

New York State PTA

Position Paper:

Use of Student Assessment & Its Impact on High-Stakes Educational Decisions

Background

Federal mandates emanating from “A Nation at Risk” (1983), “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB, 2002) and “Race to The Top” (RTTT, 2009) have combined with NYS law and Commissioner regulations to result in a variety of high-stakes educational decisions based on student assessments. As a consequence, student assessment has tipped toward high-stakes testing of student achievement in core subjects such as math and English language arts. Such measures have resulted in sanctions on school buildings and districts failing to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB. NYS legislation and Regents regulations extend similar sanctions to the individual educator. Response at the school district level has often been to reduce or eliminate instructional time in so-called “non-core” subjects such as art, music, science and physical education in favor of instruction and preparation for testing in areas such as math and language arts.

NYS PTA has historically supported the establishment of high academic standards as well as the appropriate use of standardized tests to assess student progress, so long as their purpose is to improve the overall quality of instruction and student learning. NYS PTA maintains that all new curricula and assessments must be vetted, funded, and implemented appropriately. NYSED must always allow sufficient time for professional development, and creation of instructional materials for any new initiative.

Parents, educators, and policy makers have raised concerns that overemphasis on test results as the basis for making high-stakes decisions affecting students and educators is eroding access to a well-rounded education. Information gathered in a January 2013 survey of NYS PTA leaders, combined with on-going research as well as input from parents and educators raises concerns regarding excessive time devoted to testing, test preparation, narrowing of curricula and undue stress on students. Survey respondents also expressed concerns related to the potential for unfair employee decisions, less meaningful family engagement and the development of an adversarial climate between parents and schools due to publication of high-stakes test results. NYS PTA encourages positive education reform that results in students who are college and career ready, reduces the achievement gap between various student groups, fosters the education of the whole child and recognizes families and parents as essential partners in the education process.

Positions

New York State PTA supports legislation and policy decisions that enable state and local officials to design a comprehensive and effective multi-pronged approach to meaningful pupil assessment and educator evaluation. The basis for student, teacher or leader evaluation should be reliable and valid and include multiple measures. We conclude, however, that an overemphasis on high-stakes testing is detrimental to students and the education process. In this regard, NYS PTA offers the following positions:

- We support continual development and implementation of higher learning standards, such as Common Core, and efforts by state and federal agencies to improve learning and assessment of learning based on these standards. While student assessment is necessary, linking the results to educator performance before Common Core has been properly implemented threatens the success of this reform effort. Therefore, NYS PTA calls on NYSED to suspend the link between student performance on NYS-required tests and educator evaluation for at least one year until instructional components of the Common Core have been fully and properly implemented;
- Education of the whole child recognizes the importance and value of all developmental facets in children. Rather than reducing accountability to the narrow testing of facts, assessments based on the new standards must also reflect learning that integrates creativity and appreciation of the arts and fosters application of learned skills to real life situations. Student learning should always be driven by standards and curriculum, not by tests.
- Tests whose results form the basis for high-stakes decisions create stress and have negative effects for students from all backgrounds, but especially for low-income students, English language learners, and students with special needs and for whom test performance may not be an accurate reflection of skill mastery. Assessment strategies must recognize such disadvantages and respond appropriately. NYS PTA supports a NYSED_waiver request to the US Department of Education to offer fair assessments for children with unique challenges. It is important to test these all students based on level of instruction rather than factors such as chronological age;
- We support the establishment of a strong, effective evaluation system for educators (APPR). We strongly support an emphasis on direct observation of instruction and review of non test measures of performance that directly correspond to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards and teacher standards adopted by the NYS Board of Regents that comprise 60% of the annual APPR;
- With significant state aid eligibility based on timely implementation of educator assessments, the state must periodically conduct and fund a thorough independent evaluation of the APPR process, including the role of testing and its effects on students; and
- While it is appropriate to share broad results of testing and its use in assessing educator performance, any public release of such data must not be permitted to interfere with the essential goal of improving instruction.

Summary

High-stakes testing associated with political initiatives has changed the landscape of education in New York State and across our country. The effects of some of these changes may be unintended, but when devoid of a sound educational rationale, they can actually interfere with educational improvement. NYS PTA supports the continued development and implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards and the academic challenge needed to compete in a global society. We also support the need for meaningful pupil assessment and educator accountability. Current trends unfortunately exaggerate the use of narrowly defined results to judge educational performance and make high-stakes educational decisions. These trends cannot be permitted to stifle student and educator creativity or to impede the imperative to educate the whole child