

Dr. John B. King, State Education Commissioner
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12234

May 22, 2012

Dear Dr. King:

I write to you in my capacity as Chairperson on behalf of the School Leadership Team of Purvis J. Behan PS 11 in Brooklyn NY. Our SLT consists of a cohesive, involved and diverse set of administrators, teachers and parents. We have worked collectively to make decisions through consensus that are in the best interests of all children at PS 11. We are deeply concerned by the direction of public education and write to voice our concern. In particular, we believe that the recent changes in the NYS ELA and Math tests, together with the increased importance placed by the State and NYC on the results of these tests is not in the best interests of our students.

Over the past several years we have seen our teachers and administration struggle with the Department of Education mandates which run counter to many of our goals. We pride ourselves on having an extremely robust visual arts program, music, physical education and science cluster program. However, the state's emphasis on testing puts extreme pressure on the administration and teachers to focus on test prep rather than our shared goals of growing well rounded, critical thinkers.

We are concerned about the role of state standardized testing in New York public education. Over the past several years, the amount of time and resources dedicated to state testing has significantly increased, and the stakes of those tests have been heightened to unprecedented levels, at the expense of our children's education and well-being. Our main concerns are the following:

1. Three days of Math and three days of ELA testing are too many for students in grades 3 to 5.
2. Grade-promotion based on a single Test score is educationally unsound and places too much pressure on young children, thereby hindering their ability to learn.
3. The increasing use of test results to evaluate teacher performance, school performance and student progress is not a fair or accurate method of assessment of either performance or progress.
4. The over-reliance on Math and ELA test results minimizes and discounts the impact that arts, music and other cluster programs have on student learning.
5. Both the 2012 Math and ELA exams contained errors.
6. The 2012 Math and ELA exams should be released to the public in a timely manner.
7. Field test questions were embedded in the regular Math and ELA exams. Why then are schools mandated to administer a separate Field Test during the week of June 5-8?
8. The increased emphasis on testing disempowers principals, teachers, students and parents from participating and making decisions critical to student education.

The recently passed teacher evaluation system will further increase these stakes. With 20% of the evaluation based on value-added measures of state standardized tests, plus another 20% based on

either more assessments or the state tests again, there is entirely too much emphasis on testing. Furthermore, we object to the provision that a teacher will be rated “ineffective” if the state-approved formulas deem there is little growth or sub-par achievement on these tests or assessments – even if the rest of the evaluation is outstanding. This means that it will not matter if a teacher’s principal, peers, students, and class parents, as well as independent evaluators, give this teacher the highest marks possible. The test and assessment scores – which we know can be unreliable and inaccurate, as the deeply flawed NYC Teacher Data Reports demonstrated – will override these other measures. We fear one outcome will be excellent teachers leaving the profession and promising ones avoiding it; and we fear that those who stay will feel even more compelled to teach to the test to the detriment of our children’s education.

We urge you to rethink your support of the new teacher evaluation system, taking into account a groundswell of parent outrage. The role of testing and assessment should decrease in our schools, not increase. Test scores should not override the ratings and judgments of principals, other educators, and parents.

Further we are surprised to see that your recently formed commission on education reform includes no principals or teachers. These individuals are the ones who spend the most time with our children. They are the ones who have the first-hand knowledge of the problems that we are facing in the public education system. Excluding principals and teachers from your commission adds to the perception that their experience and opinion is not valued.

We respectfully ask you to take action on our concerns; action that will serve the best interests of public school education.

Sincerely,

Amitabha Bose
SLT Chairperson & Parent
Purvis J. Behan PS 11 School
419 Waverly Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11238

cc:

Regents Chancellor Tisch
Chancellor Walcott
Speaker Silver
Senator Skelos
Council Speaker Christine Quinn