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January 29, 2016

MaryEllen Elia
Commissioner of Education
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Ave
Albany, NY 12234

Dear Commissioner Elia:

I am writing to address NYSUT's concerns with the recently released 2016-17 elementary-and intermediate-level testing schedule. Release of the testing schedule offered you an opportunity to provide educators and the public with your plans for testing moving forward. Unfortunately the release of the schedule leaves us with real concerns about the number of days scheduled for the grades 3-8 tests and the decision to place the ELA testing in March. Standardized testing is a pressing issue in New York State and the release of the schedule will only increase the concerns of parents and educators.

The *Testing and Reduction Report* released by the Department in June 2015 contained 11 recommendations to reduce testing, improve the testing program, and reduce test stress and anxiety. Recommendation 8 of that report specifically addresses shortening the tests to reduce anxiety surrounding the completion of the test. The *NYSUT Task Force on Standards, Modules and Assessments* concluded in the final report released in November of 2015 the tests were too long, especially for young children. Students in grades 3-8 sit for a total of nine hours over six days for the ELA and math state assessments; longer if they receive extended time as an accommodation. High school students Regents exams are only three hours in length; exams they need to fulfill graduation requirements. Further, as you are aware, recommendation 13 of the *Governor's Common Core Task Force* called for reducing the number of days and to shorten the duration for standards-aligned State standardized tests.

Parent opposition and resistance to standardized testing have grown in New York State. The massive opt-out campaign continued in 2015 when about 200,000 students across the state opted-out of taking the tests, an increase from the approximately 60,000 opt-outs in 2014. This was a strong message sent to the SED and the Board of Regents about the frustration that parents have with the assessment system and the call to action for change.

We understand the challenges in figuring out the best time to test. Scheduling the ELA tests in March does nothing to alleviate the perception of testing before the material is learned; even though we recognize that the ELA test is not a content specific test like math. The grades 3-8 ELA and Math tests were administered in January and March, respectively, through the 2008-09 school year. After years of push-back from the field, the tests were moved to April/May.

We propose moving the grades 3-8 ELA paper and computer assessments to later in the school year, possibly the week of April 24-28 or the week of May 15-19.

We commend you for moving the NYSESLAT to later in the year and doubling the size of the test window for the Speaking portion. However, with so much integrated English as a New Language (ENL) instruction taking place within the regular classroom, it will be a challenge for many ENL teachers to administer the test and teach their integrated content classes at the same time. English language learners (ELLs) will also miss more academic instruction as the end of the school year approaches and not be as prepared for their finals at the middle and high school levels. We recommend moving the listening, reading and writing NYSESLAT to June.

We urge you to release information on any planned test changes to the field as quickly as possible, including shortening the length of the tests and number of testing days. We urge you to consider our recommendation and move the grades 3-8 ELA test dates to later in the school year. The Department should not pass up this opportunity to make meaningful change in the testing system and restore the confidence of teachers, parents, and students in the State Education Department by showing you are listening to their concerns and making meaningful change.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Catalina Fortino
Vice President

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