

# What, exactly, is unethical?

Melissa McMullan

If you are a parent of school-age children in grades three through eight in New York State, if you are fortunate like me, you received a letter from your child's school district asking you to indicate **your choice**, for **your child**, regarding New York State's grade three through eight testing program. For me, this is a very simple choice. Given the complexities of assessment in New York State, it is important that you have some very honest, straightforward information from a teacher who is also a parent.

## Developmental Appropriateness

The assessments, especially the English Language Arts Exam (ELA), are not developmentally appropriate for many children. Last year's sixth grade ELA contained a vast number of scientific terms that many adults would have a difficult time working with, such as "polymers" and "sodium polyacrylate". Sixth grade children will read passages, and have to respond to questions such as "How does the arrival of electricity propel the main events of the plot?" or "The author conveys the purpose of the article by" and swim through four different choices and determine not the **correct** answer, but the answer that **best answers the question**. You need to know that we, as teachers, upon reading the passages and the questions, argue over which choices are the "best answers". If we cannot be certain, how can a child be certain? I urge you to go read the passages and questions released by the state:

<https://www.engageny.org/resource/released-2015-3-8-ela-and-mathematics-state-test-questions>

## Fluctuating Passing Scores

When teachers give students an assessment in the classroom, both teachers and students have very clear understandings of what a passing score is, and what needs to happen to make it possible. This is because the purpose of any test or quiz a teacher gives is to check for understanding. Showing understanding is very clear and concise on a teacher's test or quiz. We are all familiar with standard passing grades (for my students and I, passing is answering a minimum of 65% of the test or quiz accurately). On the New York State

Assessments over the last ten years in sixth grade, the raw score required to pass with a three (proficiency) has fluctuated like the barometric pressure – from answering 73% of questions correctly to answering 82% of questions correctly the next year. How can we follow a child's progress when we move the bar up and down? Can you imagine measuring your child's height with a measurement system that changed sizes from year to year?

## An Inability to Inform Instruction

Anything a child does in a classroom should be linked to his / her own personal growth. Teachers provide experiences and assessments that help them know what their students know and don't know. A test or quiz given in the classroom helps a teacher know where each child is within the given subject matter. When our children take New York State Assessments, over multiple weeks, and innumerable hours (more than the MCAT to enter medical school), teachers gain no information that can help their students. We do not get any information that would help us better meet our students' needs. In my classroom, if something does not benefit my students, we don't do it.

Commissioner Elia, at the helm of the New York State Department of Education, is calling teachers who speak out against New York State Testing "unethical". It would be unethical for me to remain silent about the failures of our state assessment system. It is unethical for the state to cherry-pick passages and questions for parents to read, as parents are trying to gain understandings about the assessments their children are asked to take. These assessments should be released in their entirety so people can make informed decisions. Each parent has the right to decide whether his/her child participates in this system. You are urged to go read the questions released by the state. Additionally, ask your child's teacher what assessments he/she is already using in his/her classroom to inform instruction, and ask how they are used.

Our children have the right to a public educational system that places learning, not testing, first. We, as parents, have the right, and the obligation, to make sure this what our children receive in school.