



GRADING EDUCATION:

Making New York's Schools More Accountable

March 2007

Accountability • Innovation • Choice

Phone: (518) 383-2598 • Fax: (518) 383-2841 • 4 Chelsea Park, 2nd Floor, Clifton Park, NY 12065 • info@nyfera.org • www.nyfera.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Governor Eliot Spitzer outlined a sweeping vision for reforming education in New York State in an historic speech at Chancellor's Hall in the State Education Building in Albany on January 26, 2007.

While committing to push through a record increase in state funding for New York's public schools, Governor Spitzer promised a renewed focus on reform and accountability. In his words:

[F]or New York to become the economic engine it once was, to create jobs, opportunity and prosperity, we must change the way we educate our children....My vision for education reform is built on a single premise: to be effective, new funding must be tied to a comprehensive agenda of reform and accountability....[T]here will be no more excuses for failure. The debate will no longer be about money, but about performance; the goal will no longer be adequacy but excellence; and the timetable will no longer be tomorrow but today.

The Governor also has pledged to raise the cap on public charter schools from 100 to 250 schools, create a state tax deduction of \$1,000 for private tuition expenses, and expand state support to nonpublic schools – fulfilling campaign pledges.

The Governor's vision for higher accountability is on target, but will require a dramatic restructuring in the state's educational accountability system to work.

For more than a generation, the New York State Board of Regents and a series of State Education Commissioners have built an extensive statewide accountability system, centered on subject-by-subject state learning standards, an extensive system of assessments, public reporting, and a graduated system of consequences for poorly performing schools. This effort has not been without much controversy, from some affluent suburban parents who oppose the basic notion of performance testing, to parents whose kids are trapped in failing inner-city schools and who fear that higher standards will keep their children from graduating on time, to others who fear the state is not moving quickly enough to raise expectations and sanction schools that do not measure up.

The Board of Regents and the Education Commissioner deserve much credit for not buckling to those who would dismantle their whole accountability effort.

Yet, the time for doing even more and doing it even better has arrived. Governor Spitzer is right to demand much higher accountability given the dramatically higher level of resources he will be providing to our public schools.

The problem right now is the current system simply is not designed or equipped to deliver the level of accountability that Governor Spitzer has called for. This report outlines the need to consider the following specific reforms:

1. Measuring the Right Stuff and Measuring It Well: The State needs to hold schools accountable for the gains that they make with students over time, rather than the existing “status” or snapshot approach currently used. The current approach compares each year students in a single grade, even though the demographics of each grade, from year to year, can change dramatically, especially in urban schools. Measuring gains or growth in student achievement of same-student cohorts is the only reliable way to measure progress and thus hold schools accountable.
2. Making Accountability Transparent and Understandable: The current approach of sorting students into four levels (Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4) is incomprehensible and counter-intuitive for much of the public, more accustomed to letter grades, a numeric 0-100 grading system, or at least an approach in which becoming #1 is considered the highest aspiration. On balance, the letter-grade approach for labeling schools, already used in Florida statewide and now being started in New York City, is a better approach. A meaningful accountability system must be understandable to the public at large in order to work
3. Fairer and More Accurate Labeling: Presently, because the measurement of academic performance is based on snapshots of different groups of students each year, rather than tracking the same students over time, good schools are mislabeled as bad schools and *vice versa*. Even when the state implements a growth model, mislabeling will still occur if the state and federal government do not change the subgroup “triggers” for failing to meet yearly progress targets. Presently, an individual school can be labeled a “school in need of improvement” if it misses the mark in any of more than 50 separate subpopulations (reflecting the number of assessments, subjects, racial, economic, and academic groupings). Labeling a school that misses virtually all of its markers the same as a school that misses one or two simply makes no sense and substantially undermines the overall system’s credibility.
4. Eliminating Conflicts of Interest: The existing approach of allowing district schools to grade their own exams presents unavoidable conflicts of interest. The state should prohibit districts from scoring their own exams, and seriously consider contracting out the scoring of non-multiple choice questions.
5. Ensuring Timely Reporting: Last year, the State Education Department released the results of state exams in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 for school year 2005-06 the following school year in September and October. This delay was longer than in any other state last year, and is inexcusable. After much criticism, the Department has proposed releasing results in May and June of the same school year in which assessments are administered. The Department’s effort to shrink the turnaround time should be encouraged, and the Department should be granted whatever resources needed to make this happen.
6. Providing Real Incentives and Real Consequences: Ultimately, the reporting of state test results does not advance accountability unless real consequences result from strong or weak performance. Once the state’s assessment and reporting systems are restructured,

schools that do well should receive additional funding as an incentive and schools that do poorly should face serious consequences, which could include loss of funding, expanded choice options for parents, and/or, as the Governor has proposed, dismissal of the responsible school superintendent, school board, or principal.

As New York moves towards higher accountability, State Legislators and other elected officials should be mindful that they simply do not have the expertise to decide technical questions of vertical integration of state assessments, the proper type of growth model to be used to measure advances in student achievement, or what performance benchmarks for schools are appropriately high. The New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department need to be vested with the responsibility and resources to develop the state's new accountability system within broad parameters and timeframes agreed upon by the Governor and the State Legislature.

Governor Spitzer is right to link additional resources to additional accountability. The state has much work ahead to make this vision a practical reality.