

FACT-CHECKING THE COMMISSIONER

New York State's learning standards expect students to be able to verify the accuracy of factual statements, yet the commissioner this week sent a misleading letter on grades 3-8 testing that requires a closer look. Here's the commissioner's email, along with NYSUT's take:

Dear Teachers and Administrators,

As you know, the Grades 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) tests will be administered to students across the state next week, and the Grades 3-8 Mathematics tests will be administered in early May. These annual ELA and math tests for students in grades 3-8 are required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The tests are designed to measure how well students are mastering the learning standards that guide classroom instruction and help to ensure that students are on track to graduate from high school with the critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning skills needed for success in college and the modern workplace. The tests also show how schools and districts are progressing with the learning standards and can support professional development for teachers.

 **NYSUT response: Because of the lack of movement by SED on NYSUT's suggested changes to the testing system, the current tests do not provide any useful information to parents or teachers or any real information on how a district is performing. The results do not accurately predict future student success. In fact, the tests mislabel more than half of the test takers as failing, while over 80 percent of students go on to graduate from high school. The results of the current tests are not only useless but also damaging to students.**

Since assuming my role as New York's Commissioner of Education almost four years ago, I have traveled all over the state listening to concerns from educators and parents about the Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests. I believe teachers are a critical component in creating quality assessments that match our learning standards. That's why we have made substantive changes with teachers guiding our work. As a result, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and the Board of Regents made significant changes to the tests, beginning in 2016. Below you will find information about the 2019 tests, including a summary of the changes.

Fewer Test Sessions and Questions

Like the 2018 tests, the 2019 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests are two sessions each. With fewer test sessions, each test will have substantially fewer questions than in recent years, lessening test fatigue for students and better enabling them to demonstrate what they know and are able to do.

 **NYSUT response: Unfortunately fewer test days has not translated into a proportionate reduction in the number of questions. While reducing one day from each test, the state did not reduce the equivalent number of questions, leading to third-grade students spending more time on these tests than high school students spend on Regents exams.**

Greater Teacher Involvement

Teachers from across the state serve on committees to write, select and evaluate questions for the tests. Hundreds of New York State educators were involved in creating and reviewing questions for the 2019 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests and selecting the questions for the test forms. This year, New York State teachers reviewed all questions for inclusion on the assessments at least six times.

 **NYSUT response: The numbers of teachers involved in this process are too few to properly represent the diversity of New York State. Asking two teachers per grade level, as done by SED, to make the decisions about what to include on a test is simply not enough to produce a fair test for the entire state. In order for the process to be fair and equitable, more teachers from each grade are needed.**

Faster Results for Teachers

Like the previous three years, NYSED plans to return instructional reports to teachers and schools by the end of the school year and to release at least 75% of the test questions. This is one of the highest release rates in the country.

 **NYSUT response: The reports are still too late to impact school programs and all of the questions should be released just like the high school Regents exams.**

Untimed Tests

Like the 2016-2018 tests, the 2019 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests will be untimed. In general, this means that as long as students are working productively, they will have as much time as they need to complete each test session, within the confines of the regular school day. Schools and districts have discretion to allow students to read silently or quietly exit the room when they have completed their test while others continue to work.

 **NYSUT response: This change in timing combined with the longer daily tests has led to students spending hours completing the tests. The length of the tests must be reduced to ensure students are not spending all day working on them.**

Improved Resources for Parents

The 2019 Score Reports for parents will feature more information about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. In addition, updated parent resources about the 2019 tests are available on our assessment website. The resources have important information about what parents need to know about the 2019 assessments and answer many frequently asked questions about the tests. The 2019 parent fact sheet and FAQ are also available in several additional languages, including Chinese (Simplified), Haitian Creole, Russian, and Spanish.

 **NYSUT response: Simply posting resources on a web site does not mean parents will have access to these resources. As with this bulletin, we have concerns about the accuracy of the information provided by SED and the methods by which that information is shared.**

Computer-Based Testing

Some schools have chosen to administer the 2019 Grades 3-8 ELA and Math Tests on computers rather than by paper and pencil. The computer-based tests (CBT) will have the same questions as the paper versions. Students in those schools utilizing the CBT option have access to CBT practice tests and most have had prior experience participating in other computer-based tests in ELA and Math. The long-term plan is for all schools to use CBT for annual state tests. CBT has the potential to further reduce the need for stand-alone field tests and make assessments better instructional tools for students with disabilities.

 **NYSUT response: CBT implementation has been a disaster. NYSUT received numerous reports of tests being lost after students had finished and students being required to re-take the test. Administering a test to students in grades 3-5 means we are testing their keyboarding skills not their knowledge of the subject. SED's implementation of CBT should slow down until they can answer all the questions regarding student performance on these tests.**

I hope these resources and information are helpful. We will continue to improve our assessments with the help of great education professionals from across the state.

 **NYSUT response: This letter fails to address the biggest problem with the grades 3-8 state tests, the benchmarks used to set cut scores for the tests. When the benchmarks were set for the common core state tests, the cuts were set too high and it has led to the state telling too many students they are failures from third grade to eighth grade – and then they pass the Regents exams and graduate at a very high rate. The data produced by the current grades 3-8 state tests are flawed and do not accurately reflect student performance nor do they reliably predict performance on the Regents exams. Until the benchmarks are reset, these tests will never be useful to parents or teachers and will continue to mislabel students. All of the other changes will fail to produce a useful test if the benchmarks are not reset.**

Sincerely,
MaryEllen Elia
Commissioner of Education