to turn teachers into deliverers of modules in alignment with the Common Core (or to replace teachers with computer software carefully designed for such alignment). This is all to be enforced by their principals, who must attend “calibration events” run by ‘network teams’.” (Carol Burris)

Clearly, the agenda is to so shake confidence in public education that other alternatives (charter schools, vouchers, etc.) become more attractive. It is nothing less than the programmatic dismantling of the public education system. Take a look at the past five years:

- Significant reductions in State aid.
- Property Tax Cap* coupled with increased unfunded mandates – PARCC, APPR.
*The Tax Cap, far from offering relief to overburdened residents, has in many instances, increased the burden on local communities to maintain the programs they invested so heavily in and value.
- Creating a toxic environment towards public education in the media...leading to the lowest morale in anyone's memory for our administrators, faculty, and staff.

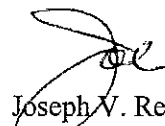
But let's remember that all of these things are happening and have happened to adults. Today, we crossed a major line. The majority of our young children will receive the clear message that since these tests are predictors of college success – they are not college material in 3rd, 4th 5th grade????!! That message is unconscionable. It is hurtful to our children. I pray it is not lasting.

If you believe that any of this is valid, then please help us. We are being systematically deprived of our fundamental right as Americans to appeal. No one is listening!

If not, then I request that on behalf of our residents – your constituents – you initiate proceedings to have me removed as Superintendent. IF this assessment system is truly valid, then during my tenure as Superintendent, our students went from about 90% proficient to about 30% proficient. At best this is gross negligence. At worst, this is willful malpractice.

I'll be happy to meet with you at your convenience.

Sincerely,



Joseph V. Rella, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

JVR:mr
Attachment



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

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August 7, 2013

Dear New York State Parents and Families,

Today, we are releasing our 2013 test results. You will notice that more students struggled on this year's test than in previous years. This is because we changed the expectations for New York State students when we adopted the Common Core State Standards. The Board of Regents adopted these standards in 2010 and teachers and principals have been working to make important changes in student learning over the last 3 years. It is exciting that these changes have already begun, but our test results tell us that we have a long way to go.

We are making this change to the Common Core State Standards because we want every single one of our students to be on track for college and careers by the time they graduate from high school. Our former standards did not prepare all of our students for 21st century college and careers. The Common Core State Standards will:

- help students gain the knowledge and skills that they need to think and work at that deeper level
- create opportunities for all students to excel at reading, writing, speaking, listening, language and math
- support students to think critically about what they read and the math that they do
- allow teachers and students to focus on fewer critical concepts in mathematics more deeply
- build students' abilities to apply what they have learned to the real world
- ensure that all students can communicate strong ideas and arguments in writing and react powerfully to what they read

The Common Core State Standards are new, challenging standards and we know that students won't be able to meet these standards without the support of teachers, parents and communities. In particular, we have been working with teachers and principals to understand how instruction should change to get students where they need to be. Teachers and principals have been working to make these important changes to help their students to achieve at higher levels.

You have likely seen and will continue to experience noticeable changes in what and how your child is learning in school. This could include what you see in classrooms, finished work that comes home, or even homework assigned to your child. We have created a *Parents Backpack Guide to Common Core Standards* to help you look for these changes and many other resources to help support your children's learning (see <http://www.engageny.org/parent-and-family-resources>). For a better sense of what the Common Core looks like in action in classrooms across the state, see the short video entitled "Teaching is the Core" at: <http://www.engageny.org/resource/teaching-is-the-core>.

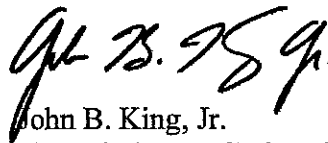
I want to make it very clear that the change in test scores (including, possibly, one in your child's score) does not mean that students are learning less or that teachers and schools are performing worse than last year. Proficiency rates – the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standards – on the new Common Core assessments cannot be compared with last year's proficiency results since the old scores are from an old test based on the former standards. This is a new beginning and starting point that will provide better, clearer information to parents, teachers, and principals about what our children know and are able to do. The results from these assessments will help you and your school directly address the learning needs of your child so that he or she gets and/or stays on track for college and career success.

Parent reports are currently being prepared and will be sent to you near the start of the school year. With these reports, we will provide you with detailed information on how best to understand the results and resources that you can use to help support next steps for your child.

We all want the same thing: for all of our children to succeed in 21st century college and careers, to be good citizens, and to contribute to their community. The changes that we are making now provide us a new opportunity to make sure that every single New York State student graduates from high school prepared and able to make choices about his or her own future in a dynamic and competitive economy. Seeing a change in scores can be challenging for any parent, school, community, or state, but we know that where we are now only marks a beginning.

It is my great honor to work for you and your child every day.

Sincerely,



John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner of Education