

NY asks districts to cut exams

Focus sought on state testing

Justin Murphy

Staff writer

The New York state Education Department is urging districts to eliminate as much local testing as possible for the purposes of teacher evaluations, and is committing federal money to help make it happen. But some educators are opposing the increased reliance on state exams.

The initiative by NYSED comes with \$9.2 million in federal Race To The Top money, including \$800,000 going to schools in the Rochester area. It comes in response to widespread protests about excessive testing in public schools, especially for the youngest children.

There is no prospect of eliminating Common Core-aligned tests or other evaluations mandated by the state or

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Barbara Tomasso, far left, and Renee Williams

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federal government, and it is those that have drawn the most complaints. Rather, the state sent a report to every district in the state this summer, identifying locally-designed tests used for teacher assessment purposes and presenting alternate ways for districts to assess teachers without testing children more.

For instance, the Brighton school district uses pre-assessments — tests given early in the year to establish a benchmark for later growth — in a variety of classes, from kindergarten reading to chemistry. In the reports, NYSED is suggesting to such districts they replace those tests with “past performance trends, historical data, and/or prior-year assessment results.”

The state also urges districts to swap out locally- developed end-of-year tests in their Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) formulas for state evaluations that need to be done anyway. The overall goal is for districts to eliminate local tests and lean more heavily on the ones mandated by the state.

“The department recognizes that ... a variety of pressures at the state and local level may have resulted in students in some districts and BOCES being tested more than needed, or in rote standardized test preparation that crowds out quality instruction,” the reports read. “The department encourages you to use this letter to help review your currently approved APPR plan to identify modifications that would ... result in less testing for your students.”

Sixty percent of APPR is based on a personal evaluation by a teacher’s supervisor; it is the other 40 percent, based on data, that the state is hoping to nudge.

In classes without a Regents exam, the recommended changes would entail sacrificing subjectspecific tests for broader, semi-related measures.

For instance, the state suggests districts could eliminate end-of-year music tests and instead assess music teachers on how well their students — or students in the school as a whole — did on the state English language arts test. That has happened in Greece, for instance, where teachers in non-core subjects are evaluated in part on how well their students do on English language arts or math tests.

It has not had the effect of eliminating all other testing, though. Greece students still take local tests and projects, but they’re not included in the APPR calculations.

Assistant Superintendent Barbara Tomasso said it’s part of a focus on literacy and math. Her district has already moved away from most local tests for APPR purposes.

“The first year, the models NYSED had out there were a lot of pretests, so we did it because that was the model we saw,” she said. “But as 2012-13 went on and we had more discussions, we realized we didn’t have to do that.” The changes would be subject to labor negotiations in a district. In the reports, NYSED holds up the Rochester and Webster school districts as models for how to eliminate pre-assessments.

Rochester early education teachers, though, protested and filed a union grievance in June over unnecessary end-of-year testing for APPR purposes. Several teachers told the school board in June that they hadn’t taught an actual lesson for more than a month because their end-of-year assessment demands were so burdensome. They described leaving entire classes of kindergarteners unattended while taking students aside one-by-one and administering a series of evaluations.

The Rochester Teachers Association is currently in negotiations with the district to amend the terms of its APPR agreement and remove as many local exams as possible, according to Adam Urbanski, its president.

“Our goal is to eliminate as much non-mandated testing as possible. To the best as I can discern, RCSD has a similar goal,” he said. “Not because we think state tests are superior to local tests, but if you don’t have local exams that are a significant improvement over state tests, then why do double testing?”

Local exams in Rochester are not superior to state exams by much, he said, because teachers haven’t had sufficient time and resources to create them.

That is not the case in Honeoye Falls-Lima, according to Assistant Superintendent Renee Williams. The state report for that district has a lengthy list of local exams recommended for elimination, but she said those are much superior to the state tests and called it “a huge issue of local control.”

“We spent a lot of time developing reliable, informative assessments ... to look at students who were succeeding and who weren’t succeeding,” she said. “The state tests give us some information, but do they give us as much information as we get from our local tests? Absolutely not.”

A spokesman for the New York State Union of Teachers said that while the union supports less testing in general, it opposes a greater reliance on state exams.

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