

GUEST ESSAYS

NY education standards in jeopardy

Plan to make Regents exams optional for graduation reduces accountability

BY GLORIA SESSO
Guest essay

The New York State Board of Regents is advancing two proposals that could significantly alter our state's education system. The first would make Regents exams optional for high school graduation, replacing them with undefined measures of proficiency. The second would lower course requirements for teachers seeking certification in additional subjects. Together, these changes could undermine the accountability, rigor, and equity that have long characterized New York's education system.

Some opponents of the Regents' proposals have warned that the move to make Regents exams optional for graduation risks turning the high school diploma into a "participation trophy." Advocates of alternatives to the Regents exams argue that this would be a step forward by helping students who are not good test-takers. While debates over standardized testing are not new, the stakes in this case are too high to ignore.

For over a century, Regents exams have upheld consistent, rigorous standards across core subjects. While alternative pathways could be useful in theory, the current proposal lacks any clear, effective framework. Implementing such changes without clarity or evidence of success could destabilize the education system. Some contend that it is wrong to assume that these undefined measures will not do this but, one must ask, where is the proof? We would argue that instituting these new graduation measures without providing viable measures of assessment is a fool's errand akin to attempting to fly an airplane while building it, a surefire recipe for the crash-landing of an educational system.

The impact on social studies education and student knowledge of history and civics is especially troubling. Already overshadowed by English language arts, math, and science, social studies could be further marginalized under these changes. Adopted only a decade ago, the New York



NEWSDAY / JOHN PALASKENAS

For more than a century, Regents exams have upheld consistent, rigorous standards across core subjects.

State Social Studies Framework was designed to build critical historical and civic knowledge and skills. Without the accountability Regents exams provide, resources and instructional time for social studies will likely diminish even more — as they did after the Board of Regents voted in 2010 to eliminate the fifth-grade exam in social studies.

This comes at a time when preparing students for informed citizenship is crucial. Social studies teaches students to critically evaluate informa-

tion, understand historical context, and participate in democracy. Removing requirements for standardized assessments without providing effective replacements undermines this mission, particularly in under-resourced schools.

The second proposal — to reduce teacher course requirements for additional certifications — is equally concerning. We understand that there is a dearth of teachers and we must find ways to recruit new ones. But teachers' expertise directly impacts student learn-

ing, and diluting certification standards risks compromising the quality of education.

State Education Department Deputy Commissioner Angélique Johnson-Dingle has noted the Board of Regents may revisit learning standards across disciplines. However, New York's current standards in English language arts, math, science, and social studies are already streamlined and emphasize critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving. Further reducing these standards could create a hollow curriculum that lacks meaningful content.

New York residents overall and especially our elected representatives in state governance should be wary of these Board of Regents plans that threaten to seriously diminish the acquisition of core knowledge and skills by our graduates. The Long Island Council for the Social Studies, advocating on behalf of its membership of 1,100 social studies teachers and administrators, opposes these proposals.

■ **THIS GUEST ESSAY** reflects the views of Gloria Sesso, president of the Long Island Council for the Social Studies.

