



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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Colleagues,

During these times of change and transition, it is important to reflect regularly on our accomplishments and evaluate next steps. In October, I sent a letter to New York educators that affirmed our vision that teaching – not testing – is the core of our work and announced an initial set of adjustments discussed at the October meeting of the Board of Regents (<http://usny.nysed.gov/docs/teaching-is-the-core.pdf>). Since that time, we have completed a series of 20 forums across the State, including five broadcasts on public television.

We understand that implementation of the Common Core and teacher/principal evaluation in a time of limited resources has come with significant challenges. The Board of Regents and I knew we would encounter a good amount of concern in the public forums. We want – and need – to hear from teachers, parents, and students as these important changes in practice occur in classrooms, schools, and communities across the State.

We know that moving forward with the Common Core is essential: study after study shows that our students lag behind in the knowledge and skills required for their future. The Common Core standards, designed by teachers and education experts from across the country – and shaped by many New York State educators – will help us do better.

The Common Core didn't invent good teaching, nor does it relieve us of the hard work of implementation. However, the Common Core is the first set of learning standards back-mapped grade by grade from what students need to know and be able to do in college and the workforce. Recent data on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that when states adopt rigorous learning standards and raise standards for teaching, significant gains in student performance follow.

Although much attention has been paid to concerns about implementation, there is also evidence of important and positive change. Each week, I visit classrooms where educators – particularly in communities that began this work during the 2010-11 school year, when the standards were adopted by the Board – continue to refine their practice and challenge students with rigorous and exciting learning activities. Students in these Common Core-inspired classrooms benefit from meaningful and lasting learning.

Some of the concerns expressed at the forums were based on misinformation. For example, some believe that New York requires additional testing as a result of the Common Core. The facts are otherwise and clear: (1) all but two of the State's required tests are

also required by federal law; (2) we continue to increase the quality and reduce the length of State tests; and, (3) we continue to approve district proposals to reduce or eliminate additional local assessments that were adopted as part of teacher and principal evaluation.

Again, our vision is that teaching – not testing – is the core of our work. Rote standardized test preparation and “scripted” teaching practices are a disservice to teachers and won’t prepare our children for rigorous learning standards like the Common Core. The best preparation for student success is a great teacher providing great instruction.

Of course, we can – and will – all do better together and respond to the concerns raised at the forums. The New York State Educational Conference Board¹ recently released a report supporting the Common Core and making five recommendations to improve implementation. The State Education Department is moving forward in each of these five areas:

Increase Understanding

The statewide public forums gave us the opportunity to hear directly from parents, students, educators, administrators and other stakeholders. In addition to listening to each concern, we were able to explain the benefits of the Common Core and describe the outstanding work that is occurring in classrooms across the State.

Our EngageNY.org website will be expanded to help increase understanding of the importance and value of the Common Core. EngageNY receives over 20,000 unique visitors each day and provides district leaders, other educators, and parents with resources to understand and implement the learning standards. In October, we launched a new feature on the site – *EngagedVoices*² – to highlight the good work happening in classes, schools, and communities across the State. EngageNY will serve as a statewide repository to pull together and share success stories and lessons learned – including video exemplars of the Common Core in action in classrooms across the State.

We will work to provide more resources on EngageNY that help parents support their children’s Common Core learning activities. The challenge is particularly pressing to ensure that Common Core instruction is differentiated to meet the individual needs of all students, including of students with special learning needs. Therefore, the Department will collaborate with the Special Education Parent Centers to develop Common Core resources that can be used when planning individualized learning plans for students.

¹ Comprised of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO), New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS), New York State Parent Teacher Association (NYSPTA), New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), and the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS).

² See www.engageny.org/engagedvoices

Professional Development

Increasing Common Core professional development opportunities for educators is a critical investment in our educators and students. Through our Network Teams Institutes, we've trained thousands of teachers and principals in best practices for implementation, and we'll hold more events centrally and regionally. We are working to enhance these trainings to provide even more instructional supports for struggling learners and materials for teachers of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs).

Using the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE), the Department has assisted 70 Focus Districts in the State to self-assess the degree to which schools have curriculum and instructional practices in place to support the Common Core. As part of Network Teams, all districts are encouraged to make use of various resources for the continuous evaluation and improvement of curriculum, instruction, evidence-based instruction, and other systems of support and improvement³.

At its December meeting, the Board of Regents proposed \$125 million (increasing to \$200 million per year in subsequent years) for a *Core Instruction Development Fund* to encourage and facilitate educator and parent learning about the Common Core. Support at home can be a critical resource for student success. Recognizing that teaching is the core of our work, the *Core Instruction Development Fund* will support capacity-building in those districts where district leaders and their bargaining units have committed to systems change – including significantly more professional development and collaborative planning time in the school day and year.

Existing resources are being used as well to increase professional development opportunities. In addition to Teacher Center and Title IIA funding for professional development, \$72 million is devoted to Strengthening Teacher and Leader Effectiveness (STLE) Grants, which are targeted to help high-need districts recruit, develop, and retain effective teachers and other school leaders.

Ensure Adequate Funding

The Board of Regents State Aid Proposal recommends a \$1.3 billion total funding increase request for school districts, including support for the following:

- Creation of a Transition Operating Aid formula to provide new funding for the 2014-15 school year on a per pupil basis;
- An increase in funding allocated to reimburse expenditures made in 2013-14 school year;
- An increase in funding for the *Core Instructional Development Fund* to support a comprehensive approach to professional development and parent support;
- Common Core transition support for investments in new instructional materials, texts, software and computer hardware;

³ See <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-metrics-expectations-2013-2014>.

- A substantial expansion in financial support for high quality CTE programs to enable more students to develop the skills they need to find good jobs and engage in rigorous academic coursework;
- Increased funding to the State's Universal Prekindergarten program to increase access and supports for children and parents.

Concerns with Testing

Of course, testing is an important part of the instructional cycle and necessary to monitor student academic progress and contribute to decisions at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. However, the amount of testing should be the minimum necessary to inform effective decision-making. Test results should be used only as one of multiple measures of progress, and tests should reflect our instructional priorities.

Other than two high school history Regents exams, all required state tests – including all grades 3-8 assessments; secondary-level exams in English, math and science; alternate assessments for students with disabilities; and annual assessments for ELLs – are required by federal law. Although the State has not created any new tests as part of Common Core implementation, we recognize that a variety of pressures at the state and local level may have resulted in students being tested more than needed or rote standardized test preparation crowding out quality instruction. We are committed to efforts aimed at reducing the amount of time students spend on tests and ensuring that tests are eliminated that do not inform instruction or improve student learning.

The Department is developing Teaching is the Core Grants for school districts to encourage the reduction or elimination of locally selected pre-tests and locally bargained and selected achievement measures. Grant recipients would commit to review all local assessment practices to ensure that all local tests help inform instruction and improve student learning. And grant recipients would receive funding to collaborate to design performance-based assessments (including multi-disciplinary projects, research papers, oral presentations, etc.). We encourage all school districts to thoughtfully review their teacher and principal evaluation plans, and submit modifications that reduce or eliminate any unnecessary additional testing.

With respect to the existing State tests, we've reduced the number of questions and testing time on the federally required assessments for grades 3-8, and our State budget request will include funding to eliminate multiple-choice stand-alone field tests. We are asking the U.S. Department of Education for flexibility to use for accountability purposes Native Language Arts tests for Spanish speaking ELLs who are newly or recently arrived to the United States and permission to allow testing at instructional level rather than chronological age for students with significant cognitive disabilities not eligible for the New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA).

It is important that the results of the state tests be used by school districts leaders and educators to support instructional priorities. After the April 2013 administration of the Grades 3-8 English language arts (ELA) and math assessments, approximately 25 percent of the items tests were released with detailed rationales and samples of student work to

illustrate the type of answers that received each score.⁴ All educators in New York also have access to the item-level performance data through their regional data centers for their students that are appropriate to support valid inferences about student educational strengths and weaknesses. This information, coupled with detailed design documentation posted prior to the tests,⁵ provides a comprehensive set of supports to help teachers improve instruction and student learning.

At this time, New York is scheduled to participate in the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) field testing only during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years. To further develop the technology capacity necessary for computer-based testing, the Regents are requesting funds to pilot an online test delivery system to be used in delivery of Regents Examinations. This would represent the first stages in the Department's transition to online testing as a component of its overall strategy to use educational technology devices and connectivity to support effective instruction and student learning.

Review and Refinement

The Department created Content Advisory Panels in the areas of English, math, science and the social studies to ensure stakeholder engagement and obtain feedback from educators in the field. Each panel is comprised of classroom teachers, school administrators, and superintendents and spans early childhood and P-12 through institutions of higher education. As our work continues we will increase membership on these panels and strengthen their role.

Educator and parent feedback has been valuable and driving force behind the adjustments we seek and the refinements we have already made. In addition to the items previously discussed, educator and parent feedback has initiated the following:

- We submitted a waiver that, if approved, will relieve 8th grade students enrolled in Algebra of the US Education Department requirement to also take the Grade 8 math test.⁶
- Common Core rollout in high school now contains three features to ensure that students have every opportunity to earn credit and graduate during this transition period.
 - First, the initial group of students required to pass a Common Core Regents Exam (this year's 9th graders in ELA and any student first enrolled in Algebra this year) is not expected to graduate until June 2017 or later, seven years after the standards were adopted in 2010.
 - Second, during the first year of rollout, students enrolled in Common Core courses will have the option to take the old test in addition to the new test and have the higher score count for grading and other purposes.⁷

⁴ See <http://www.engageny.org/resource/interpreting-3-8-ela-mathematics-tests-results-score-reports>

⁵ See <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-assessment-design>

⁶ See http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/documents/DoubleTestingFieldMemo11-25-13_1.pdf.

⁷ See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/commoncore/transitionccregents1113.pdf>

- Third, the Department intends to maintain distinct performance standards (or cut scores) that are comparable to the current 65 Regents Exam cut score for course credit and graduation purposes and the current 75/80 Regents Exam cut score for aspirational college-readiness purposes. As a result, we expect that the percentage of students passing (for credit and graduation purposes) the new Common Core Regents Exams will likely be similar to the pass rates on existing Regents Exams at a score of 65. Extensive documentation about the design of the new Common Core Regents Exams can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/regents-exams>.
- We have reached out to the professionals in the Alternate Assessment Training Network across the State to gather local input and questions from teachers on the NYSAA used to assess students with the most severe disabilities. Federal law requires that the State's alternate assessment measure student knowledge of chronological age grade-level content in ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies but with *less depth, breadth, and complexity* than the regular assessment administered to all students. Questions from educators are being answered within a 24 hour period, and one-on-one conference calls are being conducted to gather input and recommendations from teachers and administrators. As a result of these recommendations, we are developing samples of student work to assist with NYSAA administration, reviewing the NYSAA administration time line for the 2014-15 school year, and developing a NYSAA parent brochure.
- New York's optional and supplementary curriculum modules have been downloaded more than 3.7 million times. We are planning now to begin the development of Version 2 of these Common Core curriculum modules to incorporate educator feedback on the strengths and areas in need of additional development, including additional parent resources and scaffolds and supports for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. The Department will provide translated modules for math and additional native language ELA modules.

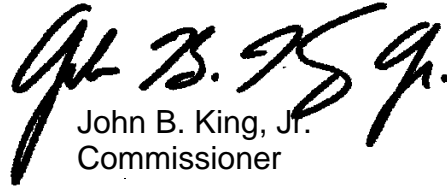
Teaching is the Core

Teaching is the core of our work. Lasting and meaningful improvements in teaching and learning happen only when educators work together to improve over time with the proper supports. We must teach our way through this moment.

Learning rigorous content can be challenging – and engaging – for our students. The best way to prevent those challenges from turning into stress for our children is for the adults in their lives to be supportive and affirming. Assessments are intended to be only a moment in time for students to demonstrate what they know and can do, so that adults can determine how to help students achieve even more. If we provide students with the proper support and the right message, challenging content will build their knowledge, their confidence, and their future opportunities.

No one change is going to satisfy everyone, but the elements discussed in this document form a meaningful and comprehensive approach. We'll make more adjustments in the future as we learn more about your successes and challenges. We hope that parents, teachers, students, and administrators continue to be open about their concerns and partner with us to make Common Core a continuing success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John B. King, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner