

# Change coming to NY schools

## New chief has myriad issues to deal with

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**ALBANY** — For the New York state Education Department, the past week marked a period of transition.

The most obvious change came at the top, with new Commissioner Mary-Ellen Elia taking the reins Monday and top deputy Ken Wagner selected Wednesday to become Rhode Island's education commissioner.

When it comes to testing, even more change: Questar Assessment Inc. learned Thursday that it won a fiveyear, \$44 million contract to craft New York's grade 3-8 tests, which will ultimately put an end to the state's arrangement with Pearson, a Londonbased company that had drawn ire from parents and schools.

With the state's education system at the center of an often-contentious debate among educators, parents and politicians in recent years, Elia takes over at a critical time.

How she and other state education officials handle the period of transition will be closely watched and scrutinized, particularly by parents who helped lead a growing effort to boycott standardized exams over the past two years.

Elia, the former head of the Hillsborough County school system in Tampa, Florida, chose to emphasize her New York roots in her first week in office, making a stop at the Sweet Home school district in Amherst, Erie County, where she started her career in the 1970s.

"I'm a teacher, I'm an educator and

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**MaryEllen Elia begins her role as New York's education commissioner on Monday.**

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"I'm not a politician," Elia told reporters Thursday. "I understand the difference in those roles. I want to work very productively with the

legislators and with the governor to improve what's happening every day for the kids in the classrooms in New York state."

For some, the first major announcement of Elia's tenure was a welcome one.

Pearson had been criticized by parents and teachers in recent years for its grade 3-8 tests, which had been at the center of the "opt-out" movement that spread across the state.

Teachers often questioned whether the tests were grade-level appropriate and criticized questions they found ambiguous, such as an infamous passage about a talking pineapple that went viral in 2014.

The contract, however, was awarded based on the state's strict contracting rules, which are meant to strip political influence from the process. By that standard, Questar had the best bid, said state Board of Regents Chancellor Meryl Tisch.

Elia's arrival combined with the awarding of the Questar contract have the New York State United Teachers union "hopeful," according to Catalina Fortina, one of the union's vice presidents.

The union has frequently clashed with Gov. Andrew Cuomo and former Education Commissioner John King, who left for a high-ranking education job in President Obama's administration. Elia met with Fortina and union officials for 90 minutes Thursday, Fortina said. "After all our members and parents across the state have been calling for, we now have an opportunity to examine and have a dialogue about the tests," Fortina said. "With Pearson in place, that dialogue would not be happening. With Commissioner Elia taking that step, it signals that she's hearing what's being said." Education issues have come to play a major role in New York's political landscape, with Republicans going as far as creating a "Stop Common Core" ballot line during last year's election cycle.

It also became a major legislative issue: In March, Cuomo and lawmakers passed a series of reforms to the school system, including a revamped teacher evaluation process and a program allowing troubled schools to be taken over by an outside receiver.

Tisch said Elia is aware of the environment she is stepping into. "She comes with a lot of experience," said Tisch, who heads the state's education policymaking board.

"We need to figure out: How do you create policy in a politically charged environment that allows school districts to thrive, maintain independence and yet meet requirements of federal and state policies?" Tisch said. "And that's a challenge."

Lisa Rudley, co-founder of NYS Allies for Public Education, said parents are looking for Elia to take concrete action to combat what she calls "high-stakes testing." Rudley, a parent of three in Ossining, Westchester County, said ending the contract with Pearson wasn't enough.

Her group helped lead the statewide effort to boycott the test, which led to more than 100,000 students opting out of the grade 3-8 exams earlier this year, according to a detailed tally maintained by organizers.

"The fundamental changes haven't taken place," Rudley said. "Until we change the highstakes nature of testing and we get back our classrooms, we expect opt-out to continue to grow."

In the short term, the Education Department will be faced with overseeing the implementation of the new teacher evaluation system, which relies in part on student test scores and observations by principals and independent evaluators.

School districts face a Nov. 15 deadline to get the new system in place, which will require an agreement with their local teachers union. But the department has set up a process in which schools can apply for "hardship waivers" to have the deadline — which many schools say is unrealistic — pushed back.

The evaluation system has caused the most tension between Cuomo and NYSUT, the politically powerful union.

"Teacher evaluations should be something that supports teachers to be continuously looking at their practice to get better in the classroom," Elia said Thursday.

She continued: "We're in the midst of a change in standards, and as that occurs, it's always great for people to get feedback and to share the things that have worked in their classroom with their colleagues, and evaluation can help to make that happen."

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