

NEWYORK STATE TESTING POLICIES

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January 12, 1986*

*Prepared Under Contract For
The Office of Technology Assessment
Congress of the United States*

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In 1985 New York celebrated the bicentennial of the University of the State of New York, which the name given to the totality of the State's schools, colleges, libraries, and museums, all regulated by the Board of Regents. Perhaps in no other State does the States board of education have such sweeping and enduring power over the State's educational and cultural institutions. The Rules of the Board of Regents and the Regulations the Commissioner of Education have the force and effect of law, and they are so extensive that there are few aspects of education, particularly elementary and secondary education, that go unregulated.

Thus, it was not surprising when, in 1865, the Regents created a system of State examination: n English grammar, spelling, arithmetic, and geography "to determine which schola in each academy are entitled, under the provisions of law, to be counted in the annual apportionment of the literature fund" (Murray, 1881, p. 462). It appears that the academies had been claiming enrollments that included large numbers of pupils who were prepared for academic study, and these numbers were reduced sharply by the impositibilities of the "Regents examinations. "

The active "preliminary" had to be added to the name of the Regents examinations in 187 when a series of advanced examinations made its debut. The advanced examination were designed, in the language of Chapter 425 of the Law of 1877, to "furnish a suitable standard of graduation from said academies and academic departments of un schools, and of admission to the several colleges of the State" (Bradley, 1883, p. 36) The advanced Regents examination program still continues with examinations in more than twenty high school subjects, but the preliminary examinations were discontinued in 1959 because the literature fund had disappeared and the examinations, administered the end of grade eight, no longer served any useful purpose. Had they been retained they could possibly have made the introduction of competency tests unnecessary scant fifteen years later.

It is interesting to note that the State Legislature was involved in the creation of the advanced or high school Regents examination program. Perhaps the 1877 legislation was introduced at the request of the Board of Regents because, as a general rule, the Legislature does not interfere with the Regents, who preappointed by the Legislature, in matters pertaining to educational programs such as the recommended curriculum or the State testing program. Exceptions are made when the Regents take actions that are clearly unpopular.

Many testing programs have been introduced by the Board of Regents or by the Board's administrative agency, the State Education Department, since 1877. Some of these programs have disappeared and some continue. Among those that have disappeared are a variety of norm-referenced tests, first in reading and then in mathematics, science, and social studies. The tests were administered in elementary and junior high schools on an optional basis. Another test that has disappeared is the Regents Scholarship Examination, which was used to select the winners of undergraduate scholarships. Now the SAT and ACT are used for this purpose. The Regents Scholarship Examination was eliminated by the Legislature as a result of lobbying by the guidance counselors association. The association argued correctly that the same individuals would be identified as winners by the SAT and ACT, which all college-bound students take, so the State's examination is not needed.

Among the programs that continue is the Pupil Evaluation Program, which consists of reading and mathematics tests in grades three and six and a writing test in grade five. The tests are administered annually to every pupil in every public and nonpublic elementary school. Introduced in 1965 as a general assessment program, it now serves to identify pupils who are in need of remediation, which is mandated by the Regulations of the Commissioner. In the 1970s, a competency testing program was introduced, consisting of reading, writing, and mathematics tests that are administered in the high schools and preliminary competency tests in reading and writing that are administered in

grade eight or grade nine. Every student who receives a high school diploma must demonstrate competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. About one-half of each graduating class demonstrates competency by passing the competency tests, and the other half (the college-bound) do so by passing Regents examinations in English and mathematics or by attaining designated scores on the SAT or ACT.

This paper deals with elementary and secondary school testing programs, but it should be noted that other testing programs have been introduced by the Regents or the State Education Department and continue to function. These include a series of college-level examinations that allow individuals to earn college credits and eventually, if they choose, to be awarded a college degree by the Board of Regents. Also included are professional licensing examinations, graduate scholarship and fellowship examinations, and a high school equivalency testing program.

All this is by way of saying that the Regents and the State Education Department have a long and elaborate history of introducing examination programs to meet specific needs or to accomplish specific purposes. The tests that have disappeared have been, for the most part, tests that have been provided as a service to schools. Those that remain serve a regulatory function.

With a few exceptions, the State tests are developed by the State Education Department with the aid of consultants. Two separate testing offices (one in the elementary and secondary branch and the other in the postsecondary branch), the offices of subject-matter specialists, and professional licensing boards are involved in test development activities. Tests are clearly an important priority for the Board of Regents.

The current importance of testing was made apparent in the 1970s when the Regents competency testing program was introduced, and this importance has been dramatically highlighted during the past few years. In 1984, the Board of Regents adopted the New York State Board of Regents Action Plan to Improve Elementary and Secondary Education Results in New York, on which work had begun well in advance of

the flurry of reports criticizing the nation's schools. The Action Plan increased high school diploma requirements? added to the elementary and middle school curriculum, and took other steps to "reform" the State's elementary and secondary schools. Not surprisingly, these other steps include a significant increase in the number of tests to be taken by New York State students. In a few years, students will be required to demonstrate competency in science and social studies as well as in reading, writing, and mathematics to receive a high school diploma. Three new competency tests will be added, one in science and two in social studies. In addition, a new science test will be administered in grade six, and new social studies tests will be administered in grades six and eight. Foreign language proficiency examinations will be administered in the middle grades. Tests in as many as 40 occupational education courses will be added, and there will be two high school Regents examinations in social studies where there is now only one.

From the beginning of the high school Regents examination program in 1877, the State has issued a Regents high school diploma to students who pass certain of the Regents examinations and earn several more units of credit than are required for a local diploma. The Regents diploma has always been seen as more prestigious than a local diploma, although there is no practical difference between the two types of credentials. No college requires a Regents diploma for admission. Under the Action Plan regulations, the number of Regents examinations that a student must pass to receive a Regents diploma has been greatly increased.

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Action Plan is the Comprehensive Assessment Report. Each fall the State Education Department will provide public school districts and nonpublic schools with a compilation of its State test results for the past three-years, coupled with other statistics such as dropout and attendance rates, average class size, enrollment by race or ethnic origin, socioeconomic indicators, pupil mobility rate, and similar items. All of the data are reported routinely to the State Education Department during the course of the school year, but the Comprehensive Assessment

Report organizes the data together with explanatory text. Under the Action plan regulations, the superintendent of each public school district must present the district's Comprehensive Assessment Report to the board of education at a public meeting. The reports serve as a public record of accountability, and the Regents believe that the debate and discussion stemming from the school board's review of the report is the best means of bringing about programmatic changes.

In the past, many newspapers have obtained test results, particularly for the Pupil Evaluation Program, in order to publish stories comparing school districts. Now, however, a tremendous amount of data is readily available. (The first Comprehensive Assessment Reports were prepared in October 1985 and had to be presented to school boards prior to December 15.) Many more newspapers are publishing comparative data, and the articles are far more extensive than they have ever been before. This is clearly what the Regents intended.

The Comprehensive Assessment Report by itself would have been an effective means of stimulating local school improvement efforts. Linked to the report, however, is a requirement that the Commissioner of Education identify 600-900 low performing schools that will be required to develop and submit comprehensive school improvement plans. It is the intent of the State Education Department to work with these schools in the development of their plans and in their improvement efforts. The names of these schools were widely publicized by the media, as anticipated.

It is apparent from the Action Plan that the Board of Regents and the State Education Department view the State testing program as a powerful tool for insuring compliance with the Commissioner's Regulations, for bringing about change, and for improving the quality of education in New York's schools. There are, after all, few other tools available and none so effective.

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