

**Learning Disabilities Association of New York State
Position Statement
High School Graduation and Diploma Requirements
May 2011**

Background:

The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State has been long engaged in the ongoing discussion concerning the standards and criteria for high school graduation and diploma options. Last year, we presented our position "Statement Regarding the Proposed Framework for New York State High School Exiting Credential" where we articulated the need for alternative pathways to a bona fide diploma that are not based on high stakes testing, and rigid academic course standards. We remain steadfast with this position.

At that time, we also urged the New York State Education Department not to proceed with plans for a non-diploma "alternative credential" until all proposed graduation standards and diploma options are resolved. We are gratified to see that further consideration of the "alternative credential" has now apparently been postponed until the Regents consider overall graduation and diploma policy options.

We continue to promote the following:

- The underlying principles in this important discussion must be inclusive of all youth, with and without disabilities, including those who are English Language Learners, and those who are disadvantaged. All students need to have access to a high school diploma.
- Effective career and transition planning must be made available before high school for each student to identify their postsecondary goals and adequately prepare them for college or career. We need to develop each student's transition and career plans, and actively engage students in choosing a path that results in college or career.
- The current high stakes tests create an unacceptable barrier for many competent students, and alternative pathways to demonstrate competencies must be available;

Therefore, within this context, LDANYS has reviewed current proposals regarding changes to the graduation and diploma criteria as recently discussed in five position papers presented to the Board of Regents by Dr. King at their April meeting. We continue to question the value of reviewing these individual proposals in isolation, and ask how the Regents can make specific changes to the graduation and diploma standards when the larger graduation strategy has not yet been decided.

At the same time, we support any revisions that may help more youth to earn a high school diploma and transition successfully to college or career. With that said our positions on these proposals follow.

- **Global History and Geography Course and Exam Revisions:** This proposal would eliminate the current two-year Global History and Geography Course and Regent's

exam and divide the course into two separate courses with a Regents Exam administered at the end of each course.

LDANYS supports this proposal. Many students with learning disabilities struggle with high stakes tests such as the NYS Regent's Exams. Restructuring the exam so that it would cover one academic year of content will permit more students to better demonstrate their knowledge of the course content without needing to recall specific details from previous academic years.

- **Earning additional course credit through integrated Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses:** This paper discusses allowing integrated CTE courses to be available beyond what is currently allowed.

We support offering additional course credit necessary for graduation through integrated CTE courses. We have long advocated for expanded opportunities for students to pursue a career and technical education in recognition of the fact that preparation for technical careers is every bit as valid and necessary as preparation for entry to college. Not all students will, nor should they, attend and graduate from a four-year college. However, we are concerned with this proposal insofar as it does not relieve the burden of high stakes standardized tests for students with learning disabilities. Enhancing CTE is important, but reliance on high stakes Regents Exams still presents a barrier that will prevent bright and otherwise qualified students from graduating high school and pursuing a technical career.

- **High School Mathematics Course & Exam Requirements:** This paper discusses increasing the required math and science courses required for graduation to four years and adding an additional Regents Exam in Geometry or Algebra 2/Trigonometry.

Students who are preparing for careers in math and science may need four years of math and science. Other students preparing for careers in human services, arts, or business may not. LDANYS remains steadfast in our support for the development of alternative pathways to a bona fide diploma that does not rely on high stakes tests, and expands the choice to earn credits towards graduation. We do not support raising the bar for graduation for all students by adding an additional year of math or science, or any additional high stakes Regents exams.

- **Options for Students to Meet New York State High School Assessment Requirements:** This paper discusses offering students various options among Regents Examinations and Department-approved alternative examinations required to earn a high school diploma. Specifically, it recommends that the current requirement of students passing five required Regent's exams be replaced with a requirement that students a) pass an English exam, a math exam, one science exam and one other optional exam, or that b) they be required to pass one English exam, one math exam, one social studies exam, one science exam and one other.

While flexibility in meeting the Regents exam requirements may be appreciated by many, this proposal does not go nearly far enough in assuring that students with learning disabilities will have their disability appropriately accommodated by providing an alternative pathway to graduation that is not based on high stakes test.

- **Regents and Grades 3-8 Testing Program Scaling Methodology:** This paper raises the following questions: 1) should the Grades 3-8 Testing Program and the Regents Exams use the same scale range; and 2) should the Grades 3-8 Testing Program and Regents Exams change the scale points from 470-800 and 0-100, respectively, to a different score range?

In our view, these questions have enormous implications for students' capacity to learn and graduate from High School. In your consideration of these major changes to New York State graduation requirements, we strongly urge that the following issues be thoroughly considered as part of any rescaling and/or revision in Regents testing.

- Development of Alternative Authentic Assessments: There is now strong evidence that many students who are earning a Regents Diploma and do pass the Regents exams are actually not even ready for community college, and are required to take remediation classes. We need to improve the alignment between course curriculum and assessments, offer criterion-referenced exams, and provide other alternative approaches to demonstrate mastery and competencies.

Our current limited one-size-fits-all course requirements and paper-pencil test assessments leave out many students, especially those with learning disabilities, from demonstrating proficiencies, talents, and skills and mastery of the curriculum in alternative ways.

Learning preferences should be recognized, and a wider range of testing accommodations should be readily available. There should be more opportunities for component retesting, portfolio development, and product demonstrations to accurately reflect their readiness for real postsecondary career and college demands. Youth should not leave our New York high schools requiring remediation.

- Continuation of the Safety Net/RCTs: We continue to raise our concern for any safety net that is exclusively for students with disabilities. We have also raised our concerns about the continuation of the Regents Competency Tests, and look forward to their discontinuation. They have directly resulted in the creation of a separate track for many students with disabilities, and they lose significant instructional time in preparing for a test that cannot be analyzed for errors, and may be a stigma throughout their lives.

All youth, with and without disabilities, deserve to have expanded opportunities to achieve a diploma. To achieve this goal we must increase the access to the curriculum for all students, and ensure that students have the prerequisite skills they need for high school courses when they leave middle school. Teacher training is critical to assuring that all students, with and without disabilities, are provided the necessary resources, tools, guidance and instruction to succeed in school and in their future careers.

As the Board of Regents looks towards new graduation criteria and assessments, we also strongly urge that the rapidly growing role of emerging technology be recognized, accepted and incorporated into school curricula and assessments. Most any parent sees daily the impact of new technology (such as smart-phones) on their children's learning. Children use technology to access information, express themselves, communicate and demonstrate their creativity. As technology becomes more common, the distinctions between everyday technology and "assistive technology" are blurring. Schools should embrace the new emerging paradigms of learning fostered by new technology. Students should be provided greater opportunities to use technology in their learning and assessments, which will in many cases help them in overcoming unnecessary obstacles and achieving a quality education.

The Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, now in our 53rd year of advocacy, stands ready and willing to assist the Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department in developing and implementing viable policies that achieve the objectives of ensuring that all students be provided the opportunity to receive a quality education and graduate from high school with a diploma that truly represents their abilities and talents. We greatly appreciate the opportunities provided to us to present our views and look forward to together continuing our work.