

Regents standards need to be more flexible

By MURRAY B. LIGHT

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It's heartening to see that good common sense appears to be replacing the rigidity of proponents of the state Regents standards that mandate often impossible standards that students must master in order to graduate from high school. These were put in place amid a good deal of hoopla on how they would result in the schools of the state turning out young people better prepared to cope with a highly technical society.

It all sounded great, but as I have observed many times since their inception, the new standards fail to face the realities of student differences in background, mental acuity, home environment and career choices.

New York State Regents standards require all students to pass the Regents tests in English, global studies, American history, math and science in order to graduate. As of now, students can pass with a grade of 55. A passing grade of 65 will be required by 2005.

The Board of Regents approved these standards at the urging of State Education Commissioner Richard Mills, one of the nation's most forceful proponents of higher standards. Mills is a dedicated and focused educator who always has the best interests of students in mind, but his intense focus has resulted in his overlooking the needs of those who don't conform to the norm. His overall objectives are laudatory, but as Orchard Park School Superintendent Charles L. Stoddart said, "There needs to be an adaptable, reasonable, flexible approach" that is now lacking.

Jack Coyle, president of the Buffalo School Board, said: "We can't use the cookie cutter approach for everyone. We have many students in the pipeline who need alternatives, who need options." And Buffalo School Superintendent Marion Canedo said she "can't think of a single person who is equally successful in each of those five subject areas. We're going to have kids who simply aren't going to graduate."

Paul Hashem, the Lackawanna school chief, agrees. "I have difficulty with the standards, because they're so unattainable for so many of our students," Hashem said.

When the Regents put the standards in place, they anticipated that objections would come from urban and rural districts. But it appears that even superintendents in more affluent suburban school districts are looking for some changes that would result in flexibility and minimize the number of students who will not graduate. Currently, only about half the public school students in Buffalo graduate from high school in four years.

Ironically, while the call for change in New York State standards is growing, the U.S. education secretary, Rod Paige, has just sent a sternly worded message to the nation's school districts warning them not to lower their academic standards. Those who do, he said, "are the enemies of equal justice and equal opportunity." Strong language, indeed, from one who should know better.

Paige, it seems to me, is currying favor with his boss, President Bush, who pressed the Congress to pass the "No Child Left Behind" education reforms. Paige said educators who are not pressing these reforms are "apologists for failure" who will not succeed. Nothing like trying to make the boss happy. Paige, a former school superintendent, surely knows that there's no uniformity among students, and some perform better than others, who may be eager to do well but cannot achieve the required results.

I have to echo the words of Orchard Park's Stoddart, who is right on the mark when he says: "I think there are people so tied to the standards and so tied to testing that, in their eyes, it can't be bad. There's a feeling that testing is to show others - not students, not parents, not superintendents, not school boards - that schools are tough."

There's more than a grain of truth to that evaluation. The Board of Regents and Mills need to pay heed to the words of the school administrators. There are many ways to minimize the problems without necessarily junking the majority of imposed standards.

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Flexibility is needed for vocational students, for those most interested in the fine arts, for those in special education and for those who can successfully pass at least three or four of the now-mandated Regents exams.

What is needed is a commonsense approach. It needs to be applied quickly to stem the outflow of students who just give up and drop out.

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