

New York studying exams decision

Educators want spring assessments canceled

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Educators across New York are calling on the state Education Department to cancel spring assessments for the second straight year as the pandemic drags on.

“Throughout this school year, there has not been a standardized mode of instruction across the state,” said Jolene DiBrango, executive vice president of New York State United Teachers, in a letter to Interim Education Commissioner Betty Rosa.

“Without standardized instructional modes there should not be a standardized test at the end of the year,”

Interim Education Commissioner Betty Rosa said the state was looking to make a decision about the Regents exams “as soon as possible.”

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she wrote.

There are two major sets of tests given in the second half of the school year: Regents exams for middle and high school students, normally offered in June, and ELA and math assessments for grades 3-8.

The state Board of Regents could again cancel the Regents exams on its own, as it canceled a smaller offering of Regents exams that had been set for this month. But it would need a federal waiver to cancel the 3-8 assessments, which are required by federal law.

The policy-making Board of Regents has maintained since its Oct. 19 meeting that New York will not be possible to administer tests remotely. But no decisions have been made about canceling Regents exams or applying for a waiver for the 3-8 tests, according to a statement from spokesperson Emily DeSantis.

During a Jan. 14 press conference, Rosa said the state Education Department was looking to make a decision about the Regents exams

them “critical” for schools and legislators to find out the extent of learning loss.

Advocates for canceling the tests argue that because students’ educational experiences throughout the pandemic have been so varied, there is no way a single assessment would produce credible data about the effects of the pandemic.

Many argue that instead of using high-stakes testing to evaluate learning loss, that evaluation should be left up to individual districts who know their students best.

“As education leaders, we can ensure [students] do not lose out on showing us what they know and are able to do,” Di-Brango wrote in the NYSUT letter. “We can be sure we do everything we can to give them the time and equitable resources they deserve to show us mastery at their pace.”

Advocates also argue that assessments would divert badly needed resources and time away from the task of actual instruction.

“as soon as possible.” The board canceled Regents exams set for this month at its November meeting.

Any decision “will be fully informed by all available and relevant public health and educational data,” DeSantis said. “And as always, we will put the health and safety of students and teachers first.”

These decisions need to be made as soon as possible, said Bob Lowry, deputy director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, as it would be a great challenge to administer these tests in a pandemic environment.

“There is a general sense that whatever the decision is, it helps superintendents if we can know that sooner rather than later,” he said.

The 3-8 assessments are scheduled to begin on April 19. Last year, New York and all other states received a waiver from the U.S. Education Department and canceled the assessments.

President Joe Biden’s pick for U.S. education secretary, former Connecticut Education Commissioner Miguel Cardona, has not yet said whether he will grant waivers.

Under Cardona’s leadership, the Connecticut State Department of Education sent out a memo in December indicating it would hold annual assessments as planned, even if they had to be given remotely. The memo called state tests “the most accurate guideposts to our promise of equity for [all].”

According to New York education officials, SED has been in talks with the incoming administration about the issue.

“We will continue to monitor applicable data as well as decisions by the incoming Biden administration and make a decision on other State assessment programs as the school year progresses, being mindful of the evolving situation,” DeSantis said.

Meanwhile, the College Board is expected to announce in February how Advanced Placement exams will be administered, which is out of the state’s hands. In its most recent update, the College Board said that extra dates will be set for the in-school administration of each exam. In

NYS Allies for Public Education, a statewide advocacy group that opposes what it calls “excessive testing,” has an online petition with more than 4,700 signatures asking the state to cancel 2021 testing.

The petition argues that schools are already diverting resources away from caring for students so they can prepare for assessments, “all for the sake of tests that are highly correlated with economic, language and disability status, while failing to provide useful diagnostic information to help teachers improve and target instruction.”

FairTest, a national organization focused on the “misuse” of standardized testing, has launched a nationwide campaign to suspend high-stakes testing on the grounds that the results won’t tell educators anything.

“We don’t need test scores to know that low-income children in poorly resourced schools have fallen even farther behind in a pandemic,” FairTest’s petition reads.

Lowry said there isn’t a firm consensus among New York’s superintendents about whether the tests should be held, but there is general agreement that the results of any assessments should not have negative consequences for schools.

“I think there are people who argue that the assessments would give us a sense of how this disruption has affected student performance, and that could be valuable information,” Lowry said.

“But it seems hard to justify attaching consequences, either for schools or educators, given the effects of the disruption ... there are questions about whether that can be done fairly.”

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addition, online exams will be arranged for schools that are closed or students who cannot take the tests in school.

AP exams are taken by high school students enrolled in AP courses and can earn students college credits. Last spring, abbreviated AP exams were given online, and the process was rife with problems.

The College Board still plans to offer the SAT college entrance exam at test centers. But the organization is discontinuing the optional essay for the main SAT and SAT subject tests. The College Board, in a statement, credited the pandemic with accelerating changes to the test that were “already underway.”

How necessary are assessments?

There has been great debate in New York and across the country in recent years over the role of what many call “high stakes” standardized assessments, which have been used to evaluate students, teachers, principals, schools and school districts.

Many education leaders have echoed the Connecticut Education Department’s sentiment that testing is essential to determine whether all students, including those from underprivileged backgrounds, are keeping pace academically, including through the pandemic.

Sen. Patty Murray, a Washington Democrat and ranking member of the Senate Education Committee, expressed support for state assessments in a Nov. 30 tweet, calling



Kindergarten teacher Dan Osborne works with remote and in-school students at Concord Road Elementary in Ardsley on Dec. 1.
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