

MORE TESTS WON'T SOLVE TESTING GLUT

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A confluence of events brought New York state to the brink of major change in our educational system. With the level of expediency usually reserved for major crises, health threats and Tylenol recalls, a new direction was set for standardized testing and teacher evaluations during the brief period between September and December.

Credit is partly due to the federal government's rewriting the No Child Left Behind Act, taking some of the focus off of nationwide standardized education. Additionally, New York State is backing away from over-reliance on standardized tests as evaluation tools. In the short-term, the plan postpones until after the 2018-2019 school year the use of standardized tests for teacher and student evaluations.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind, continues to mandate testing in grades 3-8, and once more in high school. Between now and 2019, while the entire structure of testing is evaluated and retooled, schools and students will have a "transition period," during which standardized tests will still be given. The federal government, during the three-year transition period, is mandating that tests (that will not be used for any specifically stated purpose) will continue.

A recent study by the SUNY New Paltz Benjamin Center found that in the 2014-15 school year, on average, 1,110 minutes were dedicated to the New York state standardized testing process (in reading and math) for students in grades 3-6, and 1,134 minutes were dedicated to this process for students in grades 7-8. This is more than double the amount of time allotted by the Legislature for these tests, and may violate the state's required 180 days of instruction, meaning our children are not getting the mandated classroom teaching time. And for three more years, tests will be given anyway, absent any legitimate purpose.

This plan reminds me of the old joke about the man who swam halfway across the ocean, got tired, and turned around and swam back.

How was it lost in this entire equation that the single greatest problem with these tests is the excessive number of standardized tests our children are required to take, and the education-interrupting time it takes to complete them?

We cannot and should not go halfway in reforming New York's standardized testing regimen. We have three years to fit these standards into yet another new system of testing. We need to remember that the time our children spend learning is the No. 1 priority of our educational system. We must use this window of time to ensure that the requirements are met while the number of tests, and days spent taking them, are reduced.

The federal government should change the testing requirements during the transition period. The testing may be used as a strategy for schools that are continuously struggling, but they should be lifted for those that are already producing excellent results. This way we start to lift the unnecessary mandates on programs that are already working well, and focus our attention where needed.

Additionally, the number and length of the tests should be reduced. And pending such action, New York state should immediately request a waiver from the federal mandate for testing through 2019 that accomplishes this goal. We owe it to our students to bring them all the way across the educational ocean.

Sen. George Latimer, D-Westchester, is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Education Committee.

