



Principals' Weekly

June 19, 2012

Chancellor's Memo



Dear Colleagues,

At the Principal Conference earlier this month, more than 1,200 educators gathered to engage in conversations about how we are moving forward to strengthen instruction and prepare students for college and careers. During the conference, we also had an opportunity to discuss the changes being made to the New York State tests, beginning in 2012-13. As my team made clear at the conference, I am pleased that the State is taking steps to strengthen the quality of its testing program, and I encourage you to spend time with your teachers this summer and fall processing these changes and reflecting on the kind of instruction and support students will need to meet these new expectations.

To support educators' understanding of changes being made to the state tests, the New York State Education Department (SED) last week released [examples](#) of next year's Common Core-aligned grades 3-8 math and ELA test questions.

These questions ask students to solve multi-step problems, read more challenging texts, and write more complex arguments. While these are not meant to mirror full-length assessments, they can provide us with a helpful window into the type of work students will be asked to do next spring and what instruction will need to look like in order for students to meet these higher expectations.

One example is an 8th grade nonfiction text excerpted from Helen Keller's autobiography. [Compared to a passage from a 2009-10 State test at the same grade level](#), the language in this text is significantly more sophisticated, employing complex metaphorical and figurative phrases with minimum context, and the questions associated with the passage require students to understand deeply and pull evidence from the text.

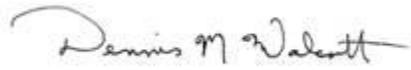
The key to solving these more rigorous problems is not more effective test prep but more effective instruction. As Shael said at the Principal Conference, the purpose of our schools is not to teach our students to be good at taking tests. The purpose is to teach our students to be independent learners, to be resilient when they fail, to be able to apply what they learn to real-world problems, to be able to read and really understand an issue so they can write, talk, and argue about it. When we do a good job supporting our students to refine those skills, they do well on tests.

So as you approach the next school year, I encourage you to help your teachers and families understand that tests are a measure of student learning, not the goal of student learning. Time management and other test-taking strategies that are currently being taught are skills that have application beyond tests; the broader relevance of these skills should be emphasized, and these strategies should be embedded in a rich curriculum, not done as isolated test prep.

For more information on the instructional shifts and changing assessments, videos and session materials from the conference are now [posted](#) on the recently redesigned [Common Core Library](#), along with [math guidance](#) and other [new instructional resources](#). My team and I will continue to communicate the changes in assessments as information becomes available, and I encourage you to share this information with your students' families. For more on the changes in the tests, please see this [FAQ](#).

Best wishes as you wrap up the year with your school community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dennis M. Walcott". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D' and a stylized 'W'.

Dennis M. Walcott
Chancellor