

For context, I am a public school parent and a co-founder of the grassroots organization NYC Opt Out.

I spend a lot of my (unpaid) time advocating for a reduction of the excessive and unneeded standardized testing foisted on New York City's school children. More often than not, these tests, which are generic mass-produced tools not rooted in a school's specific curriculum, fail to advance our students' learning, while perpetuating race and class inequities. "Drill and kill" test prep excites neither students nor teachers and sucks away time that could have been devoted to a more stimulating, inquiry-based pedagogy, one that builds on students' innate sense of curiosity and drive to learn.

There are myriad reasons why our schools continue to over-use these instruments, despite a body of research and expertise that points to alternative, and arguably more effective, ways of evaluating students. Given the subject of this hearing, however, I'll focus on just one of the reasons standardized testing continues to hold sway in our system: large and unwieldy class sizes.

Alternative, more holistic assessments frequently demand that the teacher spend significant time getting to know their students and analyzing the work they produce. The schools of the [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) are a case in point. The "performance-based assessment tasks" (PBATs) that students in Consortium schools undertake in lieu of the Regents exams are varied and dynamic. They call for multiple readings and revisions; students confer frequently with their instructors (and each other) to give and receive feedback. This extra time spent on educators getting to know students and their work deeply pays off: Consortium students outperform their peers on several important metrics.

"Students in Consortium schools begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers and yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college than demographically similar peers. Those who go on to attend CUNY are more likely to be Black and Hispanic and are more likely to be from the Bronx than their CUNY peers. Early evidence suggests that Black males, in particular, benefit from a Consortium education when compared to Black males educated in traditional high school settings: They are noticeably more likely to persist in college and to receive higher grades."¹

¹ <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>

While it is true that New York State controls the number of schools in the Consortium, it would seem that even without official sanction other schools could adopt some Consortium assessment practices, thereby making progress on graduation rates and other metrics as the Consortium schools have. Unfortunately, this has proved largely elusive. One reason, certainly, is that it is very difficult, both in terms of time and approach, to prep students for mandated standardized tests (Consortium schools have a waiver from all but the ELA Regents) *and* for PBATs. But if magically that complication were removed, it would *still* be challenging because it is a much heavier lift to implement these types of practices if class size is such that it is impractical, if not impossible, for teachers to gain deep knowledge of all students --and in too many NYC classrooms that is the case.

The NYCDOE's reaction to this situation is precisely backwards from what it should be. Instead of focusing on reducing class size in order to create the conditions that could allow for more effective and holistic assessment--which leads to greater student success--the department has decided to accept the fact that class size will be too large for that to work. This has the domino effect that the Department then finds it needs to "help" teachers in super-sized classes get to know their students' strengths and weaknesses, and so spends tens of millions on dubious mass-produced assessment tools. This has been especially egregious this year, with the Department introducing new standardized tests, euphemistically described as "screeners" or in a hat tip to George Orwell "wellness checks," and a new social-emotional questionnaire (DESSA). The Department spent \$36 million on the screeners and \$18.7 million on DESSA. In contrast, it spent only \$18 million on a class-size reduction pilot, when smaller class sizes could have eliminated the perceived need for the screeners in the first place. So now we have kids as young as kindergarten testing three times a year, on instruments that many seasoned educators have expressed grave doubts about--and this is as the pandemic continues to upend their young lives and, for most students, *on top of* the state tests, Regents exams, etc that are already mandated.

Assessment of our students is too important to offload to products purchased off the shelf. Instead, we must create the conditions that allow our teachers, who hold masters and sometimes doctorates in education, to use their professional training to craft assessments that reflect the students in front of them, not the theoretical "student" for whom tests like the MAP or iReady etc were designed. If some teachers are not up to this, address that through mentorship programs; don't detract from our children's valuable instructional time.

When we have this rare infusion of money from the federal government we should not waste it on something as inessential as the MAP, which a [U.S. Department of Education study found has no statistically significant impact on student achievement](#), and other “screeners” like it. We shouldn’t squander it on a social-emotional questionnaire completed two months into the school year by staff who have too many students and too little time to really get it right. Instead, let’s spend it on things known to yield benefits to all children: arts enrichment, more school counselors, librarians, teacher training and materials for project-based learning, field trips, and, yes, smaller class size. Those will be an investment in our future.

Our children more than deserve it.