



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK / ALBANY, NY 12234

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To: The Parents of the Students who attend the Public Schools in the 18 School Districts (listed below) served by Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES

Dear Parents:

As the BOCES District Superintendent who works closely with the Superintendents and School Boards of the 18 component school districts served by the Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES, I have had many conversations with parents who have chosen to "opt out" their children from New York State standardized tests, or, in some cases, from any tests that could be used as any part of a teacher's evaluation. And I have spoken with Superintendents, other educators and State Education Commissioner Elia, all of whom are deeply concerned about the impact that "opting out" will have on their ability to provide an equitable and effective education for the students in our charge. Up to now, I have not taken a public position on this issue, because I wanted to be able to hear all of the different opinions being expressed. Now, however, it is time for me to say what I think.

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that the "opt out" movement had already won an impressive victory. Their "NO!" has succeeded. Now, the challenge they – and all of us – face is to determine what the "YES!" is that follows that "NO!" How should we define that "YES"?

First, we should note the changes that are already underway in Albany. In the face of a combination of the "opt out" movement and declining poll numbers, last spring the Governor and the Legislature backed away from the teacher evaluation system they had created – and handed what had become a problem for them back to the Regents and the State Education Department (SED) – Albany's educational professionals – directing them to fix it. While the change still left many requirements in place, this reversal was an unprecedented rejection of the most problematic aspects of a poorly conceived accountability system.

As a result, the State Education Department (SED) and its governing board, the Regents, were able to grant school districts an extension from the original deadline of more than a year to create a new evaluation plan required by the law. They were also able to make modest reductions in the length of the tests and to provide students with more time to complete them. They began the process of moving to a new test vendor with a far more collaborative test development process that directly engages our public school teachers in the writing of test questions.



Of particular immediate importance, local school districts – teachers and administrators – were told to choose or design their own local assessments to replace the state assessments in the teacher evaluation process for a transitional period that extends for the next three and one half years. This is a breathtaking opportunity for school districts to move toward the kinds of student assessments that are far more useful than the high stakes standardized tests we have relied too heavily on in recent years.

In just one example of a better approach, the State has already accepted far more informative “performance-based assessments”, in which students demonstrate in multiple ways over time their mastery of demanding, 21st century curriculum, a method that has proven to consistently produce highly successful graduates. This approach is in effective use in schools as diverse as Chappaqua in Westchester County and the schools of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which serve many inner city youth.

SED has also begun to recruit principals, teachers, other educators, educational researchers and parents in an extensive process of re-evaluating the Common Core Standards, the state standardized tests, and the uses of those tests, with the expectation that this process will lead to significant changes.

These new directions are further supported by dramatic changes in the Board of Regents. Many experienced public educators have been added to the Board, including a new Chancellor to lead the Board, who is a vocal critic of many past assessment practices and wants them changed.

What, then, for parents, should the next steps be?

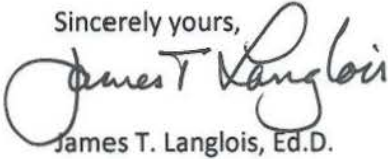
I do not believe it should be to continue to have students “opt out” of tests. For the following reasons, I believe that to continue to keep children from taking the state tests will not help to improve assessments, and, in fact, can be harmful to many students’ education:

- Additional “opting out” simply extends the “No” after it has already succeeded. A better alternative is for the parents who helped turn this process around to get involved in shaping the improvements, either directly in their local school districts or by actively paying attention to the work of those involved and providing feedback when they think it appropriate. If tests have weaknesses, the solution is to improve them, not to stop taking them.
- The state tests are no longer part of either teacher evaluations or significant decisions about student placement, etc. They have also been modestly shortened and time constraints have been removed. By these steps, the tests are returning to the lower stakes and more appropriate advisory role that they have always played of providing information about actual student learning that will help students learn better and teachers teach better.
- Some parents say they “opted out” their children because the stress that had arisen around the tests had become harmful. The tests are challenging and will certainly need further modification as we move forward. However, the majority of students did not find them too stressful. And some students found the tests stressful because they were aware the tests could impact their teacher’s, or their own, future. Those pressures no longer exist.

- Some “opt out” advocates are urging parents to opt out of any local tests that might be used to evaluate a teacher. This path leads to a chaotic educational environment in which we would be trying to educate students without some of the essential assessment information we need in order to further their learning. In addition, measures of student performance should play at least a modest role in any gathering of information designed to improve the performance of teachers.
- Finally, I am concerned that our children have to some degree become pawns in a dispute among adults. The Governor, the Legislature, the Regents, the leaders of SED, the teachers’ union, some individual teachers, some parents, all have developed strong positions about the state tests and, in some cases, about many other tests that students take. These differences should be settled through the conversations, negotiating, debates and political dynamics by which adults resolve their differences. Keeping children from taking tests injects them directly into these adult processes in a way that too often may confuse them and actually cause them harm.

For all of these reasons, I urge parents to return their children to the normal components of their education, including the tests which, however imperfect, are improving and produce some of the information we must have to provide them with the best possible education.

Sincerely yours,



James T. Langlois, Ed.D.