

# Principal warns parents: ‘Don’t buy the bunk’ about new Common Core tests

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: April 7, 2013

I recently [wrote a piece about why the standardized assessments](#) that are being designed to align with the Common Core State Standards will not be as “game changing” as supporters, such as Education Secretary Arne Duncan, have promised. Here, an award-winning New York principal who was once a Common Core supporter writes about problems with the coming assessment. Carol Burris is principal of South Side High School in New York. She was named the 2010 New York State Outstanding Educator by the School Administrators Association of New York State. She is one of the co-authors [of the principals’ letter](#) against evaluating teachers by student test scores, which has been signed by 1,535 New York principals.

By Carol Burris

New York’s Common Core tests, designed to measure whether 8-14 year olds are on the path to college readiness, will soon begin. The stakes have never been higher, since teachers and principals are now being evaluated in part by student scores. Like the teacher evaluation system, Common Core testing is [a plane being built in the air](#) — a plane in which the passengers are children.

Several years ago, the New York State Education Department created a college readiness index, referred to also as the “aspirational performance measure,” and remarkably its validity was accepted by the media without question. Two scores comprise the index: a minimum score of 80 on one of the three math Regents exams and a minimum score of 75 of the English Language Arts Regents.

The individual scores that were chosen represent a probability relationship between the Regents scores of New York City high school students and their earning a grade of C in a freshman math or English class at a City University of New York (CUNY) college. I [have posted a letter](#) that I wrote to the Regents in which I explain the problems with the index.

In short, there is no rigorous research behind this index. Although one score may be associated with a specific probability of getting a grade of C or better in a CUNY English class, and another with a grade of C in math, there is no evidence that when the two are combined, they create an overall measure of “college readiness.”

Here are examples that demonstrate the absurdity of the claim. If a student gets a score of 80 on the Algebra Regents and a 75 on the English Regents, she is

considered “college ready.” The student may have taken pre-algebra and algebra for three years to get that math score, and may not have taken courses in geometry or trigonometry, but yet she meets the “aspirational performance measure.”

Now let's suppose a different student passes Regents Algebra and Regents Geometry—both with a score of 79. She then takes Algebra 2 Trigonometry and passes the course, but gets a 64 on the Regents. She achieves a 99 on the English Regents. Although she has far better preparation in mathematics, she would not meet the measure because she never got an 80 on a math exam. Neither would an ESL student who gets a 5 on the AP Calculus and AP Physics exams, but scores a 73 on the ELA Regents.

It is astounding that New York newspapers print this fabricated measure of college readiness, and berate schools with a low “readiness score” as if this index had objective meaning.

Now the same faulty logic will be applied to our younger students. They, and their parents, will be told whether they are “on the road” to college readiness based on cut scores on tests of the new Common Core standards. Yet, there is no empirical evidence that shows that performance on these tests is predictive of how the child will do in college or career. In fact, researchers are quite unsure about how to set standards, as well as the long-term effects that setting such standards will have on teaching and learning.

This month's “Educational Researcher” (a top journal in the field) includes an article entitled *Evidence-Based Standard Setting: Establishing a Validity Framework for Cut Scores*. It is a thoughtful paper that explains just how complex a process it is to set college readiness standards. Ironically, four of the five authors are researchers for the Pearson Corporation, which produces the New York State tests. Although the authors' fierce belief in the power of measurement to enhance student learning is unnerving, their frank conclusion regarding performance standards (cut scores) shows just how little is known by the test makers themselves.

In the words of the authors:

In closing we note that too little is known about the impact of performance standards on teaching and learning. Is it better to have performance standards that are of high rigor or performance standards that are less demanding?... Virtually no research has been done that sheds light on these questions for the performance standards currently in use. (p. 86)

In the face of all of the unknowns regarding the effects of standards, cut scores, Common Core curriculum and the evaluation of teachers by scores, the New York State Education Department unashamedly claims that their April tests will “give educators, parents, policymakers, and the public a more realistic picture of where students are on their path to being [well prepared for the world](#) that awaits them after they graduate from high school” []. They must have quite the crystal ball.

So here is my advice to parents—don't buy the bunk.

\*If you want to know how your child is doing in school, ask his or her teacher. Do not ever believe that your child's potential for success in college and in life can be demonstrated by an elementary, or even a middle-school test. Even SAT's have limited value in predicting college success. The rigor of the courses a student takes in high school is a far better predictor. [Read the research](#).

\*Understand that your tax dollars are being diverted from enrichment to instead sustain a bloated regime of testing, test prep, unproven standards and a teacher evaluation system designed to feed into the testing frenzy. Write to your governor and legislature and tell them, "no more". This is an unprecedented assault on local school control.

\*Recognize that many of the Common Core Standards in the earlier grades are not in keeping with what we know about early childhood development. The Common Core standards were developed "backwards" from the high school standards for Grade 12. That is why many early childhood educators [are expressing concerns](#).

\*Realize that the Common Core expectations for reading are not aligned with literacy research. Forcing struggling readers to independently read texts that are more difficult than they can handle can have a detrimental effect on reading development. Reading expert Laura Robb does an excellent job [explaining the problem here](#).

\*Know that you are not alone. Work with parents who share your concerns. In New York, for example, there are forums and organizations where concerned parents and educators are speaking out. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). I invite readers to post links to their state's organizations in the comment section below.

This is not an argument against high standards or testing. My high school is known for its [challenging curriculum](#) for all students.

There is a healthy, child-centered role for assessment, as well. Good assessment is transparent, designed to further learning, and gives students the opportunity to show what they know. It helps teachers guide instruction and modify curriculum. When testing becomes the driver of school reform, however, we see misguided changes that do considerable damage.

This week we learned that Pearson is now planning a new generation of tests that will be "fun" for students. Here is the opening paragraph [from the public relations piece](#) written by Nassau BOCES that is helping pilot the new tests:

Nassau BOCES announced today that it is participating in a major pilot of new measures of college readiness that will enable all students to graduate ready to be globally competitive. Led by [Pearson's Research & Innovation Network Center for College & Career Success](#), this initiative is part of a major R&D project to develop a methodology for large-scale, innovative, computer-based approaches for the assessment of college and career readiness using innovative and digital approaches that assess college and career readiness.

That paragraph is worth a second read. This “measure” (a computer test) will “enable students to graduate ready to be globally competitive”—not a teacher, not a curriculum, but a “measure” will somehow enable students to do these things. Repetitive double-speak then follows. It would appear that Pearson is getting a test ready to get ready to get students globally ready for a test of readiness that assesses readiness.

This is the mindset that is driving school reform. Eventually all of it will fail. But your child will not get a second chance to be a third-grader. We are on our way to creating a generation of students who will despise school before they ever get to college, ready or not. Speak out. Our country and our children deserve better.

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