

## So many 'zero' scores add up to questions about state grade 3-8 ELA tests

**Garv Stern, Rockland/Westchester Journal News** Published 2:12 p.m. ET July 6, 2018



(Photo: Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News)

It's a ritual of summer: Parents receive their children's standardized test scores for grades 3 to 8 and have to figure out New York State's [mysterious 1-4 scoring scale](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20170822/documents/ScaleScoretoPerformanceLevelELA.pdf) (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20170822/documents/ScaleScoretoPerformanceLevelELA.pdf>). Most probably figure out that a 3 means that a student was "proficient" in math or ELA, an achievement that non-educators commonly equate with passing.

Fewer parents probably know that different types of questions on the state's tests have different scoring scales that start below 1. At zero. The big zilch.

A new study by the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz looks at the curiously high percentages of students who received zeroes on certain types of ELA questions between 2013, when New York introduced tests aligned to the Common Core standards, and 2016.

The title of the study gives away the report's conclusion: "[Tests are Turning Our Kids Into Zeroes: A Focus on Failing](http://www.newpaltz.edu/media/the-benjamin-center/db_20_tests_are_turning_our_kids_into_zeroes_a_focus_on_failing.pdf)" ([http://www.newpaltz.edu/media/the-benjamin-center/db\\_20\\_tests\\_are\\_turning\\_our\\_kids\\_into\\_zeroes\\_a\\_focus\\_on\\_failing.pdf](http://www.newpaltz.edu/media/the-benjamin-center/db_20_tests_are_turning_our_kids_into_zeroes_a_focus_on_failing.pdf)).

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The authors, Fred Smith and Robin Jacobowitz, argue that so many kids got zeros on certain questions, reflecting a complete inability to cope with the material, that the tests must have been flawed. "We conclude that testing instruments that put children in a virtual stupor cannot be defended as sound testing practice, nor as a way to raise standards or serve as a foundation for high-stakes decisions..."

The study looks at two types of ELA questions: short response questions, which are scored on a 0-2 scale; and extended response questions, scored on a 0-4 scale.

A key finding is that third- and fourth-graders struggled, reflecting longstanding concerns about the appropriateness of the state tests for its youngest takers. One example: The percentage of zeros on third-grade tests rose from 11 percent in 2012 (the last year before Common Core-based tests) to 18 percent in 2013 to 22 percent in 2016. "The failure here may be in the questions themselves or the belief that it is developmentally acceptable to ask eight-year-olds to sit for extended periods of time to take these exams," the authors write.

Among New York City students, those with disabilities and those who were English language learners had substantially higher percentages of zeroes than other students.

Smith and Jacobowitz are veteran critics of the state's testing program. [Smith \(https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/11/fred-smith-on-common-core-standards-and.html\)](https://nycpublicschoolparents.blogspot.com/2015/11/fred-smith-on-common-core-standards-and.html) is a retired testing analyst for the New York City schools who has belonged to a group promoting the "opt out" movement in the city. Jacobowitz is director of education programs at the Benjamin Center and a member of the Kingston Board of Education.

In response to the report, Emily DeSantis, spokeswoman for the state Education Department, said that the Board of Regents and Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia have spent three years listening to parents' and educators' concerns and have made "significant changes to the assessments in response." This year's ELA and math tests, for instance, were reduced from three days each to two days.

In the weeks after this year's tests, though, educators continued to express concerns about the clarity and age-appropriateness of test questions. Rye Schools Superintendent Eric Byrne, in a [letter to parents \(https://www.nysape.org/uploads/5/4/8/0/54809863/ryesuperletter04-12-18.pdf\)](https://www.nysape.org/uploads/5/4/8/0/54809863/ryesuperletter04-12-18.pdf), wrote that some text passages on the 2018 ELA test were "above the appropriate comprehension level" for many students and that some questions were "poorly constructed."

"Many students were distressed and expressed frustration to teachers and administrators," he wrote.

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State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia talks to The Journal News/lohd Editorial Board. (Photo: Albert Conte/The Journal News)

The debate will surely continue as New York moves toward creating new tests that align with the state's slightly revised standards. Elia and the Board of Regents ought to be super cautious about threatening school districts where high rates of parents opt their kids out from the tests. The state's massive plan for complying with federal education law promises that districts that "persistently and substantially fail" to hit 95-percent participation will have to produce a series of reports and audits (</story/opinion/perspective/2018/04/05/schools-opt-out-standardized-tests/486891002/>).

But Elia's [new guidelines for that plan](http://www.counsel.nysed.gov/rules/indices-fulltext/2018/040) (<http://www.counsel.nysed.gov/rules/indices-fulltext/2018/040>) also note that the education commissioner may require districts to spend part of their federal Title I money — intended to offset the effects of poverty — to increase student participation on tests. This would be a mistake. Instead, earn public support by building the credibility of your tests over time. There's no shortcut.

Clarify what the value is to students and teachers. As Smith and Jacobowitz wrote, "Questions that yield so many zeroes do not return much substantive, diagnostic information about test takers."

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