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April 19, 2012

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

Dear Commissioner King:

I urge you to carefully review this year's state ELA exams. I have been principal for 13 years and have read the tests each year. Although there are always issues with selected questions, generally it is only one or two per test that the assistant principals and I can't quite agree on. I am genuinely shocked that with the increased importance of state testing, there are so many more flawed questions than ever before. I wish I could go into detail here, but it violates test security for me to discuss the content of the tests or the questions, which is why I feel so strongly that it is important that you see these tests for yourselves.

In particular, I would recommend that you carefully read through day one of the fifth grade ELA. The reading passages themselves are not too challenging—surprising since the passages in the 4th grade test were not particularly easy and the Common Core Standards call for more rigor. However, the questions were nothing short of ridiculous. Several of them were ambiguous and seemed designed only to trick children (and adults...the answers were not clear to many of us). Overall, the questions did not serve to determine whether or not children had good reading comprehension skills. You could have excellent comprehension skills and miss many questions. Although to me the fifth grade was the most outrageous of the elementary school exams, there were problems with the other exams too. It is puzzling to me that in 2012 in New York State, a testing company that won the lucrative contract to develop these exams did not think it was important, on day one (the most heavily weighted day) of the 4th grade exam, to include any selections that were in urban settings. Children who spend a lot of time outdoors and in rural or suburban settings definitely will find "friendlier" texts, both fiction and nonfiction. Take a look so you can see what I mean. Fortunately, day two is better in this regard.

I would also urge you to actually do the listening section of grade 3 (first part of day 2). Have someone read aloud this incredibly thin, brief passage two times as required and then see if you can answer the questions, including the short and extended responses, without looking at the text (since kids are not permitted to look at this text). The questions are not really ones that you can answer well from the text, even if it is sitting in front of you and you can refer back.

Because I am an elementary school principal, I do not see the middle school exams. However, a middle school principal from outside of New York City wrote this to me after day one: "As I reviewed the exams for the sixth through eighth grade yesterday, I was appalled. I felt that sixth grade was the most difficult of the three exams, followed by eighth, with the most fair exam being the seventh grade. There were so many questions that contained answer choices where the ELA teachers could not decide which answer would be 'best'. I felt terrible for my children, especially for my English Language Learners and my special education students." And 8th graders, who really can't be controlled in terms of not talking about the test, are having a field day on the internet mocking what appears to be one of the most ridiculous selections ever included on a test!

These exams are so deeply flawed, and now so incredibly high stakes. The idea that teachers may lose their jobs and schools (at least in New York City) may be closed based on how children do on these problematic exams is incredibly upsetting and demoralizing to educators. The fact that the state has decided that these exams can never be made public just exacerbates the problem, as the general public will never know how silly the exams are. And, to use an "added value" measure on tests that are not consistently more difficult from year to year is another serious problem.

I understand that you are very busy, but given the importance of the state tests at this time, it is absolutely critical that you analyze them carefully. If you agree with my assessment, I hope that you will consider recommending to the State Legislature that given the flaws in the tests, we are not yet ready to use them for high stakes decision making. I also hope you will consider making these exams public after the test scoring is completed. It is ironic that teachers' individual ratings are made public while the actual test that determines those ratings is not. I know that the state already has a long-term contract with Pearson, but there is something seriously wrong with a testing company that has such inappropriate questions and passages on such a high stakes test.

Thank you for considering all this. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth Phillips". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "E" and a long, sweeping underline.

Elizabeth Phillips
Principal