

May 20, 2013

Rhode Island Board of Education
255 Westminster Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Board Members:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we are writing to urge you to rescind the Rhode Island Board of Regents regulation that conditions receipt of a high school diploma on passing a "high stakes test." As a result of that high-stakes test requirement, 40% of the Class of 2014 -- more than 4,000 students -- are at risk of not graduating next year. Immediate action is critical in order to address the uncertainty and anxiety facing these students and their families.

Before the fate of these students is sealed, we wanted to make sure you were aware of the impact of high stakes testing, and urge you to find more effective strategies for education reform. Your newly constituted Board has not had the opportunity to consider the full consequences of this previously adopted mandate but, in light of its potentially devastating impact, we believe it is incumbent upon you to do so.

Our organizations may have different reasons for opposing use of the NECAP test for "high stakes" purposes, but we are united in our belief that implementation of this mandate is poor public policy and will unfairly harm many students who deserve a diploma. A synopsis with some of our concerns is attached. As that summary notes, there are other research-proven strategies to improve student outcomes that should be the focus of educational reform efforts. We also take issue with the notion that retests and "alternative" testing will adequately address this problem. In addition, last-minute attempts at remediation by school districts are "too little, too late." We strongly urge you to reexamine this issue at the earliest possible opportunity before too much more damage is done to our students and our educational system.

Sincerely,

Joanne Quinn
THE AUTISM PROJECT

Aimee Mitchell
CHILDREN'S POLICY COALITION

Simon Moore
COLLEGE VISIONS

Fred Ordonez
DIRECT ACTION FOR RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

Julian Rodriguez-Drix
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LEAGUE OF RHODE ISLAND

Heiny Maldonado
FUERZA LABORAL

Maggi Rogers
GEORGE WILEY CENTER

The Rev. Sammy Vaughn
MINISTERS ALLIANCE OF RHODE ISLAND

Jim Vincent
NAACP, PROVIDENCE CHAPTER

Cathy Ciano
PARENT SUPPORT NETWORK OF RHODE ISLAND

Aaron Regunberg
PROVIDENCE STUDENT UNION

Chanravy Proeung
PROVIDENCE YOUTH STUDENT MOVEMENT

Steven Brown
RHODE ISLAND ACLU

Lisa Ranglin
RHODE ISLAND BLACK BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

Anne Mulready
RHODE ISLAND DISABILITY LAW CENTER

Veronika Kot
RHODE ISLAND LEGAL SERVICES

Julie Motta
RHODE ISLAND LEP/ELL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Lisa Schaffran
RHODE ISLAND PARENT INFORMATION NETWORK

Nancy Cloud
RHODE ISLAND TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Kia Clarke
RHODE ISLAND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

Brother Michael Reis
TIDES FAMILY SERVICES

Dennis B. Langley
URBAN LEAGUE OF RHODE ISLAND

Vera Wilson
URBAN LEAGUE GUILD

Karen Feldman
YOUNG VOICES

Adeola Ordeola
YOUTH IN ACTION

RESCIND THE NECAP HIGH STAKES TESTING REQUIREMENT, AND CONSIDER MORE APPROPRIATE RESEARCH-DRIVEN STRATEGIES INSTEAD

State-wide assessments in Rhode Island

Our current state-wide assessment system, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), was adopted in compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB required a single accountability system for every school and district, so that the state could identify underperforming schools and target them for specific improvement. As part of this accountability system, NECAP assessments in reading, writing and mathematics were introduced in Rhode Island high schools in 2007. The NECAP creators explicitly noted that the NECAP assessments were not to be used for making decisions about graduation.

In 2011, the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education proposed to change its regulation on high school graduation, to make a passing score on 11th grade NECAP tests a condition of graduation for the Class of 2012. In response to overwhelming public criticism from families, educators and advocates, the Board deferred implementation of this “high-stakes” testing requirement until 2014.

In 2012, the state sought and received a waiver from the U.S Department of Education of the NCLB accountability goals it set for Rhode Island schools. The waiver granted the state six additional years to reduce the lack of proficiency on state assessments by half. Notwithstanding the state’s recognition that education reform required more time for schools, the state continued to hold students accountable to the high-stakes testing requirement.

The disproportionate impact of Rhode Island high school NECAP scores

From the start, the 11th grade NECAP math test has posed a challenge for a significant number of high school students. The forty percent of this year’s juniors who are at risk of not graduating scored substantially below proficient in math. In past years, those numbers have varied somewhat, but remained high (e.g., 44% in 2011 and 38% in 2010). Those at-risk populations intended to be helped by these tests continue to fare poorly (90% of current limited English proficiency students due to testing them in English, a language they are in the process of learning, 83% of students with disabilities, and 58% of economically disadvantaged students are at risk of not graduating in 2014). Not surprisingly the urban core communities have a high percentage of students at risk of not graduating (e.g., 58% in Providence, 54% in Woonsocket). But students in some suburban communities also face a significant risk of not graduating due to their 11th grade math scores (e.g., 39% in Cranston, 36% in Warwick and 46% in Johnston).

Opportunities to retake NECAP, pursue appeals or seek waivers do not provide timely or adequate solutions

The Board of Regents high school graduation regulations offer students some opportunities to retake the NECAP, pursue a local appeal process, or seek a waiver. With NECAP retake test results not available until February of students’ senior year, these opportunities will come too late for those students seeking admission to post-secondary education and/or applying for financial aid. Moreover, the standards by which appeals or waivers can be granted are very

uncertain. Waivers can only be granted “in those rare cases in which [the NECAP] is not a valid means of determining the proficiency of individual students.” The regulations caution that students who appeal inadequate school support to prepare for NECAP should not presume that the appeal will result in the awarding of a diploma.

Research indicates that high stakes tests do not improve educational outcomes

Although Rhode Island is embracing high-stakes tests, experts who have studied the issue counsel against the use of high-stakes exams. A 2011 study by the National Academy of Sciences concluded there was little evidence that such tests improved learning and noted that the tests instead reduced graduation rates and competed for resources with more effective, proven strategies.

The negative impact of high stakes testing is well-known: it narrows the breadth and depth of instruction; disproportionately harms students with disabilities and English language learners; creates a climate of anxiety and fear; incentivizes cheating among school personnel; and raises drop-out rates for low-income students.

Research-proven strategies to improve student outcomes should be the focus of educational reform efforts

Rather than making the Class of 2014 (and current students in subsequent classes) pay the price for the inequities in our education system, Rhode Island should pursue meaningful education reform. In *For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence* (February 2013), a distinguished Commission appointed by Congress lays out a blueprint for such change: the proven strategy of early childhood education for each at-risk child; increased teacher training and support for the greater demands of a 21st century education and a more diverse student body; funding equity based on student need; coordinated policies to ameliorate the negative but surmountable impacts of poverty, disability, linguistic isolation and other barriers on education; and a clear accountability system that shares responsibility for improvement and consequences for failure to implement it among those with actual power and authority to make it happen.

The risks of a high stakes test are extremely high for individual students. Without a high school diploma, will this forty percent of the Class of 2014 be employable? Will they find alternate pathways to higher education? Will they be self-supporting or dependent? For all of these reasons, we urge you to promptly halt the use of NECAP or any other test as a high stakes test and to focus instead on the strategies that work to achieve Education Equity and Excellence for Each and Every Child.