

Learning Disabilities Association of New York State
Higher Graduation Standards and the Impact on Students and Educators

Testimony Before the Assembly and Senate
Standing Committees on Education
April 22, 1999

The mission of The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State is to advocate on behalf of children and adults with learning disabilities in our state. In this regard, we have grave concerns about the impact of the new Regents higher graduation standards on both students with learning disabilities and on the educators who are required to instruct students to meet these higher standards. We want a comprehensive public education system where all students in our state have equal access to receive an appropriate and beneficial education based on their individual needs. We are in agreement that our educational delivery system can be improved and with the premise that there is strong public support for higher graduation requirements and improved school standards. This agreement should not be construed as a mandate for a series of new tests and curriculum or endorsement of the one diploma state. We firmly believe that the new graduation standards will not produce positive and productive outcomes for all students, and that, for the students we represent, the new standards will result in the failure, retention, removal, or dropping out of a significant number of students. The Learning Disabilities Association's position is presented as a starting point for action, reaction and resolution to these concerns.

First, we disagree with the following assumptions upon which the new graduation standards are based:

- that every student can do the work required;
- that all students can pass the same tests;
- that the new standards have sufficient research to support the proposed assessments and that standardized tests demonstrate mastery of competencies that are indicators of positive adult outcomes;
- that the designed tests are true measures of mastery of the curriculum being presented;
- that all persons with severe learning or developmental disabilities can grasp abstract ideas (e.g. money management, ideas in math and science) and that these concepts are critical prerequisites to

success, happiness, and fulfillment in life;

- that students with milder disabilities can pass the same standardized tests as “non-disabled” students;
- that students with milder disabilities learn the same way as those with no disabilities;
- that teachers are properly trained to teach students with differing educational needs;
- that a Regents diploma based on academic proficiency should be regarded as the only status diploma to ensure post-secondary success; and
- that achieving a grade of 55 on a Regents test will be seen by anyone, especially a student, parent, family member, or teacher as a mark of success and achievement in our society.

Further, we are concerned because the new graduation standards lack or does not address sufficiently:

- the person-centered planning critical to each student’s success;
- the role of parents’ participation in their child’s learning;
- behavior management issues; and
- the reduced motivation and lack of positive reinforcement for students to stay in school if they are having difficulty achieving the higher standards.

Our anticipated outcomes of the new graduation standards include:

- a significant number of students, with and without disabilities, will not meet the proposed expectations.
- an increase in drop outs, retention, failures, disciplinary actions which have well-documented research based short and long term negative consequences to our state’s social and economic stability.
- general and special education teachers and administrators will be unable to access sufficient training and support to be prepared quickly or adequately and successfully implement the new curriculum standards in the time-frame established;
- quality assurance standards will be difficult to implement;
- teaching for the test curriculum will prevail.

To ensure improved education for both students and educators, we need graduation standards that are responsible, effective, non-punitive, and accountable. In this regard, we propose:

- an expansion of current public and private school program and placement alternatives to meet the individualized needs of students with and without disabilities who cannot meet the new higher standards;
- an increase in the range of assessment tools beyond the proposed Regents tests to demonstrate students mastery of curriculum, with these assessments open to all students throughout the state, not only those eligible through current district waiver programs;
- establishment of a reasonable time-frame to ensure effective educator and administrator training and support;
- incentives for our state teacher training programs to revise the curriculum design for teacher training promoting dual-certification programs, literacy remediation, and learning strategy instruction.
- rejection of the current proposed plan that allows grades of 55 on Regents tests for special education students, and replacement with a curriculum plan for students based on their entry skill level and ability, and a grading system based upon this reasonable, achievable plan;
- establishment of an alternative, high level, highly regarded Regents approved Vocational/Career Track Diploma Program that has an equal status with a Regents Academic Diploma. This diploma would be attainable for students, with and without disabilities, and would stress talents and technical or work skills, focus on other forms of intelligence and mastery and reduce the expectations for literacy, math, abstract thinking and information skills;
- a mandated monthly tracking system by school district reported to both the Regents and State Legislature that includes numbers and demographics of students identified as drop-outs, retentions, failures, long term suspensions and expulsions.

Each student deserves a reasonable and achievable set of goals and objectives in their school program, regardless of whether he or she is in special or general education programs. School programs should be designed to develop academic, social and vocational skills, recognize learning strengths and weaknesses,

and foster high self-esteem, pride, responsibility and independence. The gap is currently too wide between those deemed eligible to receive an IEP diploma and students qualified to take the new Regents tests. There are children who may not be college-bound and college is not a prerequisite to success in our society. To expect all students except those with severe disabilities to receive a Regents diploma is not only unrealistic, but is not in our best economic and social interests. Our high schools can provide alternative vocational tracks that instruct and demand high level of skills and abilities for students who do not want an academic or college program.

Our primary goal for all of our public education programs should be to provide a variety of instructional programs, all of which are pathways to becoming successful, competent, independent adults. By reconsidering another diploma that is reasonable and attainable for those who are not academically gifted, we can support a student in identifying their talents and marketable skills and their attainment of a respectable, quantifiable diploma of achievement comparable to the academic based Regents diploma. Whether we call it a *Regular Diploma* or a *Vocation/Career Track Diploma*, the hallmark of this diploma would be that it is recognized as a high level of training and mastery that is recognized and applauded by our business and industry leaders as a valid measure of skills and achievement. This additional diploma would help include more students within our schools and still move all students to a high Regents Standard that is meaningful and accepted throughout the United States as a measure of skills, strengths, abilities and talents. Working together we can meet the challenge of educating each student to their maximum potential by amending the new standard to reflect the diversity of our students and educators and establish an effective system of ongoing accountability so no child is lost.