

Spare the tests, support the children: Forget about standardized exams this year



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Across the country, national and local groups — including [the majority of parents](#) — are calling on the federal government to waive standardized testing requirements for states in the spring. New York should be one of the leaders of that effort. Instead, it remains one of only 10 states to link standardized exams, in this case Regents exams, to high school graduation.

We're in the throes of a pandemic with no consistency to school attendance, WiFi reception, or access to computers. In this climate, not only would a fresh round of standardized tests lack any validity or reliability, they would be a tragic waste of resources and effort.

With a virus run amok, a record number of deaths — particularly in our underserved communities — overburdened hospitals, the loss of jobs and fear of a greater economic breakdown, why inflict more harm on those whose lives and families have already been the most disrupted?

Instead, let's use stretched budgets to educate kids in ways that will support them and better meet their very real and critical needs, both academic and emotional.

Teachers and school support staff are in the best position to know what those needs are. Throughout this pandemic, teachers have made their relationships with students a priority, staying in contact, scheduling one-on-one conferencing, answering students' late-night phone calls, and using their teacher-designed assessments — appropriate to what has been taught in class — to understand students' academic needs and what to focus on next in their lessons and assignments.

Why outsource questions about what students know and can do to companies that produce standardized tests — commercial publishers that don't know our students or our schools? It was, after all, New York City Schools Chancellor Carranza who recently acknowledged, "Schools right now have a good idea of where their students are..." Teachers, social workers, counselors, administrators and others have been the ones dropping off iPads and art supplies, food and clothing and staying in touch with their students.

Reverting back to standardized testing as the ultimate measure of student progress, doubling down on a decades-long, costly, and failed approach to bridging the educational "gap," shows a complete lack of imagination and creativity about teaching and learning. It reinforces the spurious notion that teachers and students have no incentive to teach and learn without these tests, and reinforces the norm to simply "teach to the test." New York should know better and learn from the 1,450 colleges and universities, including CUNY, that [have stopped requiring SAT scores](#).

Good assessments grow out of curriculum, and provide deeper inquiry into subjects instead of relying on multiple-choice and formulaic essays. When assessments are imposed arbitrarily, they just encourage simplistic and rote teaching and create rigid categories of "winners" and "losers."

We need to use this crisis to reimagine what school can be. Instead of going backwards to policies that serve to sort and rank kids, we need to value higher goals for instruction, gain a deeper appreciation for what learning is, and show respect for kids' individual talents and interests.

New York already has schools that use teacher-designed performance assessments, presentations, and exhibitions to assess students successfully. Public

high schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium have been graduating students for 20 years using such a system. Students write literary criticism, conduct science experiments, engage in mathematical thinking and conduct historical research. They read and write extensively and present their papers to external evaluators. It works because students take ownership and can demonstrate what they know. They have been doing this in schools from the Bronx to East Flatbush, from the Lower East Side to Rochester and Ithaca.

Learning is complex and assessments should be, too. One test score cannot match the depth and breadth of using multiple forms of assessment. It's time to refocus our energies on assessments that provide a more complete portrait of a student.

So what can New Yorkers do? We can advocate in Washington and Albany for a testing waiver and launch a national discussion to review the failed policy of our 20-year obsession with standardized testing. The definition of assessment is *not* testing. Other options exist and can be implemented, with time and training.

[Petitions](#) online further that cause.

We face enormous challenges as we transition to a post-COVID world. There's been plenty of talk about social and emotional learning, but we need to do more than just talk. Students need to feel empowered so they can believe in themselves again. That will be the best way to help. More standardized testing will only disempower them and rob them of what they need most — our time, our commitment, our belief in their capacity to learn and grow.

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