

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) is pleased to announce that the State has partnered with Questar Assessment, Inc. to support the Department with the changes described in the memo and other changes to the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests. Questar Assessment, Inc. has replaced Pearson and is responsible for the construction of this year's test forms and guidance materials. Questar Assessment, Inc. brings its extensive experience with assessment in New York State to the Grades 3-8 testing program. In the past five years, Questar Assessment, Inc. has provided summative assessment services including end-of-course, alternate and English Language proficiency exams to 34 states and the District of Columbia and is responsible for test administrations for millions of students annually. NYSED is pleased to expand its relationship with Questar Assessment, Inc. to provide the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests to the students of New York State.

Greater Involvement of Educators in the Test Development Process

To improve the quality of the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests, NYSED together with Questar Assessment, Inc. has significantly increased the number of New York State educators involved in creating and reviewing the assessments as well as expanded the types of opportunities for educators to be involved in the development of the state's assessments.

Specifically, beginning in Fall 2015 and going forward, a greater number of New York State educators have been and will continue to be involved in the review of test questions and final test forms than ever before. This increase has already – and will continue to do so – greatly benefit the quality of these assessments and will also serve as powerful professional development and networking opportunities for the educators involved. Furthermore, the increasing number of educators will help ensure that the assessments have been reviewed by teachers from various parts of the state and with various expertise. NYSED is particularly excited about the greater numbers of teachers of English Language learners and students with disabilities who will be involved in the development of these assessments.

Another critical new way that educators are already contributing to the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests is through the construction of the final test forms that will be administered to students this spring. Educators from throughout the state gathered in Albany in October 2015 and were charged with evaluating and selecting assessment questions for use on the Spring 2016 tests. The reliance on NYS educators to select the best questions available ensures that the tests are rigorous and fair for all students.

As we continue the transition, for the first time ever New York State educators will write the test questions for the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests. The state has heard the need for assessments that more closely measure what is taught in classrooms throughout the state, and having NYS educators write these assessment questions will ensure that the assessments reflect classroom instruction as much as possible. This winter in what is a significant departure from past practice, Questar Assessment, Inc. will convene groups of NYS educators to engage in item-writing workshops. At these item-writing workshops educators will receive extensive assessment development training and then participate in the writing of test questions. The test questions written by NYS educators will be field tested in Spring 2017 and will contribute to students' scores on the tests beginning in Spring 2018. Having educators write test questions for the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests is consistent with the long-standing tradition in New York State of having teachers author the rigorous and highly regarded Regents Exams.

A Decrease in the Number of Test Questions

One of the most consistent recommendations made to NYSED was to reduce the length of the tests. In particular, NYSED has heard that students would be better able to demonstrate close reading and thoughtfully respond to questions if the ELA tests included fewer questions.

Based on this feedback NYSED has decreased the number of test questions on both the 2016 Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests. On each of the 2016 Grades 3-8 ELA Tests students will read one less passage and answer fewer questions. This will allow students additional time to read the passages more closely and apply their knowledge and skills in answering the questions and is expected to decrease testing fatigue for some students. On the 2016 Grades 3-8 Mathematics Tests students will also have fewer questions to answer. (See the Appendix for a comparison of the number of passages and test questions in 2015 vs. 2016.) Additional information about the makeup of the 2016 Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests will also be included in the annual test guides.

A Shift to Untimed Testing

In addition to a change in testing vendor, greater teacher involvement and fewer test questions, NYSED has also received extensive feedback from educators from throughout the state about the inability of students to work at their own pace on the Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests. As a result, NYSED is pleased to announce the transition to untimed testing for the Spring 2016 Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests. This change will provide students further opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do by allowing them to work at their own pace. In general, this will mean that as long as students are productively working, they will be allowed as much time as they need to complete the ELA and Mathematics Tests. Additionally, this change in policy may help alleviate the pressures that some students may experience as a result of taking in assessment they must complete during a limited amount of time. NYSED will release guidance to schools and districts on how to implement this new testing policy.

These changes are just some of the efforts that NYSED is committed to implementing to improve the quality of the State's assessments and the experiences that students have taking these tests.