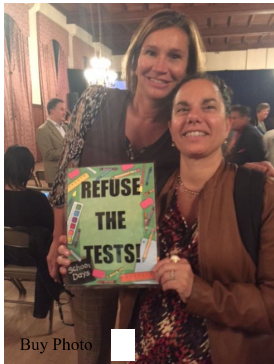


# Editorial: Finally, testing obsession is under review

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*State and federal officials are suddenly reconsidering the role of "high stakes" testing in our schools*



(Photo: Swapna Venugopal/The Journal News)

At the first public meeting of Gov. Cuomo's Common Core Task Force on Thursday, a Bronx principal named Jamaal Bowman displayed a picture of his young daughter on a big screen and said he would not send her to a public school in New York because of our "test-and-punish culture." The task force members, including state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, sat impassively at the College of New Rochelle as Bowman, an invited speaker, decried an overemphasis on standardized testing at the expense of innovation, creativity and richer methods of measuring student achievement.

Nothing he said was new or surprising. Most of the task force members have heard this message repeatedly for years. In fact, task force chair Richard Parsons headed a similar group for Cuomo in 2013 that heard educators and parents pick apart the state's "reform" agenda, in particular New York's obsession with using annual tests to label schools and teachers failures.

This time, though, are policymakers actually listening? A welcome reassessment of testing-worship seems to be underway. It's too early to know where things may go, but there's something in the air.

Consider:

- Cuomo's task force is charged with reviewing New York's testing program and its close ties to the Common Core standards by year's end.
- Cuomo just named Bedford Superintendent Jere Hochman his deputy for education. Hochman has sharply criticized New York's focus on "high-stakes" testing and has called for the state's widely disliked teacher evaluation system, tied to student test scores, to be torn up and replaced.
- Longtime Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch, who has overseen the state's test-centric "reform" agenda, will leave the board when her term is up in March.
- The state Education Department is also reviewing individual Common Core standards — but not the role of the Core itself.
- The Board of Regents plans a serious review of the teacher evaluation system, which Cuomo and legislators have essentially taken control of in recent years.
- Congress is trying —struggling, really — to rewrite the federal No Child Left Behind law to reduce the federal role in education while maintaining accountability measures for school systems.

## Obama takes blame

This testing-reassessment moment gained new strength last weekend when President Obama announced plans to help states reduce testing. He actually accepted blame for nurturing the testing culture through his Race To The Top Program. The administration had ratcheted up the national focus on testing by dangling federal grants to states that would, among other things, tie teacher evaluations to student test scores.

Suddenly, Obama and his outgoing Education Secretary Arne Duncan are admitting that there is a lack of "clarity of purpose" when it comes to testing. Well, yes.

Why this late-in-the-game change of direction for the Obama administration? Maybe he is trying to create a smoother path on education policy for would-be Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, who immediately supported Obama's testing plan. Clinton appears to prefer avoiding schools talk, partly out of deference to teachers unions but also because it's hard to please anyone these days when it comes to education.

It's debatable how much Obama's new posture will help. But he knowingly gave a shot in the arm to parents, teachers and others who are fed up with federal and state prescriptions for saving our supposedly failing schools.

Have no doubt that New York's opt-out movement forced Cuomo, legislators, the Regents and newcomer Elia to reconsider testing and related policies. Tisch and Elia may condemn opting out as counterproductive, but when 1 in 5 bubble sheets are not filled out, which is what happened in New York last spring, you've got a big problem on your hands.

## What may come

With so many reviews going on in New York, it's anyone's guess who will recommend what and how New York's testing system might be revised.

Real change in New York may depend on whether Cuomo is finally ready to relent on his signature teacher evaluation system, which is inextricably linked to state tests and the Common Core. Educators have railed against the system for being inaccurate, unfair and time-consuming while yielding little information for improving instruction. The system relies on students' standardized test scores to grade some teachers and a hodgepodge of other student scores to assess the majority of teachers.

The whole evaluation system needs to be redesigned by experts (not legislators). Hochman told our editorial board as much over the summer, insisting that the current evaluation system could not be repaired. And now he's Cuomo's education guy. Why would Cuomo have hired Hochman if he wasn't ready to accept change — even if it will have to be couched as a political win?

At Thursday's meeting (</story/news/education/2015/10/29/panel-questions-effectiveness-common-core-standards/74843680/>), parents and teachers in the audience applauded and sometimes yelled out when speakers, like Ossining parent activist Lisa Rudley, assailed not only New York's testing program, but the Common Core itself.

The last speaker, Robert Horan, superintendent of the Schodack School District outside Albany, offered a moderate, "aw shucks" voice, explained that his teachers were doing fine with the Common Core and were not obsessed with test scores. But he conceded that he's concerned about relying on one type of accountability — testing — instead of allowing students to show that they can apply what they've learned.

"I'm a high test-anxiety person every since I went to school," Horan said. "I could study study, study, I'm not going to do very well."

That's just what parents, whose kids are stressed by high-stakes tests, and teachers, whose evaluations hinge on such tests results, have been saying.

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