Dear Colleagues:

In August, scores from the 2015 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) and Math Tests were released. Overall, students across the state made slight progress, thanks in large part to the efforts of you and your colleagues. [INSERT DISTRICT SPECIFIC INFORMATION]

* **SED has been trying to scare parents and teachers into believing that if large numbers of students opt out, school and teacher ratings will suffer. But despite some 240,000 opt outs in 2015, scores went up. This exposes SED’s scare tactic for what it is.**

However, as you are already aware, many students did not participate in the 2015 tests. As educators, we all have a responsibility to ensure that the greatest possible number of eligible students take the state assessments. This school year, our district plans to work with our school community to communicate the value and importance of the exams in order to encourage participation in the 2016 tests. I invite you to take part in these conversations.

* **No, as EDUCATORS we have a responsibility see to it that children get the quality education they deserve and not allow mindless high-stakes testing to destroy the joy of learning.**

While this has been a period of transition for all of us here in [DISTRICT], tests have always served an important role in educating our students. The annual tests are just one of many indicators of performance for students and educators, but they do provide an objective measurement of progress. They indicate how our students are performing in the classroom and where they need additional support. Without widespread participation in tests, we can’t accurately identify achievement gaps or make sure that all students receive the support they need to be successful. That is why it is crucial that we all work together to help parents and students understand why we test and encourage them to participate in this year’s annual exams.

* **Poorly designed, age-inappropriate tests designed by unqualified employees of for-profit publishing companies with no classroom teaching experience do not provide “an objective measurement” of anything. The notion that prior to administering these high-stakes tests we were unaware of achievement gaps and were incapable of giving students the support they needed is patently absurd.**

Both the State and our district are committed to improving our testing program so that the annual assessments are as short as possible, while still providing valuable feedback to teachers and parents about student progress. State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia has prioritized improving New York’s testing program since coming on board this summer. In July, the commissioner announced a contract with a new test company, Questar Assessment. Under the new contract, nearly double the number of New York State teachers will be involved in developing future assessments. The new test vendor will also provide computer-based testing platforms that will eventually help reduce the need for stand-alone field tests and make test results available sooner.

* **Since no NYS teachers were really involved in “developing” the previous assessments, the claim that we’re doubling that number is a meaningless statement.**

The State has also taken steps to improve the 2016 tests. The ELA and math tests for all grades will be shorter. There will be fewer reading and writing passages on the ELA and a smaller number of multiple choice questions on the math.

* **The length of the tests was a problem, but not the main problem. As long as student progress is measured by a single, flawed high-stakes test and as long as teachers are evaluated on the basis of student performance on these tests, nothing is fixed. The amount of instruction time squandered on preparing for the tests will continue to be excessive.**

In addition to working on improving the tests, the State is in the process of reviewing the current learning standards. An online survey has been launched, which allows respondents to provide feedback on any of the State’s standards for prekindergarten through grade 12. The survey is available at <http://www.nysed.gov/aimhighny>. Feedback from the survey will help inform any changes and adjustments to the standards. Therefore, educator input is critical to this effort. Please take the time to respond to the survey. You have until Monday, November 30, to do so.

* **Many educators will undoubtedly provide input, but if past experience is any guide, that input will be entirely ignored. We hope that real improvements will result, but it’s obvious to all that the Task Force appointed by the governor to receive our input is stacked with Ed Reform proponents who were hand-picked to deliver the recommendations the governor wants. But the governor and his minions have not been able to ignore are 240,000 opt outs last spring!**

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to your school administrators.

Thank you for your continued service to our students. I look forward to seeing the wonderful teaching and learning that will happen in our classrooms this year.

Together for students,

Superintendent