

EDITORIAL

Don't lower school standards

Regents' move to reduce requirements would do more harm than good

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When the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures released its report earlier this month, it highlighted four "priority areas to target change."

The commission sought to provide: multiple pathways to a single high school diploma; culturally responsive curricula, instruction and assessment; an understanding of "meaningful life-ready credentials"; and "assessment flexibility."

Missing from those priorities was any mention of words like "rigor" or "challenge" or even "academic."

So it's unfortunate, but not surprising, that the commission's recommendations include the misguided notion of reducing or modifying testing requirements.

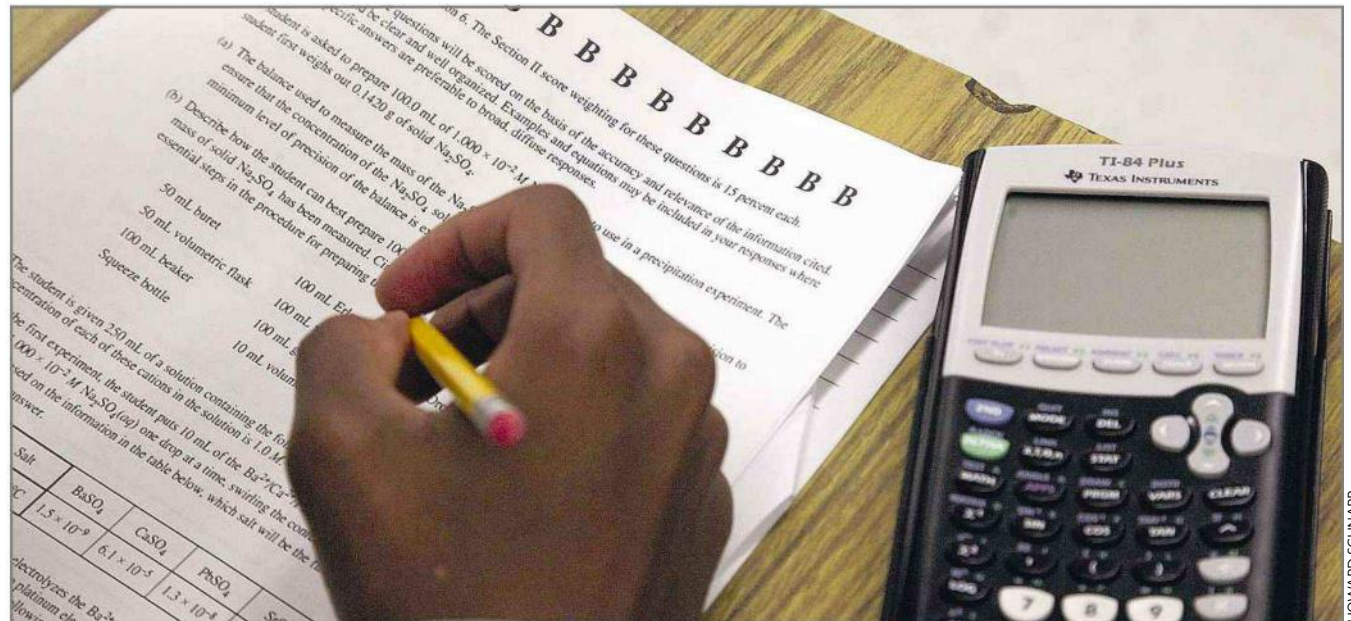
The commission is certainly wise to be looking closely at ways to improve New York schools, curriculum requirements and the way students are assessed. Many of its recommendations, while not new, should be further embraced. The idea that diploma credit requirements should include topics such as civic responsibility, cultural understanding, financial literacy, writing, fine and performing arts, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, already falls within many state curricular requirements. But the Regents can do more to strengthen those requirements and ensure that every school is meeting them.

The commission also is right to drill down on the needs of specific student populations, such as those from immigrant communities who require extra emphasis on developing language skills and acquiring the tools to navigate their new social and school environments.

BEWARE VERMONT

But none of that explains why the panel then suggests the need to "reduce and/or modify diploma assessment requirements . . ."

If the commission's recommendations move forward, Regents exams likely would still exist, but perhaps only to fulfill federal testing requirements.



Rather than eliminating or reducing standards, the Board of Regents might be wiser to improve testing and utilize it to better assess schools, teachers and students.

Students would have alternative options to receive their diplomas, such as amorphous "performance-based" assessments, which too often are ill-conceived and ill-defined, and lack consistent, uniform evaluation metrics. Vermont's experience with such portfolio work, for instance, was labeled as "largely unsuccessful" by the research firm RAND Corp. New York should take a serious look at the lessons other states like Vermont can teach.

It's also unclear, under the state panel's proposed framework, what would happen to all-important categories like social studies, which now is included in Regents testing standards, but does not have a federal testing requirement. Would such a Regents test be eliminated? That could be to everyone's detriment.

Under the Commission's plan, the state would move toward a single diploma that all its students could obtain — whether or not they complete Regents exams. Optional "seals" could then indicate extra coursework or higher standards are met.

A state Education Department spokesman claims the commission's ideas would "create a flexible and inclusive framework," while accommodating a wide range of learners and "ensuring equity."

Flexibility, inclusivity and equity are

important elements, but the Regents will fail to properly instill them if in practice, the board ends up eliminating or lowering standards. The commission's strategy would seem to push many students down to the lowest common denominator, rather than hoisting them up to meet the highest possible caliber. The ultimate goal should be to lift all boats, rather than lower them.

LOSING THE MIDDLE

Top students still will strive for every endorsement, every seal. The students who need an alternative path, perhaps focused on career and technical education, or CTE, still will be guided along that road. But everyone in the middle — the students who need the push to go the extra mile or to discover a subject that can ignite a love of learning — would have an excuse to lag behind. The commission's strategy gives schools, teachers and students a weaker baseline to shoot for and cheats the very students who can and should be pushed to new heights. A Regents-less diploma, with fewer testing measures and choose-your-own-adventure-style metrics, would not only hurt students, it also would make it easier for teachers and administrators to highlight artificially high graduation rates while they, too, are evaluated on the basis of lower,

more tenuous standards.

It is no accident that New York State United Teachers, a union with outsized clout on the Regents board, supports a multiple pathways approach.

None of this is to say that the Regents tests as they now exist are perfect measures. They're not. Rather than eliminating or reducing standards, the Board of Regents might be wiser to improve testing and utilize it to better assess schools, teachers and students. Rather than supplanting such testing with looser, unclear alternatives, maintaining Regents testing requirements — but supplementing that with portfolios, self-assessments and other strategies — could provide a more holistic look at each student, allowing schools to both maintain the rigor high-stakes testing brings and provide additional, more qualitative feedback.

The Board of Regents must determine whether to adopt the panel's recommendations. The board is likely to spend the next year evaluating its upcoming steps. It should first take a step back, reconsider what's best for all students, and insert words like rigor, challenge and academics back into the discussion.

If the Regents use addition, rather than subtraction, they could raise standards and inspire schools and students to rise to meet them, rather than bring all of them down.