



January 29, 2010

Dear Colleagues,

Since 2007, when our accountability system was introduced, student achievement has increased significantly. One of the reasons for these gains is the hard work principals and teachers have taken on to thoughtfully integrate the use of data into their instructional planning and practice. But our accountability tools aren't perfect. Each year, we have made adjustments in response to feedback from principals and teachers, which helped our tools better capture schools' contributions to student learning.

When I took on leadership of our school accountability work this summer, Chancellor Klein asked me to talk with educators in our schools to identify ways to further strengthen our accountability system. I'm writing to share with you some of what I learned, and to invite you to participate in an ongoing conversation about strengthening the way we measure schools and support teacher and student learning.

BUILDING RICHER ASSESSMENTS

The most powerful accountability lies in the tasks we ask students to do. As a high school teacher, I learned that students who are asked to defend arguments, solve complex problems, perform real experiments, and do other meaningful work in the classroom are better positioned to graduate ready to perform the tasks required by college and the workplace.

To prepare our students for success after high school, we need to take every opportunity to ask students to perform higher order tasks. One important opportunity is the state tests New York students take each year. Those exams set the bar for what students are expected to know and be able to do in every grade -- defining a common set of expectations for students across the state.

Last fall, New York joined 48 other states in signing on to the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#), an effort to define new, high learning standards and ultimately to design a new kind of assessment. We support New York State's commitment, made explicit in the [Race to the Top plan](#), to adopt higher learning standards and more rigorous assessments.

This isn't about more tests. As President Obama [said](#) this past November, "It's about being smarter about our assessments. It's about measuring not only whether our kids can master the basics, but whether they can solve challenging tasks, do they have the skills like critical thinking and teamwork and entrepreneurship." In support of this goal, President Obama has dedicated \$350 million in stimulus funds to support development of new assessments by groups of states.

Moving from our current system to a set of richer assessments will take several years. While much of the work will happen at the state and national levels, here in New York City, some of our schools are already teaching and assessing higher order skills (for examples of performance tasks used in other districts and countries, click [here](#) and [here](#)). For next year, working with the Gates Foundation and others, we will introduce new opportunities to design and pilot this kind of performance task as part of the Periodic Assessment program. The innovation and experience present in our schools position New York City to be a national model in this area; strengthening the assessments we use will be a clear priority moving forward.

INCREASING RIGOR AND STABILITY OF EVALUATION

In the short term, we will adjust our metrics to be more stable and precise. In the long term, we will broaden the set of performance data we use to evaluate schools.

Progress Reports

For the Progress Reports that come out this fall, we are proposing a number of changes.

- Highlight the progress of different groups of special education students.
- For elementary and middle schools, adopt a [growth percentile model](#) for calculating student progress. Under this model, we will compare each student's growth to that of other students who started at the same level, controlling for the starting score of each student. This model, which is similar to one already in use in Colorado and which New York State is considering implementing for the annual State Report Cards, is less influenced by changes in the state tests and takes into account the fact that students learn at different paces.

- We are committed to defining targets in advance when possible. This year, New York State has been clear that the Grade 3-8 English Language Arts and Math tests will be more difficult than in the past. Because of these changes in test timing, content, and difficulty, it's not possible to define cut scores required to earn each Progress Report grade in advance. So, this year for elementary and middle school Progress Reports, we are proposing to set the distribution of grades, as we did in the first year -- giving 25% of schools As, 30% Bs, 30% Cs, 10% Ds, and 5% Fs.
- For high schools, raise the bar by slightly increasing the minimum score required to earn each grade in line with the pattern of growth we've seen over the past three years.
- Publish a summary of each school's Progress Report designed specifically for families in order to make sure the progress report is an accessible tool for families as they partner with schools in supporting their students' growth.

To review a detailed description of proposed changes to the elementary and middle school Progress Reports, click [here](#); for high school, click [here](#); a list of feedback sessions is [here](#).

Over the next few years, we will work with you to broaden the set of information we use to evaluate schools. For example, next year, we will begin exploring new metrics for the elementary and middle school Progress Reports that will come out in fall 2011 that measure how well students perform in their classes, similar to the credit accumulation measures currently in place for high schools. At the high school level, we will begin piloting college readiness metrics, measuring how well each school prepares its students for postsecondary success.

As you know, Progress Reports are one of many ways we measure our schools and we are working to strengthen other indicators and controls for the data we use to measure performance.

- Quality Reviews: This year's Quality Review [rubric](#) was revised to increase the focus on instruction, teacher effectiveness, and how well each principal uses resources to create meaningful learning experiences.
- School Survey: This year's School Survey, which begins next month, will have an increased focus on two critical indicators of school quality: how well schools create opportunities for teacher collaboration and how well schools prepare students for postsecondary success.
- Credits: We are clarifying practices for awarding course credit. To help you ensure students have demonstrated mastery of content and skills before receiving course credit, you can read answers to [frequently asked questions](#) about the state's regulations on awarding high school credit. You can also access new [guidelines](#) from Deputy Chancellor Santiago Taveras that clarify practices on topics including credit recovery, annualized and semester-based programming, credit-by-examination, and remedial courses. For more information, you can participate in a [webinar](#) or contact credit@schools.nyc.gov.
- Regents Scoring: Beginning this summer, we will randomly audit Regents scoring at 10% of high schools.

BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH TEACHER TEAMS

The third theme that emerged from my conversations with educators is that powerful learning happens for both teachers and students when teachers hold themselves and each other accountable for their students' learning, and are empowered to make the decisions that impact their work with students.

As a principal, I learned that one of the strongest mechanisms for adult learning is team work. In the 2007-08 school year, each school created an inquiry team. Since then, as a result of intensive efforts by network teams, central staff, and principals, more teachers have formed teams, and the number of educators engaged in this work has grown dramatically, from 10,235 in December 2008 to 43,154, or 57% of teachers in the city.

Student data is valuable when teachers use it to support their work with students. Beginning next school year, we will provide a tool that principals and teachers can use to enter and share the data they gather in the classroom, and combine it with the other data they have about their students in ARIS.

Over the next few months, I encourage you to share your reactions to these adjustments through the [feedback sessions](#) or by sending me an e-mail at ssurans@schools.nyc.gov. My team takes feedback seriously--for example, we heard loud and clear that pulling teachers out of school for so long to score exams is disruptive to classroom work. To address this, we cut back the time teachers will spend on scoring this year by a third.

Thank you for the hard work you do each day to create learning opportunities for teachers and students. I am confident that these adjustments to the accountability tools will support and strengthen that work.

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