

**Prepared Remarks by Chancellor Merryl Tisch
New York State Board of Regents
2015 Winter Institute of The New York State Council of School Superintendents
March 9, 2015**

Good morning and thank you to Executive Director Bob Reidy and President Neil O'Brien for the invitation to speak today.

I want to talk with you about three things: rigor, flexibility, and most important, the future of our schools.

First, let's talk about rigor.

A national leader in education recently described her vision of what makes a good school. She said a good school is one where parents want to send their children, teachers want to teach, and students are engaged. Of course, this vision is true, but it's not sufficient.

A happy school is not always a good school.

You and I know a good school when we see one – and I visit schools a lot.

A good school is a place where all students are challenged to high standards and are supported in their growth by great and caring teachers. That is a school where parents will want to send their children, teachers will want to teach, and students will be engaged.

In short, good schools require both collaboration and rigor.

But there is also a need for flexibility.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for education.

The Board of Regents has long supported flexibility within a rigorous course of study.

The Board supports multiple pathways to graduation, including pathways that involve career and technical education, business/community partnerships, and early college courses.

The Board has taken a stand with the federal government on the need for more flexibility. We've asked the feds to allow us to delay testing for newly arrived English language learners and allow us to test students with severe disabilities at their instructional level.

The Board has also demonstrated a commitment to flexibility in its support for the Strengthening Teacher and Leader Effectiveness grants, or STLE. We know that a teacher evaluation system is meaningful only if it is anchored in collaboration, teaching and learning, and a comprehensive approach to talent management.

And now, the Board will soon start an important conversation about flexibility when demonstrating college and career readiness.

Last February, the Board delayed the full implementation of the new standards by five years, from 2017 to 2022. The Class of 2022 is the first group of students who must pass the new ELA and math Regents Exams at the proficiency level. The Classes of 2017 to 2021 need to pass these exams at the current cut score of 65, or partial proficiency.

The standards were adopted in 2010, so we are in our fifth year of a 12-year phase-in period, with seven years to go until 2022.

Even with a 12-year phase-in, there are those who say this is impossible. But remember two things –

+First, we have done this before. We phased out the local diploma for most students over a decade, and yet the graduation rate continued to rise.

+Second, keep in mind that the Class of 2022 is the first class that completed kindergarten the year the standards were adopted in 2010, entered grade 3 the first year we measured student progress on the standards in 2013, and will enter high school in fall 2018, eight years after the implementation of the standards began.

We already hear stories about the amazing things students can do after only two or three years of instruction with the new standards, so it is hard to imagine what the 9th graders in the Class of 2022 will be able to do after benefiting from eight years of great teaching and high expectations.

I believe they will surprise us all.

However, college readiness is complicated, and it certainly cannot be captured by a single cut score on a single test. Readiness includes academics, but it also includes important skills like persistence and collaboration and creativity. That is why, since 2001, the Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation – perhaps our first and best indicator of readiness – requires persistence through advanced math and science courses, as well as advanced coursework in CTE or World Languages or the Arts.

This is the conversation we need to have. As we approach the 2022 challenge – when our graduation requirements will reflect college readiness – should we provide additional flexibility in our definition of readiness?

Let me be clear – Our current flexibility in the appeals process and our current safety nets for students with disabilities and English language learners will remain in place, or even expand.

But, is there room for more flexibility while maintaining our high standards?

Should passing the ELA Regents Exam at the proficiency level be the only measure of college readiness in English, or should there be another option in English, such as the completion of a four-year course of study in ELA that includes recognized advanced coursework, such as AP, IB, and courses for college credit?

Should passing the Algebra Regents Exam at the proficiency level be the only measure of college readiness in math, or should there be another option in math, such as the completion of a four-year course of study in math that includes recognized advanced math coursework, such as Regents Algebra II, AP, IB, and courses for college credit?

I do not propose we require this advanced coursework for all students. What I ask is whether good things might happen if we created a pathway to graduation that is based on the completion of advanced coursework, rather than the attainment of a cut score? Should this flexibility be available to all students as an option, especially those students for whom passing at a higher cut score may be problematic?

If we did this, four things would happen

- (1) We would have an additional pathway for all students, including those who have difficulty passing a single ELA or math test at a higher cut score.
- (2) We would increase incentives for districts to make advanced coursework in ELA and math available to all students.
- (3) We would increase incentives for districts and BOCES to collaborate and provide access to advanced coursework, including virtual and distance learning opportunities.
- (4) We could give districts public recognition for this work by adding an additional aspirational performance measure to our graduation rate release to include the percent of the graduating cohort who completed early college experiences like AP, IB, dual credit programs, early college high school, and P-TECH.

Each of our schools and districts is as unique as the students and communities they serve. There is no single approach that will fit all needs all of the time. I believe we can and should find a way to preserve rigor while differentiating our methods to build upon our strengths. You must help us discover and support the range of options and best practices in place across the State.

We look forward to your feedback on these ideas in the months to come.

Now, let's talk about the future.

First, please pay attention to the Board of Regent's state aid proposal. The Board proposed the biggest number out there – over \$2 billion more for our schools, including restoration of the gap elimination adjustment over a two-year period, an increase in foundation aid, and additional funds for important work like universal pre-kindergarten, support for ELLs and CTE, continuation of the STLE grants, and financial support for districts experiencing increases in enrollment.

If you pay attention only to the \$1.1 billion number that is out there, you have taken a billion dollars off the table. Why? Think big.

Second, as you know, the Board is searching for a new Commissioner. Our search firm Isaacson, Miller is contacting stakeholders across the state and seeking your feedback, nominations, and applications.

There seems to be general consensus that the new commissioner needs to:

- Be good at listening, explaining, and adjusting course as warranted;
- Coordinate the Department's broad authority across P-12, higher education, and cultural education, in order to achieve maximum impact;
- Understand the complexities and challenges in funding education for all students in all communities;
- Realize that improving education is a long-haul activity.

Let me be clear – This is no time for a return to the good old days.

In the good old days, people rarely complained about the tests because the tests had become meaningless and the standards were too low. Each year, we tested the same few standards in the same way, and the temptation to teach to the test was irresistible.

When your tests become meaningless measures of progress, kids disappear. Not just African-American kids and Latino kids and poor kids and rural kids, but even wealthy kids in the suburbs who don't make the year-to-year progress necessary in today's world.

They disappear.

There is broad consensus on this point. There are very few times when the national business councils, the national civil rights groups, and the national teachers union all agree. But these groups have all gone on record in the past few months in their call for the federal government to maintain annual testing.

Because all kids must continue to count.

So, let's talk about opt out.

If you encourage test refusal, you have made a very powerful statement. We all want the tests to be even better – as short as possible and as closely matched to instruction as possible. That is a fair critique, and we continue to improve the tests over time.

However, some have a very different goal. They have said they want to bring down the whole system on which adult accountability is based – even if only a little bit – on evidence of student learning.

I am much less cynical, and I see things very differently. I believe that test refusal is a terrible mistake because it eliminates important information about how our kids are doing.

Why on earth would you not want to know whether your child is on track for success in the fifth grade or success in college? Why would you not want to know how your child and your school are doing compared to other children in district, region, and State? Why would you not want to know the progress of our multi-billion dollar investment in education? Why would you not want to know whether all students are making progress, not just the lucky few?

I do not pretend that test results are the only way we know, but they are an important piece of information. They are the only common measure of progress we have.

We are not going to force kids to take tests. That's not the New York way. But, we are going to continue to help students and parents understand that it is a terrible mistake to refuse the right to know.

We don't refuse to go to the doctor for an annual check-up. Most of us don't refuse to get a vaccination. We should not refuse to take the test.

I know that superintendents are on the front lines in this debate over the future of our schools. Day after day, you help your community understand the importance of high standards and the necessity for measures of student progress. We would be lost without your leadership.

Thank you.

I close by acknowledging that we often focus more on our challenges than we do on our strengths. Ours is a wide and diverse system with tremendous strengths.

Our hopes lie only in building upon our strengths to solve our challenges. That is how we do things in New York.

Every year, you recognize one of your own as Superintendent of the Year, based on national standards of leadership, communication, professionalism, and community involvement. Today, you recognized this year's superintendent of the year, Jim Langlois, for his distinguished contributions to education in New York.

I thank Jim for his work to make his BOCES and his component school districts the envy of the nation, and I applaud all of our past, current, and future school district leaders.

Thank you. We are happy to take your questions.