

METRO

Many NYC students are bombing the writing portion of state exam

By Susan Edelman

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An alarming number of NYC students have scored three or more “zeroes” for their writing answers on the statewide English exams, a new study reveals.

On the English Language Arts exams between 2013 and 2016, in addition to multiple-choice questions, students had to read nine or 10 short stories or texts, then write responses aimed at showing their ability to think critically and cite evidence to support their answers.

A score of zero (out of 2 to 4 possible points per question) means a student wrote something “totally inaccurate,” “unintelligible,” or “indecipherable.”

“Kids were stupified by these questions,” Fred Smith, a former test analyst for the city Department of Education, told The Post.

Smith and Robin Jacobowitz, the director of educational projects at the Benjamin Center, a research unit of SUNY New Paltz, were forced to use the Freedom of Information Law to obtain the data for their report titled, “Tests are Turning our Children into Zeroes: A Focus on Failing.”

Of about 78,000 NYC third-graders, they found the number who scored zeroes on three or more written answers doubled from 10,696 (14 percent) in 2012 to 21,464 (28 percent) in 2013, when the state tests were redesigned to fit the tougher Common Core standards.

But in the next three years, city third-graders — who were taught nothing but Common Core curriculum since kindergarten — still racked up zeroes at the same high rate, the study found.

The percentage with three or more zeroes on the ELA exam was still 28 percent in 2014, 29 percent in 2015, and 27 percent in 2016, the last year data was available.

That year, the state eliminated time limits, but the effect on zeroes was slight.

“We can’t say this is just kids getting used to the Common Core curriculum. This is all they’ve ever known,” Jacobowitz said. “It did not get better over time.”

What’s worse, the racial achievement gap widened. In 2013, the number of black kids scoring three or more zeroes was 10 percent higher than white kids. In 2016, the gap grew to 18 percent. The white/Hispanic gap grew from 11 percent to 20.

In one 2014 test question released by the state, third-graders had to read a three-page story called “Science Friction,” in which four kids meet in a bedroom to do a science project on moldy bread. The passage defines the words “inhibition” and “specimens,” and includes words like “acidic,” “captions,” and “spore.”

One question asked; “Why is the setting of the story important? Use two details from the story to support your response.” Students could earn one to two points, even with spelling or grammatical errors.

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Why does the author include the cost of raising a kitten in the passage? Use two details from the passage to support your response.

In Now York sey got
in invidid to apartey
sey was aksdit Bey
kas sey was grow
to get a hon sit dol
r Bill

Score Point 0 (out of 2 points)

This response does not address any of the requirements of the prompt and is unintelligible.

In one zero-point answer that did not address any of the requirements, the student wrote: “It is importent because if you were wondering were they were. And you could be gussing.”

Citywide, 47 percent of the kids got zeroes on that question. Broken down, 67 percent of English language learners got a zero, 68 percent of kids with disabilities, 55 percent of blacks, 54 percent of Hispanics, and 31 percent of whites.

In 2016, a student wrote a zero-point answer on a passage about caring for kittens: “In Now york sey got in invidid to apartey sey was aksd it Bey kas sey was grow to get a hon sit dol r Bill.”

Overall, 30.4 percent got zeroes on that question.

“The data is showing that our kids really struggled with these tests,” Jacobowitz said. “I think we need to go deeper to understand the cause.”

Statewide, many teachers and parents have complained the tests were ill-suited to a child’s age and development: “The result was 8-and 9-year-olds sitting for hours upon hours in frustration, crying and in some cases becoming physically sick,” said Carl Korn, a spokesman for the state teachers’ union.

David Bloomfield, a Brooklyn College and CUNY Grad Center professor, said the zeroes may not only indicate bad exams, but kids without

the necessary preparation or skills.

“It’s easier to fake a multiple-choice question,” he said. “The lack of intelligible answers in the open-ended section is of particular concern. It raises the question of whether students are truly learning to become creative thinkers.”

State officials denied the exams — which cost taxpayers \$32 million in a five-year contract with testing vendor Pearson — were poorly designed.

“In general, zeroes would not imply a flaw in the test; rather, it would demonstrate students struggled to master the content being assessed,” a spokesperson said.

Another vendor, Questar, produced the exams for 2017 and 2018, given last spring, under a new, five-year \$44.7 million contract.

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The state has so far withheld data showing how many kids got zeroes on those tests, and Smith says parents should demand a full accounting before the 2019 exams.

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