

New York Adopts Plan for Rating All Schools Based on Test Scores

By Bess Keller

The New York state school board has adopted the first phase of a plan to rate schools according to student test scores, including—in the future—those from a school's racial and ethnic subgroups.

The new system raises the stakes on state-devised tests and tightens up New York's existing accountability program, which identifies only the lowest-performing schools. Under the new plan, approved May 4, two categories will be added, with a third likely in the future (*See Education Week, Feb. 23, 2000.*)

If the system state officials now have in mind goes through, in the next year or two the ratings will be based in part on how well black and Hispanic students do on the tests, which are pegged to the tougher standards that the state adopted in 1996.

Commissioner of Education Richard C. Mills has advocated teasing apart the test results as an important step toward raising persistently low achievement among black and Hispanic students.

"Job one for me is closing the gap in student achievement, and part of getting that done is being absolutely clear about what that gap is," Mr. Mills said. "I'm very excited about this new policy decision."

The new dimension of the accountability system puts New York on the leading edge of what may become a trend. Currently,

Texas evaluates schools partly based on test scores of minority subgroups, a practice that has been credited with helping to close the achievement gap. California recently decided to follow suit.

Already, more than 20 states assign ratings to their schools or plan to start doing so in the near future.

Masking the Gap

Both ratings and information on minority achievement are intended to push schools to do better to avoid losing face in the public eye. Many educators argue that a school with gener-



Richard C. Mills

ally good test scores, thanks to a population of mostly white, middle-class students, can mask the fact that its black and Hispanic students are significantly behind

even when their parents are well-off and educated. (*See Education Week, March 15, 2000.*)

New York education officials say they are committed to the Texas approach, but aren't ready to go forward this year. "At this point, we don't have the data in a form we can do that with," said Roseanne DeFabio, New York's assistant commissioner for curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

In the meantime, test results are being collected for special education students, and will be

collected next year for students whose first language is not English.

Starting in the coming school year, New York's elementary and middle schools will be rated according to the proportion of their 4th and 8th graders who reach state-specified benchmarks on tests in English and mathematics. Eventually the goals for high school students will be set in terms of the percentage of students graduating—by passing the

required courses and the state regents' five required exit exams.

Under subsequent phases of the plan, schools not meeting the standards would probably be required to submit improvement plans for state approval, while high-performing schools might be freed from some state regulations. State officials also plan to add an "exceeding standards" level to the three approved by the board earlier this month: "meeting standards,"

"below standards," and "farthest from standards."

Under the current plan, the commissioner can designate schools making strong test-score gains as "rapidly improving."

State education officials have not yet decided how the targets for the minority groups will be decided or how they will count toward school ratings.

"There's more than one way to have such a system," Ms. DeFabio said.

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