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Despite Focus on Data, Standards for Diploma May Still Lack Rigor

By MICHAEL WINERIP

The next time people try to tell you how much the data-driven education reform programs of President George W. Bush (No Child Left Behind) and President Obama (Race to the Top) have raised academic standards in America, suggest that they take a look at the Jan. 24, 2012, New York State English Regents exam.

This year, for the first time, high schools students must score at least 65 on the English exam, as well as on four other state tests — math, science, global history and United States history — to earn a diploma.

The three-hour English test includes 25 multiple choice questions; one essay; and two short responses that are each supposed to be a paragraph long. A short response is scored 0 to 2 points. A student who gets 1's on both responses has a pretty good shot at scoring 65 and passing the exam.

Here, from the state teachers' scoring guide, is an excerpt from a short response written by an unnamed student. The guide says it deserves a score of 1:

These two Charater have very different mind Sets because they are creative in away that no one would imagen just put clay together and using leaves to create Art.

Theoretically, passing the English Regents would mean that a student could read and write.

Here is the topic sentence of another student's short response that, according to the state guide, also deserves a 1:

In the poem, the poets use of language was very depth into it.

Until recently there were two main graduation options in New York. Students could earn a Regents-endorsed diploma by passing several state exams, or they could earn a local diploma. But the two-tier system has been phased out. No longer will there be a local diploma option.

New York's last three education commissioners, all leaders in the reform movement, have been suspicious of assessment instruments that rely too heavily on people who work in schools.

State officials have instead chosen to use one English test to assess every high school student in the state, which has caused another fairly gigantic problem: How do you create a single graduation exam for 200,000 seniors when some are heading to the Ivy League and others to pump gas?

If the standard is set too high, so many will fail — including children with special education needs and students for whom English is a second language — that there will be a public outcry.

But if the standard is set too low, the result is a diploma that has little meaning.

So far, officials have opted to dumb down the state tests.

The New York State education commissioner, John B. King Jr., and the chancellor, Merryl H. Tisch, say they want to change that. They are considering raising the passing English score to 75.

They are also counting on a new set of national learning standards, known as the common core, which are currently being developed in more than 40 states. The hope is that more sophisticated standards detailing what children should know, coupled with more sophisticated curriculums and exams, will result in a more rigorous public education system.

“The D.O.E./Board of Regents position on the passing score for this exam, with attention to college and career readiness, will be re-examined in conjunction with administering a revised exam in this subject area aligned to the Common Core State Standards,” a spokesman for Dr. King wrote.

The current state English exam appears to be the easiest in memory. From 1999 to 2011, the test was given in two three-hour sessions that required students to write four essays. But a series of school closings caused by snowstorms forced state officials to reschedule the two-day exams, which was a logistical nightmare. So in 2009, the Board of Regents voted to reduce the exam to a single session. (In the decades before 1999, the English exam was also one three-hour session, but required students to answer 60 to 65 multiple choice questions and write two essays.)

The English exam is graded on a sliding scale, meaning there are several possible ways to score a 65. A student can:

¶ Score 1 on each of the short responses; 4 on the essay (which is graded on a 1-6 scale); and answer 17 of the 25 multiple choice questions correctly.

¶ Score 1 and 2 on the short responses; 3 on the essay; and answer 17 of 25 correctly.

¶ Score 1's on the short responses; 3 on the essay; and answer 20 of 25 correctly.

Below are two “sentences” from an essay that according to the scoring guidelines, deserves a 3:

Even though there is no physical conflict within each other. There are jealousy problems between each other that each one wish could have.

The January essay was supposed to focus on a quotation from Goethe, "No two persons regard the world in exactly the same way."

These are the first few sentences from an essay that should be given a score of 4:

In life, "no two people regard the world in exactly the same way," as J. W. von Goethe says. Everyone sees and reacts to things in different ways. Even though they may see the world in similar ways, no two people's views will ever be exactly the same. This statement is true since everyone sees things through different viewpoints.

Despite a decade of state English testing under No Child Left Behind, the results are disheartening, even in New York City, where a data-driven system was put in place by a former chancellor, Joel I. Klein, and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, two giants of the reform movement.

Sad to say, during the Bloomberg administration, little if any progress has been made, if test results are to be believed. In 2003, 52.5 percent of fourth graders were proficient in English, compared with 51 percent in 2011. In 2003, 32.6 percent of eighth graders were proficient, compared with 35 percent today.

Perhaps, as leaders of the reform movement seem to believe, there are new and higher standards, stronger curriculums and better tests just over the next hill to solve all our problems.

But four now, Wm. Shakespeare must Be a turnover in his Grave (1 point).

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