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Teacher Perceptions of the New York State Regents Requirements: A Pilot Study

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By

Jennifer E. Lerner

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Abstract

This pilot study investigated teachers’ perceptions of the effects of the New York State Regents requirements on teachers and students. An eight question Likert scale survey was administered to one hundred high school teachers in an upstate New York urban school district. Survey questions covered the impact of the new standards on teacher autonomy, in addition to student and teacher anxiety level. Teachers were asked about the fairness of the exams, the amount of time spent teaching to exams, and how they perceived the exams as impacting school drop-out rate. Results indicated that teachers believed that the new requirements had a negative impact on their teaching style and autonomy. Teachers also reported that they did not think that the exams fairly assessed student knowledge, predicted that the exams would lead to a higher drop out rate and increased student anxiety.
Teacher Perceptions of the New York State Regents Requirements

A high school diploma certifies that a student has accomplished an acceptable level of learning. A test is one of the many tools used to measure a student’s mastery of material. To be valid a test must be an accurate measure of a student’s mastery of relevant knowledge (American Educational Research Association, 1998). Some of the most important assumptions about tests used for certification decisions are that they tap the knowledge they are designed to measure, that the minimum passing score is a good indicator of mastery or non-mastery, and that the test scores are reliable. The current trend in testing has moved away from minimum competency tests towards tests that measure higher level skills (American Federation of Teachers, 1997). These tests are known as “high stakes” because they likely will have affects on graduation rates. Educators are concerned because current psychometric standards recommend that a decision that will substantially impact a test taker should not be based solely on the results of one test score. It is widely acknowledged that other relevant information about the student should be taken into account (American Educational Research Association as cited in Heubert & Hasuer, 1999).

Research done on high stakes testing indicated that preparing students for these tests often resulted in “drill and practice” teaching methods that did not encourage higher levels of thinking (O’Day & Smith, 1993). As testing stakes are increased districts may take on a single-minded dedication to increasing test scores.

The New York State Regents examinations are achievement tests that were revised in 2000 to measure the New York State Learning Standards. In order to graduate from high school in New York State, students must achieve minimum passing scores on English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies Regents exams. The exams were designed so that passing scores demonstrate attainment of the New York State Learning Standards. The Regents examinations
were designed to measure the quality of instruction as well as to measure what learning took place in the classroom. Students take the Regents examinations after completing coursework in the subject area of the test (New York State Education Department, 2000). Currently, students who do not take the Regent’s Exam can receive a Local Diploma; however, this option will be phased out by 2004 and all students, except those with severe disabilities, will graduate with a Regents diploma. For a Regents diploma, a score of 65 or above on each exam is required.

Students with disabilities will continue to have the option of taking the Regents Competency tests, if they fail the Regents Examination, in order to receive a local diploma. The Regents Competency tests are achievement tests that measure basic proficiency and are less rigorous than the Regents examinations (The New York State Education Department, 2001).

The fairness of the new standards has been hotly debated. Critics of the Regents requirements question whether the tests will ultimately penalize students with learning disabilities, students of low socio-economic status, students with atypical learning styles, and students who attended alternative schools. Proponents of the Regents requirements believe that the new standards will ensure that all students will meet set learning standards. This study examined the Regents requirements, the arguments for and against the new standards, and teacher perceptions of the new requirements.

**Diploma Requirements for A Regents High School Diploma**

Students who entered grade nine in or after 1985 but before the 2001-2002 school year must earn at least eighteen and one half credits or the equivalent in order to receive a Regents or local diploma. Credit must include: four units of English, four units of social studies, two units of math, two units of science, one unit of art or music, and a half unit in health education (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.5).
Students entering ninth grade in the 2001-2002 school year or after must earn at least twenty-two units of credit to earn a Regents diploma. Students must complete four credits in English; four credits in social studies; three credits in science (with at least one course in a life science and one course in a physical science); three credits in math (with each level at a more advanced level than grade eight); one credit in art, music, dance, or theatre; one half credit of health education, and two credits in physical education (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.5).

In order to demonstrate attainment of New York State learning standards, students must pass the New York State Regents Examinations. Students who entered ninth grade before 1996 could demonstrate that they met the standards by passing either the Regents Comprehensive Examination in English or by passing the Regents Competency tests in Reading and in Writing. For students who entered ninth grade after 1996 but before September 2000, passing the Regents Comprehensive Examination meets the requirements of NYS standards. The minimal passing score on the Regents exam is a 65. For a local diploma the minimum passing score is a score between 55 and 64 as determined by the individual school. Students who entered ninth grade in September 2000 or after can meet State requirements by passing the Regents examination with a score of 65 or higher. Students with disabilities who fail the Regents Comprehensive Examination and who started ninth grade between September 1996 and September 2002 can meet requirements for a local diploma by passing the Regents Competency Test in Reading and the Regents Competency Test in Writing or their equivalent (The New York State Education Department, 2001, section 100.5).

Local Diplomas
Students who entered ninth grade before or in the 2000-2001 school year may earn a local diploma. To earn a local diploma students must:

1. complete a sequence of three credit units in math, science, a language other than English, a career and technical education subject, five credit units in either English or social studies, and an art or music subject or,
2. complete a sequence of three units of credit in each of two career and technical education subjects, or in each of two languages apart from English, or in each of two of the following subjects: math, science, a language other than English, art or music, career and technical subjects or,
3. complete a sequence of five units of credit in math, science, a language other than English, art or music, as well as a career and technical education subject (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.5).
4. the sequence of three to five credits in a language other than English must consist of courses in one language (i.e., not one course in Spanish, one in French, and one in Italian). The sequence of credits that the student chooses must include the eighteen and one half credits required by New York State.
5. students who are attempting to earn a local diploma shall also pass a career and technical proficiency exam (when available) if they are following a career and technical education sequence (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.5).

Local Certificates

Currently, a student with a disability may earn a local certificate if that student meets the educational goals specified in their Individualized Education Program that are in place the year
the certificate is awarded. Before this can happen, the school district must have written policies in place to ensure that students with disabilities have adequate opportunities to earn a high school diploma. The student must also have attended school for at least thirteen years, which does not include kindergarten, or have received an equivalent education for an equal period of time. When a student receives a local certificate it should be accompanied by a written statement from the school district assuring that the student will be eligible to attend the district in which the student lives until he or she has received their high school diploma, or alternately, until the end of the school year in which the student turns twenty-one, whichever comes first. Due to the changes in graduation requirements local certificates will not be awarded on or after February 1, 2005 (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.6).

*High School Individualized Education Program Diplomas*

Presently, the Board of Education may issue an Individualized Education Program (IEP) Diploma to a student with a disability. As with a local certificate the school must have written policies that ensure adequate opportunity for students with disabilities to earn a high school diploma (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.9). The Board of Education may award an IEP diploma to a student with disabilities at the end of the year that the student will turn twenty-one or when it has been established that the student has met the goals and learning standards specified in the student’s IEP. The IEP diploma appears identical to the school district’s regular Regents diploma except that there will be a notation that the diploma has been awarded on the basis of the students’ IEP program (The New York State Education Department, 2000, section 100.9).

*Alternative Assessments for Students with Severe Disabilities*
In order to guarantee that students with severe disabilities are accounted for in the statewide assessment procedure, IDEA required that states develop alternative assessments for students who could not complete the regular assessments, even with accommodations. These alternative assessments were designed to measure skill mastery related to the New York State learning standards (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998). The goal is to measure objectives related to real world skills that help with planning for long-term adult outcomes.

The New York State Alternative Assessment is similar to the regular state tests in that it measures student achievement in state pre-selected learning areas. Alternative assessments were designed because the requirements of the other state tests were not basic enough for students with severe disabilities (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998). Alternative assessments do measure the student’s progress towards general education goals.

The Committee on Special Education (CSE) determines whether a student with a severe disability will take part in the alternative or the regular assessments. Only students with severe disabilities are eligible for this type of assessment. The CSE along with the student’s parents or guardians make this determination on an individual basis. The student’s IEP must document whether he or she will be participating in regular or alternative assessments and what accommodations for testing will be needed (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998). The CSE must consider the student’s history, which should include an evaluation of adaptive behavior as well as an evaluation of the student’s academic progress.
The CSE must ensure that decisions about which assessments the students will take are not based upon the category of the disability, language differences, cultural or environmental differences, or excessive absences. Assessment measures must meet the requirements of section 200.4 (b) (6) of the Commissioner’s regulations as well as section 300.532 of the code of federal regulations (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998).

Students who participate in alternative assessments must demonstrate a severe cognitive disability as well as severe deficits in language, communication and adaptive behavior. These students must also require a specialized education program and educational support such as assistive technology, behavioral interventions, health services or personal care (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998). Students are evaluated using multiple techniques including direct observation, written products, or audio or videotape that shows a student meeting a learning standard. The student work is scored with a rubric system, similar to the regular state assessments. (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998).

Students with severe disabilities are included in the system of accountability because educators, parents, and administrators want to ensure that students with severe disabilities are gaining the skills needed to adapt to the adult world. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997/IDEA) requires students with disabilities to be included in state and district wide assessments (Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, 1998).

Safety Net for Students with Disabilities
The Board of Regents determined that there was a need to extend a “safety net” for students with disabilities. The safety net refers to prolonging the amount of time local diplomas will be available to students with disabilities. This means that students with disabilities are still able to get a local diploma if they cannot meet the Regents requirements. Originally, the Board of Regents determined that the safety net should cover students with disabilities who entered ninth grade between September 1996 and September 2000. In February 2001, the Board of Regents extended the safety net for students with disabilities to include students who enter the ninth grade between the years of 2001-2004. In doing this, the Board of Regents has decided that students with disabilities who enter the ninth grade between September 1996 and September 2004 will be required to take both Regents courses and the examinations (The New York State Education Department, 2001). If, however, they do not pass the Regents examination, students with disabilities will be able to meet the requirements for a local diploma by passing the Regents Competency Tests or the equivalent. Students must first attempt and fail the Regents exam to be allowed use of the safety net. This recommendation also extended the availability of local diplomas for students with disabilities. It is hoped that the extension of the safety net will accomplish the following:

1. Provide more time for academic intervention services so that students will be better able to meet the goals of the new learning standards,

2. Give educators more time to train in modification and adaptation to their curriculum in order to better assist students in meeting the learning standards,

3. Provide more time to collect performance data on students with disabilities,
4. Ensure that students with disabilities are getting equal access to the course content they need to get a high school diploma (New York State Education Department, 2001, policy 01-06).

*Alternative Schools and Regents Exams*

Richard Mills, New York’s Education Commissioner, ruled on April 25th, 2001 that alternative schools could not use alternative assessments such as projects, oral presentations, or experiments in place of the state Regents exams. He indicated that he believed that the schools failed to prove that their alternative methods consistently measured student progress toward New York State Learning Standards (Holloway, 2001). The ruling was a major setback to a group of 37 small alternative schools, most in New York City (Holloway, 2001). It is believed that this decision will likely force the schools to change their unconventional curriculums so that their students can pass the statewide exams in five subjects. The alternative schools indicated that their curriculum is what makes them alternative. It was interesting to note that one local alternative school in upstate New York that uses its own curriculum has reported more than 80% of its graduates go on to college. In addition, it maintained one of its District’s highest attendance rates, lowest suspension rates and one of the District’s highest SAT averages (Rochester City School District, 2002).

Alternative schools often use portfolio review and teacher evaluation to decide whether or not a student is making progress. They may use different teaching styles and do not follow traditional teaching methods. They generally follow learner-centered philosophies and do not rely on standardized testing to evaluate their students. Some parents, teachers, and administrators involved in these alternative schools believe that this change will hurt their schools (Holloway, 2001). They reported that they would have to cut out innovative teaching and replace it with
teaching towards a test. State officials, however, indicated that if the alternative schools' programs are solid, the students should be able to pass the Regents exams without changing the curriculum (Rosenberg, 2001).

Critics of Mills reported that he was ignoring the fact that all students do not learn the same way. They argued that many of the students in these alternative schools are students who already had difficulties in the traditional school setting. Approximately 37 New York State alternative public schools applied for a variance from the commissioner, which would have exempted them from the Regents examinations. This was denied in April, 2001 (Holloway, 2001). Each of the schools used some form of performance-based assessment, to determine whether a student is ready for graduation. Cumulative documentation is also assembled over time, to demonstrate how the student is performing. In addition, all students are offered multiple methods through which to demonstrate their learning. The schools lost the ability to assess their students in these alternative ways as of September 2001.

*Arguments For and Against the Regents Testing Requirements*

Gardner (2001) pointed out that while there should be accountability in schools we may be pushing in the direction of insisting that all students must learn in the same way. He questioned how and by whom decisions were made. He questioned whether these tests measured learning concepts and higher level thinking or fact memorization. Gardner indicated that he believed these types of high stakes tests hurt students who weren't particularly good at memorization and damaged teachers who preferred not to follow someone else’s curriculum.

Across communities substantial variation in educational achievement has been found between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Maynard & Kelsey (1996) pointed out that while nationally less than fifteen percent of youths do not complete high school,
the drop out rate in urban areas often exceeded fifty percent. Also, reading proficiency scores in disadvantaged communities are on average ten percent less than those in more advantaged urban communities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993). Maynard & Kelsey (1996) reported that in the educational process, family had the strongest influence on a child's behavior and outcome. The family socioeconomic status, the number of children within the family, the time that the parents spent with their children, and health and nutritional practices were all factors that affected school achievement. In addition, parents conveyed to their children their feelings about school by their involvement with school activities and by the messages they sent about how highly they valued education. Another component to a child's outcome was the community that they live in. (Maynard & Kelsey, 1996).

Schools also influenced a child's success in the future. The factors that influenced a child's success were class size, teacher quality, and peer group characteristics (Odden & Kim, 1992). Ogbu (1987) pointed out that cultural differences and the perception of poor economic prospects may have accounted for some of the performance differences between minority groups and white youth. U.S. schools are serving larger numbers of poor children. Between 1980 and 1990 the percentage of public school children from low-income families increased by forty percent (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992). Over the past twenty years there has been an increased concentration of minority and poor children in center-city schools. In comparison to suburban schools these schools had a higher rate of school violence, less resources per child, higher rates of diagnosed learning disabilities and overall lower student outcomes. Poverty outside of central cities has been falling while in cities it has been rising. There was a near doubling of the proportion of the poor population residing in central cities from 1970 to 1980. As
a result, almost one half of inner city schools had a majority of their students from low-income families (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992).

**Dropout Rates**

Reardon (1996) found that the schools that were most likely to have high stakes testing policies were schools that had high concentrations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. He reported that the poverty of the schools and the communities, and their associated lack of resources linked high stakes testing to a higher drop out rate. Kreitzer et. al (1989) compared the ten states with the highest dropout rates to the ten states with the lowest dropout rates. They found that nine out of ten states that had the highest dropout rates used high stakes tests for graduation while the states with the lowest dropout rates did not use high stakes graduation testing. Kreitzer also pointed out that high stakes graduation tests may potentially push at-risk students out the door. Cawthorne (1990) interviewed students in two Boston schools. Results indicated that many of the students who failed the newly implemented graduation tests were minority or bilingual students who did not test well or read English too slowly to finish the test. Many of these students were students who had received good grades in school.

Some groups of students, such as low SES, African-American, Hispanic, and English language learners had been found to be more likely to attend schools in which high stakes test were given (Reardon, 1996). These same children also were found more likely to attend schools where they were not receiving high quality curriculum and instruction. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that low SES and minority students failed high stakes graduation tests at higher rates than high SES and white students (Natriello & Pallas, 1999).

Whether or not high stakes testing has improved inadequacies in curriculum has not been clearly demonstrated. However, the decision to award or withhold a high school diploma impacts
a young person's future. It has been suggested that graduation from high school should not be based on test scores alone. Other alternatives, such as compensatory models and the use of differentiated diplomas (which is being phased out in NYS) have been suggested. Placing high-stakes test based accountability on students' poses additional legal problems. Educators must demonstrate that the tests used to make decisions do not discriminate against any group of students and do not deny any student due process. States must demonstrate not only that students have received adequate notice of the requirements but also that they have been taught what the test is measuring (Taylor, 2001). The National Research Council (1999) recommended that high stakes decisions should not be based on a test score alone, but made in conjunction with other relevant information such as teacher recommendation and grades.

One of the major purposes of accountability is to encourage schools to focus their efforts on improving student performance. However, in the past, raising test requirements has not always had the desired effect. Some schools have focused their instruction on the format and general content of the test instead of on the skills and concepts they were designed to measure. Other schools have resorted to unethical and illegal practices, including cheating (Pipho, 2000). An important factor in accountability is a teacher's own judgement about his or her ability to affect the learning of students. In schools with weak internal accountability, the expectation for student learning is often low because teachers believed that the issues the students bring to school, rather than their own efforts, have the greatest amount of control over student learning (Elmore & Rothman, 1999).

Jones, Jones & Hardin (1999) found that 80% of teachers indicated that they spent more than 20% percent of their instructional times focusing on practicing for the end of the year tests. More than 28% of teachers said that their students spent more than 60% of instructional time
practicing for end of the year tests. Jones, Jones and Hardin (1999) reported that the time taken away from regular instruction for practicing the tests as well as taking the tests themselves narrowed the focus of the curriculum to only concepts being tested by the state. Twenty four percent of teachers believed that their students were less confident. In addition, 48.5 % of teachers indicated that the accountability program had a negative impact on their students’ love of learning. More than 77% percent of teachers reported that morale was lower among them, 76% responded that the program would not improve the quality of education and more than 76 % of responding teachers felt that their jobs were more stressful than before the accountability program was implemented. More than half of teachers who responded indicated that they would consider changing schools if their school was designated as poor performing. Eighty-nine percent of teachers surveyed indicated that they felt labeled as the result of their students’ achievement on the tests

Local Opinions on High Stakes Testing

On May 3, 2001, Dr. Richard Ryan, William Cala, Susan Gray, and Dan Drmacich presented their opinions about high stakes testing at a forum organized by the Rochester Coalition for Common Sense in Education. The following are excerpts from their presentations.

Dr. Richard Ryan, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, obtained data from the NY State Education Department regarding the validity of the Regents examinations currently being administered across the state in grades four and eight, as well as in the high schools. Dr. Ryan indicated that the state has not presented him with any evidence that these tests have any predictive validity. He opposed the procedure that the state used to determine passing and failing scores on the new tests after they have been administered to students. Because the tests are criterion referenced, designed to measure specific competencies,
he indicated that the state should be able to determine benchmarks before the testing takes place. Dr. Ryan further indicated that the tests are not really aligned with the state educational standards. He pointed out that skills such as public speaking and creativity couldn’t possibly be measured by a pen and pencil test. He postulated that many students are being denied a rich and varied curriculum because of the limited vision of the tests.

Dr. Ryan reported that school reforms that assist students in becoming more motivated are those that actively engaged students, increased interest in learning, and added to the sense of belonging. He indicated that children did better academically when they felt a sense of choice and autonomy. Dr. Ryan specified that test reform, like that currently going on in New York State, limited a teacher’s ability to cater lessons to student interest and to effectively pace lessons. He further pointed out that test-focused teaching leads to a decrease in teacher enthusiasm for teaching. He noted that teaching to the test undermined the validity of the tests themselves. Additionally, he postulated that it had a negative effect on student motivation as well as student performance. Both Dr. Ryan and Mr. Drmacich, Principal of School Without Walls in the Rochester City School District, pointed out that students had a diversity of learning styles as well as different rates of learning, as indicated in developmental as well as educational research. They argued that using one test as a measurement denied the diversity of children. They reported it further forced us into a “one size fits all mentality” which did not follow developmental or educational research.

Mr. Cala, Superintendent of Fairport Public Schools, believed that trying to force all children to “walk the same walk and reach the same gate at the same time” is unconscionable. He indicated that children are losing large amounts of important instruction time in his district. This is because teachers must be trained in how to administer the Regents examinations as well
as spend time practicing the tests with students. He estimated that students in his district are losing around twenty instruction days a year. He stated that we are moving from multiple intelligence to minimal intelligence. Mr. Cala pointed out that the two major manufacturers of these tests indicated that they should not be used as high stakes tests or as diagnostic measures. He also pointed out that major test manufacturers like Houghton Mifflin reported that no single test should be used to assess a child’s abilities or skill attainment.

Mr. Cala noted that standardized test scores are highly correlated to the income and education of the student’s parents. He believed that the main purpose of these standardized tests is to sort large numbers of students as quickly and efficiently as possible. He further indicated that these tests lead to depression, anxiety, withdrawal, and stress as well as to an increase in special education.

Ms. Gray, Superintendent of Penfield Schools, stated that there need to be more options for students. She is an advocate of the theory of multiple intelligence. She stated that if verbal-linguistic intelligence is not one of the student’s high ability intelligences, it could cause difficulty on the Regents examination because so much of it is based on verbal-linguistic abilities. She asked, “If we can teach to the ability and style strengths of children, why can’t they demonstrate some of their learning through their individual strengths?” She argued that other abilities of students besides verbal-linguistic should count towards or in place of some of the New York State tests for graduation. She reported that bodily kinesthetic, spatial-visual, interpersonal, intra-personal as well as naturalistic intelligence can be as important or more important skills in adult life.

Proponents of the tests believed that the Regents exams will help ensure that all high school graduates meet a certain level of competency (Kohlstrand, 2001). Supporters also
suggested that the Regents tests in fourth and eighth grade assisted in identifying where students and school districts are having trouble (Kohlstrand, 2001). Supporters indicated that if a teacher is truly teaching to the standards then the students should not have any difficulty with the tests. They argued that the tests will ensure that all students in New York receive an education that will enable them to read and write at set standards; no matter what school a student attends in New York he/she will all have achieved certain competencies. Advocates believed that the Regents examinations will enable students to get help when they are falling short of learning standards, something they may not have received without the Regents examination to identify them. They reported that students should not be graduating from high school without the necessary skills to be successful in life.

Assemblyman Joseph Morelle (personal correspondence, May 6, 2001) indicated that it will be difficult to satisfy everyone with regards to the Regents requirements. He postulated that no matter what type of measure is developed there would always be some students who were disadvantaged by the tests. He agreed that suburban children in wealthier districts do have an advantage over children from poorer districts that do not have the same resources. He agreed that the problems in the urban districts would not be solved by giving tests and making graduation requirements more restrictive.

**Purpose & Rationale**

It was the hypothesis of this author that the new Regents requirements would be perceived as having a negative effect on both teachers and students, particularly those working in urban districts. It was important to explore teacher perceptions of the requirements because teachers are ultimately responsible for preparing students for the exams. Equally important is how teachers perceived the affects of the changes in graduation requirements. In order to test the
hypothesis that the new requirements will negatively affect both teachers and students a Likert scale survey was developed and administered to teachers in an urban district of Upstate New York.

Method

Participants
One hundred city school district teachers, males and females, completed an eight-question survey. All participants worked for Rochester City School District in one of three urban high schools as either regular education or special education teachers. Seventy-six regular education and twenty-four special education teachers participated. Respondents averaged 14.59 years ($SD = 10.19$) teaching experience. Table 1 presents the survey participants by grade level and classroom type. Rochester City school district is a large urban school district in upstate New York that had 37,159 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade as of July 2000. The ethnic breakdown of the district's students was 65% African American, 17% Hispanic, 16% Caucasian, and 2% Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American or East Indian (RCSD, 2000). Of the students within this district, 67.5 percent were eligible for a free lunch in the 97-98 school year. The percentages of students who received a free lunch in the three schools that participated in this study were similar and ranged from 30.9 to 45.0 for the 1996-97 school year (RCSD, 2002). Since percentage of students who receive a free lunch is a good indicator of the overall make-up of the school, data from the entire sample was pooled.

Materials and Procedures
Three hundred teachers in three inner city high schools received a survey with a cover letter encouraging involvement in the study in their mailboxes. Approximately two weeks later, non-respondents received a second copy of the survey to increase the response rate for the study.
Through these two canvassings, 100 surveys (33 percent response rate) were received from regular and special education teachers.

Materials consisted of an eight-question Likert-scale paper and pencil survey. Questions were based on teacher concerns voiced at a high stakes testing forum sponsored by the Rochester Coalition for Common Sense in Education, as well as from teacher concerns noted in previous study by Jones, Jones & Hardin (1999). The questions focused on teacher’s perceptions of the NYS Regents requirements. Respondents rated the affect they believed the new Regents requirements would have on the drop out rate and how well these tests assessed student knowledge. Respondents also indicated how these required assessments impacted their own teaching style, anxiety level, autonomy, and use of teaching time. Space was provided for additional comments. Respondents were provided with envelopes to return surveys to a drop box provided in the main office of each school. A copy of the survey appears in Appendix A.

Results

The results of this study indicated that teachers have strong opinions about the New York State Regents requirements. Table 2 presents a detailed breakdown of the percentages, means, and standard deviation of respondents to all eight questions. When respondents were asked whether the new Regents examinations fairly assessed their students knowledge, 53% either strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement. It is notable that only 3% of teachers strongly agreed that the new requirements fairly assessed knowledge. In response to the statement, “The new Regents requirements will lead to an increase in the drop-out rate within Rochester City School District”, 65% of teachers indicated that they either somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement. Notably, only 11% of teachers strongly disagreed with statement. Fifty three percent of respondents indicated that they either somewhat or strongly agreed that the Regents exams
affected their autonomy as teachers; while only 7% of teachers indicated that it had no affect on them. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that the Regents requirements initiated a change in their teaching style. Notably, only 27% of teachers reported that they had become more anxious about their jobs since the graduation requirements changed, while 35% of teachers either somewhat or strongly disagreed with this statement. Fifty-seven percent of teachers reported that their stress level had increased since the implementation of the new graduation requirements, while only 7% of respondents strongly disagreed with this. It is important to observe that 53% of teachers reported that they believed their students were more anxious about passing the Regents examinations since the requirements changed. Only 9% of teachers strongly disagreed with this. Only 21% of respondents indicated that they spend no time teaching to the Regents examinations, while 44% of teachers admitted that they spend between 50 to 100% of their time teaching to the Regents examinations. Table 3 presents responses to this question by category.

No significant differences to survey questions were found between the responses of teachers with more or less than fifteen years experience. Table 4 presents this information for each question. The responses of regular education versus special education teachers were also compared and one significant difference ($p=.018$) was found. Table 5 presents this information for each question. Results indicated that special education teachers were more likely to believe that they had to change their teaching style in response to changes in Regents Examination requirements than regular education teachers.

Discussion

Overall, results indicate that teachers believe that the new Regents requirements have a substantial impact on their teaching and on their students. Write in comments provided by
teachers on the surveys amplify these findings. Past research (Kreitzer, 1989; Reardon, 1996) as well as the teacher perceptions reported in the current study support the idea that more children fail to complete high school because they are unable to pass the Regents examinations. In the present study, 65% of teachers indicate that they believe the drop out rate will increase. This result must be considered carefully. One respondent in the current study wrote in, “Higher standards equal a higher drop out rate and a higher level of student frustration” and added that real vocational alternatives are needed for students. Another educator stated, “The requirements are one of the most ignorant decisions I’ve seen since I started teaching”. A third reported, “Placing Regents standards on all students is unfair and illogical”.

Past research indicates (Natriello & Pallas, 1998; Cawthorne, 1990) that these tests are not fair to all students across race, gender, and socio-economic status and for students with disabilities. Natriello & Pallas (1998) found that children in large urban districts are most penalized by high stakes testing. Teacher write in comments from the current study also reflect concerns that the Regents examinations unfairly disadvantage ESL and special education students. One teacher commented, “Many more special education students will drop out or get an I.E.P. diploma”. An ESL teacher noted, “The standards and tests are unfair to ESL students who are required to take the state exams and have to pass with a 65% or better, especially if they have been in the country for less than two years.” A special education teacher wrote, “The standards do not sufficiently include special education students, it’s either Regents or an IEP diploma,” and “Where does that leave my students when the local diploma and the safety net are taken away”? A high school educator wrote, “I am worried about students who enter NYS in their junior or their senior year who then must pass the examinations. In response to the Regents, test standards are actually being lowered, because the test becomes the curriculum”. Finally, a respondent
wrote, "The exams do not measure any “standards”, standards in themselves are beneficial to students while high stakes tests are not”.

Results from the current study replicate Jones, Jones and Hardin’s (1999) findings that vast amounts of time are being spent preparing students for these exams. That study found that 28% of students spent more than 60% of instructional time practicing for tests. In the current study, 42% of teachers report spending between 51-100% of their time teaching to the Regents examination. One teacher wrote in, "Although my students are only required to take one test this year, when this year’s freshman class enters they will be subjected to passing five exams before they can graduate. I’ll need to start teaching to the tests much more in the future, which, in turn, will make my current project driven class, test-driven”.

Not only do teachers report that they are spending large amounts of time preparing their students for these examinations, but they also report that they do not believe these exams are good indicators of student knowledge. It is astonishing that 53% of respondents surveyed did not believe that the Regents examinations fairly assessed what their students knew, while only 3% of respondents reported that they agreed that the Regents examinations fairly assessed student knowledge. In addition, some teachers stated that the change in requirements moved education away from exploring material and concepts to basic fact memorization. They reported that learning seemed less significant for students. One teacher wrote, “The requirements force teachers to teach to the test, which focuses on lower level rather than complex thinking skills. When in history have all students been expected to perform at the same level?” An English teacher wrote, “This exam does not imitate real writing, writers do not write under these circumstances or use these kinds of restrictions”.
More than half of current respondents believe they must change their teaching style to accommodate Regents examinations, while 45% believe that their autonomy has been limited. These changed attitudes may impact the way teachers relate to their students. Special education teachers were more likely than regular educators to indicate that they had to change their teaching style since the implementation of the new requirements. This is probably because beginning in 2005, special education students will no longer be able to receive a local diploma. A high school teacher noted, “Teachers have become more interested in covering the curriculum rather than going in-depth for rich understanding of material and meeting student interests due to the new standards”. Another wrote, “Social studies has been reduced to meaningless trivia”. A third respondent wrote, “The Regents exams are not aligned with the state standards or with common sense. They are arbitrary, political, and a professional affront to any good teacher. The exams are requirements that stifle creativity and the joy of learning, both of which should be our goals as educators”. Finally, a high school teacher stated, “Students are not being taught to think but rather to regurgitate information only”.

Jones, Jones, and Hardin (1999) indicated that 61% of teachers surveyed believed that their students were more anxious after a high stakes testing program was implemented in their district. Similarly, in the current study 57% of teachers reported that the new Regents requirements increased their stress level while only 16% of teachers disagreed with this statement. Increased teacher anxiety may impact the ability to relate to and teach students. Teachers in the current study also reported that 54% of their students were more anxious since the graduation requirements had changed. A math teacher commented, “Many students come to me well behind in ninth grade and may not have passed math for many years. It is quite a task to get them to the new standard in four short years”. An English teacher stated, “There have
already been changes in my class. If I do not put up a question on the board for my students to respond to, the students are unable to think without relating the question to what they’ve learned for the Regents exam. Students are moving away from learning and thinking for the simple values and joys of learning and thinking and equate knowledge with formulaic writing”.

Some educators surveyed believe that the new standards could be beneficial. One respondent indicated, “The standards may force teachers to teach at the appropriate high school level. Currently, many of our school’s honor roll students go to college and must take remedial courses. This indicates that educators are not doing their job”. Another educator wrote, “The Regents exams in Science keep me to a particular goal. Requiring topics/units forces a teacher to make sure the appropriate topics are taught”. Another teacher stated, “It is basically a new test, no more, no less. The only negative is that it limits creativity, which is the trade off for setting a minimum standard”.

Considered with abundant previous research on high stakes testing and minority students, the results of this study suggest that teachers and students in urban districts may be adversely affected by the revised New York State Regents standards. Most respondents believe that high stakes testing may not be the best way to assess all students. Clearly some means to measure student achievement is necessary to guarantee that students who graduate have the knowledge to be successful and productive adults. Most respondents to this study think that the current Regents examinations detract from learning and are detrimental to teaching because they focus on fact memorization and increase anxiety. The solutions to this dilemma are not clear. Educators must consider the impact that the new Regents requirements will have on students and teachers, and seek more appropriate and valid ways to evaluate student achievement.
Limitations and Further Directions

Limitations of this preliminary study are the small sample size (N=100) and the homogeneous make-up of the respondents. All respondents came from one urban school district, where students historically perform poorly on standardized tests. Future research might compare teacher perceptions of the Regents requirements in urban districts versus suburban districts using larger sample sizes and more representative samples. In addition, future research should explore the types of assessments teachers believe would most fairly and adequately measure student achievement and knowledge.
References


Table 1

Respondents to Survey by Grade and Classroom Type (N=100):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades Taught</th>
<th>Regular Ed.</th>
<th>Special Ed.</th>
<th>Reg &amp; Spec. Ed</th>
<th>Total *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Totals are greater than 100 as teachers were asked to indicate all that applied.
Question 1 was recoded so that negative feelings indicated higher scores.

More. Respondents used the following scale: 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Somewhat Agree; 3 = No Opinion; 4 = Somewhat Disagree; 5 = Strongly Disagree.

When they were before the requirements changed:

7. My students are more anxious about passing the Regents exams now.
6. The new Regents requirements increased my stress level for students changed.
5. I am more anxious about my job since the graduation requirements changed.
4. I have had to change my teaching style as a result of the new requirements.
3. The Regents exams affect my autonomy as a teacher.
2. The new Regents requirements will lead to an increase in the drop-out rate.
1. The new Regents examinations fairly assess what my students know.

Percentages of responses to survey questions, mean and standard deviation.
Table 3

Percent of Classroom Time Teachers Reported Teaching to Regents Examinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Time</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Time</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-25% of time</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-50% of time</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-75% of time</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-100% of time</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Comparison of Mean Responses for Survey Questions from Teachers by Number of Years of Experience (N=100):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>-.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>-.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>&gt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>&gt;15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt; 15.0</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. I spend the following time teaching to the Regents examinations.

7. My students are more anxious about passing the Regents exam now.

6. The new Regents requirements increased my stress level.

5. I am more anxious about my job since the graduation requirements.

4. I have had to change my teaching style as a result of the new requirements.

3. The Regents exams affect my autonomy as a teacher.

within RCSD.

2. The new Regents requirements will lead to an increase in the dropout rate.

1. The new Regents examinations fairly assess what my students know.

Comparison of Mean Responses to Survey Questions by Teacher Specialization (Regular vs. Special Education) (N=100)

Table 5
Appendix A
New York State Regents Requirements
Teacher Survey

School: __________________________ Number of Years of Teaching Experience: __________

Grades you teach: __________________________

Regular Education ____ Special Education ____
I am not a teacher I am a: __________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion either way</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each question below, circle the number to the right that best fits your opinion about each statement. Unless noted in the question use the scale above to match your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The new Regents examinations fairly assess what my students know.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The new Regents requirements will lead to an increase in the drop out rate within RCSD.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Regents exams affect my autonomy as a teacher.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have had to change my teaching style as a result of the new Regents requirements.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am more anxious about my job since the graduation requirements for students changed.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The new Regents requirements increased my stress level.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My students are more anxious about passing the Regents examinations now than they were before the requirements changed.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I spend the following amount of time teaching to the Regents examinations:</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = no time 2 = 1-25% 3 = 26-50% 4 = 51-75% 5 = 76-100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please add comments about how you think the new regents requirements will affect you as an educator or your students. Add additional pages as needed.