

EDITORIAL

LI schools are failing our students

Reducing standards is not the way to improve mediocre performance

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Education remains Long Island's centerpiece — the beacon that brings families here and the justification for paying high property taxes, all in the name of giving their children the best of the best when it comes to schooling.

But the latest data from New York State shows Long Island may no longer be getting its money's worth.

More than half of Nassau and Suffolk counties' students in grades three through eight failed to reach proficiency on the state's English Language Arts exam during the latest round of state tests. Data showed that 48.1% of students scored proficient or better, compared with 52.5% in 2023. Yes, that's still better than the statewide average — but not by much. A breakdown by county showed even starker results; just 38.7% of Suffolk students reached proficiency or better, with a wide variety of districts displaying thoroughly mediocre results.

Is it a sign that Long Island's schools are slipping? State and local education officials must explain these results to their constituents. It will be up to taxpayers footing the bills to hold our education bureaucracy accountable.

The claim from some educators that some students might not have the requisite computer skills to take the new computerized tests doesn't hold water. And while the number of English language learners on Long Island and around the state is a challenge, surely the data can be analyzed to isolate this factor and still provide a clear-eyed look at the performance metrics.

ANSWER IS NOT LESS TESTING

The test results and their analysis present complex questions, but the correct response most certainly does not involve even less assessment, testing or accountability. Yet somehow, that's the path state education officials are on when it comes to our high schools — where those students in grades 3-8 who struggled on those state tests are headed in just a few years.

If the Board of Regents approves and moves forward with the latest proposal to end testing-related graduation require-



Faltering student performances in Long Island school districts undermine public education and its funding streams.

ments and provide alternative ways to qualify for graduation, that could ultimately render the high school diploma in New York a mere participation trophy that everyone receives.

Students would no longer have to pass at least four comprehensive exams in subjects as fundamental as math, English, history and science. They could, in fact, fail such exams and still graduate, as long as they choose an alternative path — like volunteering in public service.

The state is not wrong to promote or expand components like volunteering, gaining technical skills or financial literacy, or expanding arts, music and theater offerings, to broaden the education New York's high schoolers receive. But such additions shouldn't come at the expense of challenging those students to do their best and making sure they have acquired the building blocks, skills and knowledge essential for informed citizens. An arts portfolio, volunteer gig, research project, or occupational certificate shouldn't take the place of successfully passing core tests in key subject areas.

State education officials emphasize the importance of establishing "multiple pathways" for students. But such a strategy will shortchange students if those pathways don't challenge them and don't

properly assess their knowledge and learning.

Undermining the high standards to which we should hold our students is a particularly bad idea at a time when our prowess as a world leader in many arenas is under challenge, a further reminder that we need a new generation of critical thinkers, readers and learners. It could have an insidious impact if our students are ill-prepared for the rigors of college — or for the increasingly competitive job market that will follow.

It's also a bad idea at a time when colleges are reinstating national tests like the SAT and ACT to determine admissions.

WIDE-RANGING FALLOUT

As a society, we must be most concerned about how to best teach core principles and a shared body of knowledge to every student. But faltering student performances give rise to other concerns as well. They undermine public education and its funding streams. They create economic concerns that could affect the entire region, influencing things like home values and job prospects, and possibly making it even tougher to lure potential residents and employers here.

Even under the current timeline, the state's proposal has a way to go. The new exam requirements wouldn't go into effect until the fall of 2027. But moving toward such a severe change when the entire education landscape is in flux is unwise. And instituting a change that will result in less assessment at a time when our students can't widely pass existing assessments is particularly troubling.

The efforts by state education officials appear to be another piece of a long-standing teacher-driven effort to remove testing standards. That will make it harder to accurately evaluate school and teacher success. And it will not help students develop knowledge of civics and American history, English reading and writing skills, or mathematics and literature.

We doubt that eliminating testing requirements will give all students the education they deserve, as state education officials contend. Even though schools still must follow a state-mandated curriculum, the impetus to make sure the material is mastered will be gone.

Our students deserve better. Given the enormous investment they pour into our schools every year, taxpayers deserve better, too.