

# Lower standards will leave kids behind

State education officials should embrace rigor again to help students succeed



Lane Filler

lane.filler@newsday.com

There is an art to naming legislation so rosily that opposition to the bill appears maniacal. Few laws have made better use of this tactic than the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Every attack on the bill sounded like a declaration of evil, every opponent was ripe to be asked, “Why do you want to leave children behind, sir, and how far?”

Even so, the name, and the grand intentions behind this brainchild of George W. Bush couldn’t mask the fact that the law was partially mad.

And yet, 20 years later, NCLB looks heroic compared to the “Oh So Many Children Left Behind” philosophy degrading standards in New York’s schools.

NCLB was premised on the theory that high standards and

incremental, measurable goals could improve real educational outcomes, like how much a student learned, and not just graduation rates.

But it said ALL students had to be proficient by the 2013-2014 school year, with each state using its own “high, challenging standard.” That included kids who had arrived from El Salvador Wednesday, or who had extreme special needs. Worse, it failed to meaningfully address external drivers of poor student performance, like homelessness, malnutrition, addiction in the home, and inadequate school funding.

By 2013-2014, a school would have been “failing” if it had even one child not proficient at grade level. Since practically all public schools have students who can’t hope to meet rigorous academic standards, NCLB was eventually judged a failure.

But the intention behind the bill was laudable. Bush hoped to end “the soft bigotry of low expectations” that allowed too many children living in poverty



RANDEE DADDONA

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or with special needs or who were not native English speakers or were Black, to be taught too little, with no repercussions to the schools who failed the children.

Now, in New York, that same soft bigotry of low expectations is increasingly treated as a goal, not a travesty. Tuesday, the Board of Regents voted to extend to the 2022-2023 school year the pandemic-era rule that a 50 on a Regents exam quali-

fied a student for a diploma.

The minimum was 65 for decades. And last year, to take the Algebra I Regents exam as one example, students had to get a “raw score” of just 20% correct to “earn” that 50.

So students must “pass” the Algebra Regents to graduate, but do not need to learn much algebra.

Tuesday, the state also named members to a Blue Ribbon Commission formed with two

goals. The first, identifying the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in the 21st century, is crucial. The second, finding “equivalent” pathways to diplomas for students struggling to pass increasingly watered-down Regents exams, is frightening.

There are some aggressive advocates of rigor on the panel, like Malverne Superintendent Lorna Lewis. And there likely aren’t any members who don’t want what’s best for students.

But the political momentum on the Board of Regents and in the Assembly and from the teachers unions is for easing up on the tests. The push is to rely on more subjective measures of students’ classroom achievement and work portfolios, judged by the educators who know and often love them, to determine whether they should graduate.

And if that happens, the crowing over instantly increased graduation rates will drown out the warnings that the soft bigotry of low expectations is too often leaving children adorned in caps and gowns behind.

■ **COLUMNIST LANE FILLER’S** opinions are his own.