

SPIRITED DEBATE ERUPTS OVER REGENTS EXAMS

Educators voice
worries over future
of social studies

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A spirited debate over Regents exams erupted Friday at an educators conference in Melville, as social studies teachers peppered top state education officials with questions regarding their push to drop the tests as graduation requirements.

State education officials say they want to give students more options for earning diplomas, and many teachers endorse that goal in principle. Still, doubts linger over details of the state's plan, and that skepticism surfaced Friday at the conference sponsored by the Long Island Council for the Social Studies.

One teacher, Victoria Buonpane, who spoke up at the conference session, expressed concern that schools could start cutting back instruction in subjects such as history and government if the state drops exam requirements in those areas. Buonpane teaches global history.

"I know that's not what you're trying to do," Buonpane told two state officials who fielded questions and comments at the session. "But New York is going to be killing social studies education as other states are already trying to do."

Another audience member, Charles Backfish, who runs a training program for social studies teachers at Stony Brook University, pointed out that the trainees he works with must pass an exam in order to obtain state certification.

"I think there's a contradiction here, that we're asking teachers to pass a standardized exam, but we're not asking stu-



State Deputy Education Commissioner Angelique Johnson-Dingle fields questions from the audience during a presentation on Friday in Melville. "The Regents exams are not disappearing," she said.

dents," Backfish said.

Later, one of the state's representatives, Angelique Johnson-Dingle, a deputy commissioner for pre-K through 12 instructional support, said the state's changes in graduation requirements would be gradual and done only after further discussion with educators on the Island and elsewhere. The other representative was Frances Wills, a member of the state Board of Regents from Westchester County.

"The Regents exams are not disappearing," Johnson-Dingle said. "We aren't getting rid of them because, believe it or not, when we're talking with students, there were students who said, 'I actually like to take tests, I'm a really good test

taker.' So we don't want to take that option away from students. But what we want to do is say that this should not be the only determining factor."

Federal law requires academic testing in high schools for purposes of measuring student achievement but does not require that students pass such tests in order to graduate.

On Nov. 4, state education officials are scheduled to announce a specific time schedule for putting new diploma requirements into effect. Leaders of the Regents board and state Education Department have already said the ultimate goal is to drop Regents exams in English, math, science and history as requirements, and to add other options. Some options

mentioned would allow high school students to earn credit toward graduation by taking job internships, performing public service or completing research projects.

Toward the end of Friday's session, Johnson-Dingle got applause from listeners after pledging to meet with them again locally after the Nov. 4 announcement. Among those pleased was Gloria Sesso, of Port Jefferson, president of the regional social studies council and a leading opponent of the state's proposal to de-emphasize use of Regents exams.

"The audience felt that they had been heard, and that the state was going to try to solve some of the problems," Sesso told Newsday.

Suffolk exec to stand by election outcome

BY BART JONES
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Suffolk officials on Friday guaranteed the integrity of the voting process in the county even if a candidate claims fraud, a day before early voting in national and local elections starts.

Officials unveiled a new \$2.8 million early voting center in Yaphank that doubles as a training center for poll inspectors, coordinators and other personnel tasked with ensuring election integrity.

Suffolk County Executive Edward P. Romaine said he has won 19 elections in the county during his decadeslong career in politics, and that the balloting system is solid.

"I can tell you from long expe-

rience, I have never questioned the veracity, the efficiency and the effectiveness of the Board of Elections," Romaine said. "They have always done a great job . . . We give them the tools, and they'll do the job."

Asked at a news conference what his response would be if former President Donald Trump, a fellow Republican, loses New York State in the presidential election and claims it was due to fraud, Romaine said he stood by the system's integrity.

"The vote is the vote. The count is the count. And the accuracy of the count, I don't think it's going to be challenged, certainly not in Suffolk County," Romaine said.

The new center at 700

Yaphank Ave. is being used to train some of the 5,000 poll workers who will oversee the election, officials said. It is one of the larger training centers in the county, they said.

Officials including Romaine and the two commissioners of the Board of Elections — John Alberts for the Democrats and Betty Manzella for the Republicans — said there was little to no chance Suffolk's election system could be tampered with. It's not possible for a hacker to break into the system because it is not connected to the internet, Manzella said.

When asked how specifically the county is training poll workers to detect and counteract fraud, Manzella said she could not divulge that for security rea-

sons.

The county is in regular contact with the FBI, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the New York State Board of Elections and multiple law enforcement agencies, including some of their cybersecurity units, she said.

The new center can train up to about 100 workers, compared to other locations that fit only 20 to 30, Alberts said. The workers must be certified every year, including on changes in election laws, he said.

The new center is also aimed at boosting the number of people who vote early, officials said. About 120,000 Suffolk County residents voted early in the 2020 presidential election, Alberts said. That number is ex-

pected to rise to about 200,000 this year, he said.

There are 28 early voting centers in the county, including for the first time the H. Lee Dennison Building in Hauppauge, Alberts said.

Officials expect a significant number of early voters to use the new center in Yaphank in part because it is centrally located between the Long Island Expressway and Sunrise Highway. The center — and others throughout Suffolk — is also offering weekend, early morning and evening hours to accommodate people's work schedules.

The county has allocated \$35 million to replace all voting machines in Suffolk next year as part of efforts to maintain voting integrity, Romaine said.