March 17, 2023

Dear Chancellor Young,

As a former Rochester teacher, principal and currently the coordinator for the Rochester Coalition for Public Education, I read the recent Rochester Democrat & Chronicle newspaper report on NYS student test scores and your response, with great interest, since I am very aware that you have a great amount of influence on what changes, if any, are made to NY's current curricular and assessment systems. The report stated that you commented:

“All across New York state,” he said, “there are parents who want to know, ‘If my child is in eighth-grade, how are they doing and how are they doing compared to all the other people in eighth grade?’ “ Young said it is “unconscionable” for parents to be told that their children are doing well in school only for them to get poor results on standardized tests."

Our Coalition is very aware that you, the other Regents members and Commissioner Rosa are extremely concerned about the growth and development of our students and the expectations of their parents, and appreciate your work to meet those ends. However, we are also aware that there are some fundamental flaws in our current system that are reflected in your statement and that prevents our common goals for students from being attained. Among our concerns are the following:

1. The perception by parents, students, educators, policy-makers and others, that high-stakes, standardized test scores accurately reflect any individual student's growth and development is flawed and inaccurate.

- Many students are simply not effective test-takers due to a variety of factors, but perform well on other meaningful classroom activities.

- NYS Regents Exams do not have reliable predictive validity for how well an individual student will perform in the future, and

- NYS Regents Exams do not effectively assess the skills students need for becoming effective citizens, career-performers or college students.

Given these research-based arguments, an organized state-wide effort by the NYSED to inform all constituencies of these realities would be a meaningful education plan, rather than simply carrying on the charade of reinforcing their current beliefs on standardized test scores.

2. The process of comparing test scores among individual students and various disaggregated groups of students exacerbates the issues we are commonly dealing with. The common expectation that all students in all disaggregated groups should be able to excel at the same rates and demonstrate their proficiency through standardized test scores does not match the volumes of research that clearly states that every student is unique, with a combination of learning styles, interests, goals and motivation. Furthermore, given our nation's long history of racism and discrimination, the realities of institutional and structural racism and discrimination have not been eliminated in education, but also not been exorcised from employment, housing, physical & mental health care, criminal justice, and transportation. These factors, which impact each other, including education, create unrealistic expectations for students, parents, educators and policy-makers who do not consider their impact. The act of publicly comparing individual and group standardized test outcomes and expecting marginalized students, such as those living in low socio-economic conditions, having experienced a history of racism, having learning disabilities, experienced trauma or have a primary language other than English has a negative impact on these students, if their standardized test scores are lower than average, damaging their self-image and decreasing their motivation to engage in schools that persist with standardized test-driven teaching and learning.

3. Secondly, continuing to emphasize standardized test scores coerces school districts, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and students to be focused on raising test scores by teaching-to-the-test, in one form or another, so that the school, school district, educators and students appear to be successful. That assumption is problematic and destructive for the following reasons:

A. It assumes that the skills the test is assessing are those necessary for students to be successful in the real world. We know, however, that there is little validity to that, since virtually all high-stakes standardized tests rely mainly upon memorization and regurgitation vs. those focusing on development and application and other higher-level thinking skills to the real world. Furthermore, the use of high-stakes standardized tests for giving an accurate picture of individual student growth is highly questionable. As you well-know, many students who are poor test-takers, excel in careers or in college.

B. The focus on test scores coerces educators to neglect not only the skills that students need for success in society, but also the content that interests students, as well as the content society needs them to be knowledgeable about.

C. Teachers become frustrated from the test-centered education process they are coerced to work in; not being able to teach students the skills and content they need, are interested in, and for survival. As a result, some of our most creative educators leave their schools or the profession, and many potential candidates are discouraged from entering the profession.

In essence, the reality of the socio-economic principle called "Campbell's Law" becomes an educational reality. This principle states generally that: "Any socio-economic goal that is reduced to a number will result in corruption and perversion of the process to reach that goal." As you are aware, that result is quite evident in our current test-centered, education process.

So what do we do about this dilemma?

1. The recommendation in #1 above, to educate all constituencies on the realities of the accuracy of high-stakes standardized testing is crucial.

2. The skills identified by the current Blue Ribbon Committee for New Graduation Requirements should be used to develop a new performance-based assessment process, modeled after that of the NYS Performance Standards Consortium.

3. School districts that are ready to move in this direction, can have teams of educators attend professional development sessions, facilitated by Consortium staff, to learn how to modify their curriculum, pedagogy and assessments to implement the changes. We should expect that each district would pilot the changes and increase the number of schools implementing the new system each year, with NYSED supporting all NYS school districts in this initiative.

4. A group, including you (the Regents Chancellor,) Commissioner Rosa, the NYSUT President and perhaps AFT President Randi Weingarten should meet with U.S. Secretary of Education to seek permission to implement this initiative.

I believe, Chancellor Young, that this outline provides an assertive, research-based compromise to move forward with a plan that will more effectively meet the needs of ALL students, in a timely manner that allows for the scaffolded implementation of an authentic process of education and assessment that will more effectively not only meet student needs, but also more effectively meet the professional and motivational needs of educators, future teachers and society.

My colleagues and I would be most happy to meet with you and other members of the Regents to discuss these arguments at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Dan Drmacich, Rochester Coalition for Public Education Coordinator