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New York fails Common Core tests

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August 7, 2013 02:27 PM EDT

The political fight over the Common Core academic standards rolling out in schools nationwide this fall is sure to intensify after New York reported Wednesday that students across the state failed miserably on new reading and math tests meant to reflect the more rigorous standards.

Fewer than a third of students in public schools passed the new tests, officials reported. And, in a twist that could roil education policy, some highly touted charter schools flopped particularly badly.

Other states are expected to face similar reckonings next year and in 2015, as they roll out new tests aligned to Common Core. Already, Kentucky has reported high failure rates on its Common Core tests.

New York released [nearly 2,000 pages of data](#) parsing the poor performance of students in third through eighth grade. In Rochester, for instance, just 5 percent of students scored proficient in math. Fewer than 9 percent of students in Syracuse passed the reading test. Statewide, just 19 percent of low-income students made the grade in language arts.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the state was, for the first time, coming clean with students, parents and teachers about the inadequacies of the public education system.

“Too many school systems lied to children, families and communities,” Duncan said. “Finally, we are holding ourselves accountable.”

Yet critics fumed that the state was setting kids up to fail — and failing to acknowledge that crimped budgets, crowded classrooms and high student poverty rates have all played a role in limiting student achievement.

A bipartisan crew of education reformers, including Duncan, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and many others, have pushed charter schools as one solution to boost student learning. Yet charters, which are publicly funded but privately managed, fared particularly poorly on the new tests.

Just 23 percent of charter students scored proficient in language arts, compared with 31 percent in public schools overall. That’s a greater gap than had shown up in last year’s exams.

In math, charter schools beat the public school average in each of the past two years — but not this year. **On the new tests, just 31 percent of charter students scored proficient, the same as in public schools overall.**

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Results were mixed at some of New York City's most highly rated charter schools, often acclaimed as "miracle" schools because in years past, so many of their mostly poor and minority students aced the state's proficiency tests.

The flourishing [Success Academies](#) network of charter schools continued to post outstanding results on the new exams, especially in math. In one of its schools in the Bronx, for instance, an astonishing 90 percent of third graders passed the math test, and 68 percent passed language arts. Both results far exceeded the citywide average of a 33 percent pass rate for math and 28 percent for language arts.

Eva Moskowitz, the founder of Success Academies, said she hopes the scores put to rest a common criticism that charter schools drill endlessly for fill-in-the-bubble multiple choice, but don't nurture higher-order thinking skills. The new tests were designed to assess those more advanced skills — and her students still flourished. "Our emphasis has always been on critical thinking, high standards, the whole child — and a ton of elbow grease," Moskowitz said.

Yet other much-celebrated charter networks did not do nearly as well.

The Democracy Prep chain posted uneven results, with particularly poor scores in sixth grade. In its Harlem charter, fewer than 4 percent of sixth graders passed the language arts exam, and fewer than 12 percent passed math. Its best results came at the eighth grade level, but even then the pass rate on both tests was under 33 percent — better than the citywide average of about 26 percent, but not a quantum leap above other public schools.

Democracy Prep officials didn't respond to a request for comment.

The highly touted KIPP network also stumbled, with proficiency rates well below the city average for several grades and subjects. At KIPP Star College Prep, just 11 percent of fifth graders were proficient in math and just 16 percent passed the reading test. Seventh grade was another weak point, with 11 percent proficient in language arts and 14 percent in math. KIPP also did not respond to a request for comment.

The poor results for KIPP, Democracy Prep and other renowned charters suggest that "we have to be more careful about claims of miracle schools," said Michael Petrilli, an education analyst at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

While many educators and politicians praised New York for demanding more of its students, some critics accused officials of raising the bar too high, too fast — without any proof that the new tests would, in fact, help children succeed in the global economy.

"The decision about where to set the passing mark is a judgment call," said Diane Ravitch, a former assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush. Setting it so high guaranteed low pass rates and "adds to the phony narrative about 'failing schools,'" Ravitch said.

Based on other measures, including national standardized tests and high school dropout rates, Ravitch argues that schools are performing better than ever before and that popular reforms including more testing, more charter schools and more vouchers to help families

reforms including more testing, more charter schools and more vouchers to help families pay for private schools are not needed.

For all the attention on the proficiency rates, Petrilli cautioned that they are “a terrible metric to use for measuring school quality” because they generally reflect school demographics, with low-income students coming in with weaker skills and having farther to go to reach proficiency. “What you want to look at is progress over time — how much closer are these schools getting students toward college and career readiness,” Petrilli said. “And we won’t know that until next year.”

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