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Statewide Superintendents Council reacts to release of grades 3 through 8 assessment results

Reacting to the release of grades 3 through 8 state assessment results by the State Education Department, New York State Council of School Superintendents Executive Director Robert Reidy said,

“The results show a sharp drop in the percentage of students judged to be meeting standards. But at the same time the average scores earned by students remained about the same. This indicates that the drop in passing rates came from setting a higher standard, not from any fall-off in school performance.”

Reidy’s statement came after the Education Department released results from the states grade 3 through 8 assessments in mathematics and English language arts following an adjustment to the “cut scores” for those tests. Cut scores are used to distinguish levels of student performance on standardized tests, including whether a student is passing or meeting standards.

Reidy noted also that average scores in math remained about the same as in 2009, even though the Department expanded those tests to cover more material.

“We respect that the Department’s leadership conducted a review of its tests, concluded they were flawed, and moved to begin improving them,” Reidy said. “We weren’t satisfied with the tests, the standards, or our progress before,” he added. “The Department’s findings just confirm that we all have more work to do.”

“Commissioner Steiner and the Regents are setting higher expectations for schools and students. Superintendents endorse that goal,” Reidy said. “But much more needs to be done to achieve the goal than merely changing the passing scores on elementary and middle school tests.”

“Most importantly,” Reidy said, “the state needs to give schools a clear sense of the ultimate goal we should aim for – what should students know and be able to do when they graduate from high school. The 3 through 8 tests are just one part of a system that needs to work together to help schools lead students to that goal.”

Reidy noted comments by SED’s Senior Deputy Commissioner John King last week when the State Board of Regents endorsed adjusting the cut scores.

Speaking of past gains on state tests, Dr. King said, “The data shows that schools responded to the assignment they were given – they worked hard to help students achieve standards as measured by the state tests that were being given at that time. And more students did, in fact, pass those tests. The problem is that those exams didn’t sufficiently test students’ abilities – the bar was set too low.”

Reidy said, “Experience gives us confidence. As the state improves its tests and clarifies its expectations for students and schools, we are certain that schools will again achieve increasing success in helping more and more students meet the hopes we hold for them.”

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Reidy also welcomed the Education Department’s efforts to gain some relief from federal school accountability requirements and give schools flexibility in applying state test results to determine which students must receive extra help. But he added that many superintendents will feel an obligation to provide that help to any student whom state tests show is not meeting standards.

Reidy concluded, “We are concerned that schools could be set up to fail. We are being asked to do more for students – a decision that we endorse. But at the same time, state officials are threatening to cut school revenues, through state aid reductions and property tax caps, while not giving us any immediate real help in reducing costs. We expect the Commissioner and the Regents to be forceful advocates for the resources schools will need to help students succeed.”

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