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Regents focus too much on test prep

As more students drop out of New York schools, it gets harder for them all to make the grade.

BY ALAN SINGER

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Since the mid-1990s, the State Legislature, the Board of Regents and the education commissioner have been at the forefront of a national testing craze that seems bent on replacing the love of learning with continuous, repetitive test prep.

Meanwhile, over the past decade, the state has had the largest decline in its graduation rate in the nation, according to a Boston College study of federal data.

Despite this dismal record, Education Commissioner Richard Mills and the Board of Regents are considering tightening the screws again and increasing the passing score on the five state tests required for graduation from 55 to 65. Late last week at the Regents' monthly meeting, Mills argued that it is time to raise the bar for graduation because three-fourths of the 9th grade students entering the class of 2000 who took all five exams passed each one with at least a grade of 65.

But he did not explain why 65 should be the standard in the future, nor what will happen to the students who don't make the grade. Forty-three percent of the class of 2000 either scored less than 65 percent on one or more of the tests or did not take at least one of them.

In New York City, the percentage of students passing the Regents tests and the high school graduation rates are even lower than the state results. Almost a third of the students entering high school never even take the tests because they are too far behind academically. The city school dropout rate is officially around 20 percent, but about half of the students entering high school never earn a regular high school diploma. They simply disappear.

Mills seems to be inhabiting an "Alice-in-Wonderland" fantasy world where saying something is so is enough to make it so. But that's not enough to reverse the decline in graduation. I have no problem in principle with standardized testing in schools. As a high school social studies teacher, I found the Regents examinations useful for defining the scope of the curriculum and for establishing a performance standard for students. It also gave me a tremendous amount of freedom as a professional educator to make decisions about what I considered important. As long as my students performed adequately on those tests, I could choose the best pedagogical approach to meet my students' needs.

For more than a decade, I worked in some of the city's poorest performing schools. I did a minimum amount of test prep, telling my students that the Regents would probably be the easiest tests they would take all year. Their scores were always as good, if not better, than the scores of students from classes that spent months engaged in the tedious process of reviewing for the tests. Most important for me, my students had not disappeared by the end of the year - and most of them had showed up to take the Regents.

The problem with standardized testing in New York State today is that it is being misapplied from the top on down. Too many teachers use it as a threat to control students. As you walk through school corridors, you often hear a teacher say, "You better learn this because it will be on the test." In those classrooms the fact that unconnected, obscure information is meaningless to students and memorizing it seems pointless is ignored.

The irony is that most of the information the students laboriously memorize never appears on the Regents. The tests basically measure academic skills and the understanding of major historical and social science concepts. The 20 or so U.S. Supreme Court cases, presidential actions and noted individuals that repeatedly show up on the tests could be learned in a week, freeing teachers and students to spend the rest of the year exploring the past, examining contemporary society and engaging in many creative, interesting projects and debates.

I do not blame teachers for what is happening. School administrators use test results to control and punish both students and teachers. Students who rebel against oppressive learning environments or resist memorization after years of failure are threatened with being denied a high school diploma even if they buckle down and pass their classes. Teachers whose students seem to underperform on these tests are subject to scrutiny that borders on harassment. They're written up for minor infractions and assigned to teach the most difficult students in the most impossible of conditions. All this in the name of promoting high standards.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Mills presses on. He obdurately rejects the possibility that the Regents exams are causing more students to drop out. Instead, as he recently claimed, "they dropped out for lots of reasons."

Students do drop out of school for "lots of reasons," and that is the problem with focusing on standardized testing. It does not address what is going on in these young people's lives and why they are not performing well in class.

When I taught high school, I found that the key to promoting academic success was the development of a classroom community where students felt as if they were respected members of a team, were intellectually engaged by their lessons, and had the opportunity to pursue things they found interesting. Every teacher knows that students who are literate and know how to learn perform well on standardized tests even when the class does not follow a standardized curriculum. Students who aren't engaged by school fail no matter how much test prep they are made to sit through.

There is no magic potion for improving education, though equitable funding will help. But if increased funds are just used to better prepare students for tests, the schools will continue to fail our children.

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