

NY principals: Why new Common Core tests failed

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: May 23, 2013

Teachers and principals in New York have expressed strong concerns about the new high-stakes standardized tests supposedly aligned with the Common Core State Standards that were [recently given](#) to students across the state. The following letter to New York Education Commissioner John King from a number of New York principals explains the depth of the problems educators found with the tests.

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Dear New York State Education Commissioner John King,

We New York City and Metropolitan Area Principals hold ourselves accountable to ensuring that all of our students make consistent and meaningful academic progress. Although we are skeptical of the ability of high stakes tests alone to accurately capture students' growth, we understand a system's need for efficiently establishing and measuring milestones of learning.

We have been encouraged by the new National Common Core Standards' call for more rigorous work that promotes critical thinking, and many of us have been engaged in meaningful curriculum revisions as a result. We were hopeful that this year's state exams would better represent the college preparatory-type performance tasks that Common Core exemplifies. Unfortunately, we feel that not only did this year's New York State Exams take an extreme toll on our teachers, families and most importantly, our students, they also fell short of the aspirations of these Standards.

For these reasons, we would like to engage in a constructive dialogue with you and your team to help ensure that moving forward our New York State Exams are true and fair assessments of the Common Core Standards. As it stands, we are concerned about the limiting and unbalanced structure of the test, the timing, format and length of the daily test sessions, and the efficacy of Pearson in this work.

In both their technical and task design, these tests do not fully align with the Common Core. If one was to look closely at the Common Core Learning Standards (www.corestandards.org) and compare them to the tests, it is evident that the ELA tests focused mostly on analyzing specific lines, words and structures of information text and their significance rather than the wide array of standards.

As a result, many students spent much of their time reading, rereading and interpreting difficult and confusing questions about authors' choices around structure and craft in informational texts, a Common Core skill that is valuable, but far from worthy of the time and effort given by the test. Spending so much time on these questions was at the expense of many of the other deep and rich common core skills and literacy shifts that the state and city emphasized. The Common Core emphasizes reading across different texts, both fiction and non-fiction, in order to determine and differentiate between central themes—an authentic college practice. Answering granular questions about unrelated topics is not. Because schools have not had a lot of time to unpack Common Core, we fear that too many educators will use these high stakes tests to guide their curricula, rather than the more meaningful Common Core Standards themselves. And because the tests are missing Common Core's essential values, we fear that students will experience curriculum that misses the point as well.

Even if these tests were assessing students' performance on tasks aligned with the Common Core Standards, the testing sessions—two weeks of three consecutive days of 90-minute (and longer for some) periods—were unnecessarily long, requiring more stamina for a 10-year-old special education student than of a high school student taking an SAT exam. Yet, for some sections of the exams, the time was insufficient for the length of the test. When groups of parents, teachers and principals recently shared students' experiences in their schools, especially during the ELA exams with misjudged timing expectations, we learned that frustration, despondency, and even crying were common reactions among students. The extremes were unprecedented: vomiting, nosebleeds, suicidal ideation, and even hospitalization.

There were more multiple-choice questions than ever before, a significant number of which, we understand, were embedded field-test questions that do not factor into a child's score but do take time to answer and thus prevent students from spending adequate time on the more authentic sections like the writing assessment. In English, the standards themselves and everything we as pedagogues know to be true about reading and writing say that multiple interpretations of a text are not only possible but necessary when reading deeply. However, for several multiple choice questions the distinction between the right answer and the next best right answer was paltry at best. The fact that teachers report disagreeing about which multiple-choice answer is correct in several places on the ELA exams indicates that this format is unfair

to students. Further, the directions for at least one of the English Language Arts sessions were confusing and tended to misdirect students' energies from the more authentic writing sections. The math tests contained 68 multiple-choice problems often repeatedly assessing the same skills. The language of these math questions was often unnecessarily confusing. These questions should not be assessing our students' ability to decipher convoluted language. Instead, they should be assessing deep understanding of core concepts.

Finally, we are concerned about putting the fate of so many in the education community in the hands of Pearson – a company with a history of mistakes, most recently with the mis-scoring of the NYC test for the gifted and talented program. (Thirteen percent of those 4 to 7 year olds who sat for the exam were affected by the errors; Pearson has a 3-year DOE contract for this test alone, worth \$5.5 million.) There are many other examples of Pearson's questionable reliability in the area of test design: In Spring 2012 only 27% of 4th grade students passed a new Florida writing test. Parents complained, the test was reevaluated, and the passing score was changed so that the percentage of students who passed climbed to 81%. The Spring 2012 NYS ELA 8th grade test had to be reevaluated after complaints about meaningless reading passages about talking pineapples and misleading questions. (See Alan Singer, Huffington Post, 4/24/13; John Tierney, The Atlantic, 4/25/13.) Parents and taxpayers have anecdotal information, but are unable to debate the efficacy of these exams when they are held highly secured and not released for more general analysis. These exams determine student promotion. They determine which schools individual students can apply to for middle and high school. They are a basis on which the state and city will publicly and privately evaluate teachers. The exams determine whether a school might fall under closer scrutiny after a poor grade on the test-linked state and city progress reports or even risk being shut down. These realities give us an even greater sense of urgency to make sure the tests reflect our highest aspirations for student learning.

So, we respectfully request a conversation about the direction of New York's Common Core State Exams. As the state is in its early phases of Common Core assessment, we have a wonderful opportunity to align our efforts towards learning that best prepares our children for their future lives. We believe we can do better – and we are committed to helping New York realize the full promises of Common Core.

Respectfully,

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Principal of East Side Community High School, H.S. 450

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