



**Testimony of the New York City Department of Education
on the 2010 New York State English Language Arts and Math Test Results**

Before the New York City Council Committee on Education

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Testimony of Shael Suransky, Deputy Chancellor, Division of Performance and Accountability and Josh Thomases, Deputy Chief Schools Officer for Academics, Division of School Support and Instruction

Good afternoon Chair Jackson and members of the Education Committee. My name is Shael Suransky, and I am Deputy Chancellor for the Division of Performance and Accountability at the New York City Department of Education. Thank you for inviting me to discuss the results of the 2010 New York State Math and English Language Arts (ELA) exams, as well as the Department's ongoing efforts to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and careers. Joining me today is Josh Thomases, Deputy Chief Schools Officer for Academics in the Division of School Support and Instruction.

I began my career as a sixth-grade math teacher. After working as an assistant principal, I had the opportunity to found and lead my own school as principal of Bronx International High School on the Morris Campus in the South Bronx. At Bronx International, a high school for newly arrived immigrants, every student arrived speaking no English. Our mission was to both teach them English and prepare them to graduate, and I am proud to say that we succeeded with most of our students. It is my direct experiences with students, parents, teachers, and other school leaders that inform my perspective as Deputy Chancellor, as well as the mission of the Division of Performance and Accountability as we work with our schools to raise the bar for our students.

As you know, New York State requires all students in third through eighth grade to demonstrate their mastery of State math and English Language Arts standards on annual exams. Based on each child's score on these exams, he or she is designated as achieving at Level 1 (below standard), 2 (meets basic standard), 3 (meets proficiency standard), or 4 (exceeds proficiency standard).

[SLIDE 1]

This summer, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) decided to redefine what it means to pass the test by making the proficiency requirements significantly more demanding. This was done by raising the "cut scores" needed to meet or exceed grade-level standards. The State's goal was to make their proficiency standards more meaningful and to better align the results with being on track to college-readiness.

To be clear, we support the State's decision and commend Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch and Commissioner David Steiner for their bold actions in raising standards. As early as 2006, Mayor Bloomberg advocated for "a uniform measuring stick" to evaluate school performance, suggesting that all states that accept federal education money should be required to adopt proficiency standards aligned with NAEP—the National Assessment of Educational Progress—often called "the gold standard" of educational testing. In addition, Chancellor Klein has testified many times before this Committee about the need to raise State standards.

Naturally though, if you increase the score required to pass a test, fewer people will pass. And while raising the bar is the right thing to do, parents who have recently heard for the first time that their children are not performing at grade level are understandably upset and worried. We know that we have much work ahead of us.

At the same time, it is both inaccurate and unfair to dismiss the real progress our students have made over the past several years. In fact, had it not been for that progress, it would be hard to conceive how our schools could meet this new, higher bar. Some school districts in the State now have proficiency rates in the 20s. Thanks to the hard work of our teachers, principals, and students over the past eight years, we are not in that position; instead, we have a strong foundation on which to build. My colleague and I therefore welcome and appreciate this opportunity to clarify exactly how far our students have come under this Administration, to discuss some of the strategies we've already adopted to increase students' college and career readiness, and to share our plans to build on that work going forward.

[SLIDE 2]

With that as an introduction, please join me now on slide two of the PowerPoint presentation provided to the Committee. This slide is not our data, but it's important in framing the context for today's conversation. Back in 1960, the U.S. job market was a real mix of routine manual labor, more sophisticated manual labor, and more cognitive tasks. And as you look across on the graph, you can see that over the last 40 years there are far fewer straight manual labor types of jobs available, and therefore the skills that individuals need to be successful in the job market have changed significantly.

For that reason, we need to build into our curriculum and assessments both the basic skills *and* the higher-order skills that students need to be successful in today's world—skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork that 21st century employers increasingly demand, and that current State tests simply do not assess.

Rather than focusing on basic proficiency in English and math, our goal is for all of our students to graduate from high school ready to start college or a career. And earlier today at NBC's Education Nation Summit, Mayor Bloomberg unveiled a bold, new plan for achieving that goal. In his speech, the Mayor outlined four key strategies: creating new public-private partnerships, ensuring a great teacher in every classroom, leveraging technology and innovation to empower teachers to tailor instruction to individual student needs, and providing more top-quality school choices for our children. We look forward to talking more about some of those strategies with you today.

So while the State has taken an important first step in recalibrating what it means to be proficient, the overall goal, content, and curriculum of State tests also needs to fundamentally change to reflect the skills and knowledge required for students to succeed in today's economy.

Over the course of this Administration, we have implemented several policies designed to help prepare our students to meet these rising expectations. Early on, we began eliminating social promotion, which had allowed unprepared students to move on to the next grade. Three years ago, we introduced our Progress Reports, which incorporate a growth measure in part to challenge schools to push their students beyond mere proficiency. Two years ago, we initiated a nationally recognized partnership with



CUNY focused on ensuring that our graduates are prepared to succeed in college. And this year, we're piloting college-readiness measures on the Progress Report to evaluate whether schools are meeting that standard. Most importantly, we are beginning to introduce the Common Core standards into our curriculum, which my colleague will speak to in greater depth shortly.

[SLIDE 3]

As you can see on slide three, our reforms over the past several years have already borne fruit. Whether we apply new or old cut scores to define proficiency, New York City students have demonstrated real progress. If we were to apply the new State proficiency standards retroactively, our overall proficiency rate would still have gone up since 2006: by 22 points in math (from 32 percent in 2006 to 54 percent today) and by more than 6 points in ELA (from 36 percent in 2006 to more than 42 percent today).

[SLIDE 4]

Given the State's adjustment to proficiency cut scores this year, the best way to compare students' scores over time is to look at students' scale score performance. Because scale scores are based on the number of questions kids get right, and adjusted for the difficulty of the test, they can be compared from year to year (within the same grade level), even when the passing score changes. Here too, the trend is positive, with a 23-point increase in math (the average student's scale score has gone from 656 in 2006 to 679 today) and a 13-point increase in ELA (from an average of 649 in 2006 to an average of 662 in 2010).

This is the purest data about what actually happened—the average score of all our kids. Proficiency is choosing a line and asking how many kids are above it. When you move the line, it affects the number of kids who make it. Instead, scale scores show the gains we actually did make, which are substantial.

We unquestionably still have a long way to go, but whichever way you look at it, we have made real progress.

[SLIDE 5]

Furthermore, when you compare New York City with the rest of the State, you can see that the gains we have made in scale scores are significant and much higher than those of kids taking the exact same test in the rest of the State.

[SLIDE 6]

Of course, we recognize that far too many students are still struggling and not performing at the levels they should. Nothing demonstrates that fact more clearly than the unacceptable racial achievement gap that exists both here in New York City and across the country, along with the low proficiency rates for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Proficiency rates for these groups have dropped significantly now that students are being held to a higher standard.

[SLIDE 7]

However, as I have already explained, it's problematic to just look at proficiency rates because you miss actual changes in students' performance. Looking at black and Hispanic students, where you saw the biggest drop in proficiency rates on the previous slide, absolute scale score gains were actually greater than those of their white and Asian peers. Using scale scores, you can see that we have narrowed the



achievement gap substantially since 2006—representing a 37 percent reduction of the gap in English and 18 percent in math for black students, and a 36 percent reduction in the gap in English and 22 percent in math for Hispanic students.

And while it is unacceptable that so many black and Hispanic students are performing below the new proficiency threshold, it is important to note that many of them are very close to that threshold. In fact, the percentage of black and Hispanic students labeled “Proficient” in math this year would be 16 percentage points higher if borderline students had answered only five more questions correctly. Similarly, we would have seen a 14 percentage-point gain in proficiency rates for Black and Hispanic students on ELA if they had answered just two more questions correctly.

Again, we aren’t nearly where we’d like to be – closing the achievement gap is a nationwide challenge—but we are hopeful, given the progress we’ve seen thus far. Making sure that students’ zip code, race, and income don’t determine their experience in City schools will remain a top priority of this Administration.

[SLIDE 8]

We see a similar story with our English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities: significant progress, but still much more work to do. Since 2006, our English Language Learners’ average scale scores have increased by 37 points in ELA and 30 points in math.

[SLIDE 9]

Students with disabilities have seen their mean scale scores increase on State tests in English and math by 32 points and 34 points, respectively. As with ELL students, while absolute performance has increased, proficiency rates are unacceptably low. Improving achievement among our students with disabilities is a major focus of the Department’s work this year. As many of you are aware, we have introduced a set of bold special education reforms centered on inclusion and increased rigor, which my colleague will speak to in greater detail shortly.

[SLIDE 10]

Beyond State test scores, there are other metrics that clearly demonstrate our students’ progress, chief among them is NAEP. On our watch, New York City student progress on NAEP has outpaced both the rest of the State and the nation-as-a-whole in three of four categories. Fourth graders have achieved 11-point gains in both math and reading—representing a full year of additional learning—while our eighth graders have achieved a seven-point gain in math. Our eighth-grade reading scores mirror trends in other districts, but our most recent eighth-grade reading scores increased by three points over the previous exam, boding well for the future.

It’s no coincidence that our students struggle most with eighth-grade reading, a test that focuses heavily on informational texts. Literacy across the content areas is a central focus of the new Common Core standards that my colleague will discuss in his testimony.

[SLIDE 11]

New York City students have also made great gains in high school graduation rates. For a decade—from 1992 to 2002—the City’s graduation rate was stagnant at fifty percent. Under this Administration, by



contrast, our graduation rate has climbed steadily, reaching 63 percent in 2009 according to the State's new calculation method. In real terms, 8,897 more kids graduated from NYC public high schools this year than in 2002. We are by no means satisfied with a 63 percent graduation rate, but this represents enormous progress.

[SLIDE 12]

In addition, the number of high school students earning Regents diplomas, which will become the new minimum high school graduation standard in just two years, has also steadily increased. In 2005, just 30 percent of students received a Regents diploma. In 2009, that number was 46 percent – a 16-point increase that mirrors the growth of our overall graduation rate.

[SLIDE 13]

Importantly, we are also seeing a narrowing of the achievement gap in our graduation rates. The percentage of black students graduating high school in four years increased from 40 percent in 2005 to 58 percent in 2009, closing the gap with white students by more than five points. Among Hispanic students, the graduation rate improved from 37 percent in 2005 to 56 percent in 2009—closing the gap by six points, and representing the first time since the City began tracking graduation rates that the rate for Hispanic students topped 50 percent.

[SLIDE 14]

As I said at the beginning of my testimony, however, merely graduating from high school is not enough: students need to graduate prepared for success in college and their careers. Evidence that we're headed in the right direction can be gleaned from the rising number of students taking and passing Advanced Placement exams in NYC from 2002 to 2010 as well as from our students' performance on this year's SAT.

Since 2002, the student participation rate on AP exams has increased by over 60 percent, while performance on AP exams has increased almost 55 percent. As the Chancellor recently announced, gains achieved by New York City students' on the most recently released SAT examination outpaced the nation. These are both significant achievements, as the AP and SAT exams are nationally-recognized measures of college readiness.

[SLIDE 15]

Finally, more New York City high school graduates are now attending college than ever before. From 2002 to 2009, the number of NYC graduates starting at City University of New York (CUNY) colleges each year has increased from 16,000 to more than 25,000—a 57 percent increase, with CUNY enrollment among black and Hispanic students increasing significantly more than is the case among white students. It is also notable that, even as enrollment has climbed, the percentage of students requiring remediation at CUNY has declined from 56 percent to 50 percent over the past seven years.

I would now like to turn the floor over to my colleague Josh Thomases, who will share what we're doing to help our school communities meet these new expectations and raise the bar even further.



*Testimony of Josh Thomases, Deputy Chief Schools Officer for Academics,
Division of School Support and Instruction*

Good afternoon Chair Jackson and members of the Education Committee. My name is Josh Thomases. I spent the first 12 years of my career as a founding teacher and leader at one of our strongest small schools: El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. Since then, I have helped lead the Department's work around developing the hundreds of new small schools that have opened under this Administration. Now, in my current role as Deputy Chief Schools Officer for Academics, I have the responsibility to guide instructional work at schools across the City.

Today, I would like to share the work we are doing to improve student learning and student outcomes. As Deputy Chancellor Suransky indicated, we are focused on changing the target. Our national challenge is that a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for success in America. And as the Mayor explained this morning, we have set a higher goal for our schools: that we graduate our students college and career ready. This is no easy task, but one that we must take on, and one that we are ready to take on given the progress of the past decade.

[SLIDE 17]

An important component of this work was launched last April when we introduced the Common Core Standards to our superintendents and network leaders. New York State has committed to implementing these K-12 standards over the next few years, and they represent a useful tool in challenging our schools to raise the bar even further.

For example, the Common Core standards shift the focus from fiction reading to non-fiction reading, and from narrative writing to analytical writing. Too many of our students spend too much of their time telling personal stories. While this is important, it has become increasingly clear that when students get to college they are not asked to tell their stories. They are asked to read complicated texts and analyze them. They are asked to make an argument and defend it. Our students need to graduate ready to do this work and so it needs to be a focus in our schools.

In Math, the shift is towards tackling real-world problems. Students will be expected to do more than memorizing formulas. Instead, they will need to think critically, defend their ideas, and apply math skills in a variety of contexts.

New York City is among the first districts in the entire country to launch the Common Core work. We are preparing our schools for the new standards now, even before they have been fully integrated by New York State into its exams, because they are a terrific way to hold our schools to a higher bar, and thereby better prepare our students for college and careers.

We also introduced the Common Core early because we know it will take a tremendous amount of work to adapt our K-12 teaching practices to meet this new challenge. We can't afford to wait for New York State's final implementation of the Common Core into State standards and assessments. This summer, all of our superintendents, network leaders and principals began engaging their staff, especially assistant



principals and lead teachers, on how to begin integrating Common Core standards into classrooms. With support from the Department, they will continue this work throughout the school year.

We are also deepening our college-readiness partnership with CUNY, which enrolls over one third of our graduates. We now have a unique data sharing agreement with CUNY so that our high schools can see how their students perform when they arrive in college. This is a critical new tool, and an eye-opening one. It used to be that we were blind to how our graduates performed beyond high school. Now we have a much clearer sense of what we are doing right, and what we must do better, and we can use that knowledge to prepare students for college success.

I am also pleased to share that today the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National League of Cities awarded four cities individual \$3 million grants, including New York City, for innovative proposals to boost college completion rates. New York City will use our grant to help launch Graduate NYC: The College Readiness and Success Initiative, with the overall goal of doubling the number of students receiving CUNY associate degrees in the next 10 years. Specifically, this initiative will focus on:

- Aligning academic standards and curriculum across high schools and CUNY colleges;
- Improving academic advisement and counseling in our schools and communities;
- Strengthening our data system to track student outcomes from kindergarten through college, while engaging parents and families in this common effort.

The Mayor also announced this morning an important example of what this work will look like—a groundbreaking, new partnership between the DOE, CUNY, and IBM, which will create a school that runs from grades nine to fourteen, including two years of college work. In addition to learning the traditional core subjects, students will also study computer science. And when they graduate from grade fourteen with an Associate's degree, they will be guaranteed a job at IBM.

I hope this gives you a sense of the big picture. Now, I would like to quickly focus on some important school-based supports that will clarify what this means for schools.

[SLIDE 18]

First, our schools are making time for teachers to meet in teams to collaboratively examine student work and their teaching practices with the specific goal of improving student outcomes. Three years ago, we asked every school to have at least one such team in their school. This year, we expect the vast majority of teachers to consistently meet in teams to reflect upon and improve their teaching practices to better support student learning.

[SLIDE 19]

Second, our principals and teachers are working to ensure that all students receive appropriate supports, but focusing extra attention on those students who scored at a Level 1 or 2 on the 2010 State tests. Every school will implement a diverse range of student-level and classroom-level supports, including individualized instruction plans for students, small-group work, targeted after-school tutoring, and team teaching.



We have mobilized our superintendents, cluster and network teams to assist schools with this work, placing an additional instructional staff member into each network to closely support schools. Each network also includes a Coordinator of Early Intervention Services whose job is to make sure that struggling students get the support they need as efficiently as possible.

In addition, we are asking every school to develop and share a plan to raise the bar and support struggling students. Where plans are insufficient, network teams and superintendents will provide additional coaching and support. Schools are engaged in this critical work as we speak, and we expect to have the plans in place by October 2010.

[SLIDE 20]

Finally, there are a series of critical pilots designed to transform teaching and learning in our schools. Through this work, our schools will be on the leading edge of schools adapting instructional practices for the 21st century, and the results of the most effective programs will be shared citywide:

- Phase I of our special education reform is focused on ensuring that as we raise the bar, students with disabilities receive targeted supports and instructional programs to meet that new standard. Our reform efforts are focused on making sure that students with disabilities receive the type of support that is most effective for them. For some students, it's best to be in a self-contained setting, but for most students, it is not. Those latter students need a setting that combines time with their peers with time getting targeted individual or small-group instruction. Every network that is part of Phase I has a team member dedicated to this work.
- Our Innovation Zone pilots focus on strengthening the ability of schools to more effectively individualize instruction, leveraging technology to better meet student needs.
- In our Common Core assessment pilots, 100 schools are working on developing assessment systems in their schools that meet the new standards.
- Our teacher-effectiveness pilots are reframing and strengthening the support and evaluation of teachers to ensure there is an effective teacher in every classroom for every student.

[SLIDE 21]

As you know, New York State recently won the Race to the Top Competition that will support much of this work.

We have made great strides in this City. We have schools across the City that demonstrate what we in this room know to be true: that all of our children can learn and perform at the highest levels. These schools show us that we can close the achievement gap because they have already done so.

They are schools like Manhattan Village Academy or PS 172 in Brooklyn that are mostly poor or working class, mostly black and Latino, and have significant numbers of English Language Learners and Special Education students. At both, more than 9 out of 10 students are graduating with a Regents endorsed diploma or scoring above proficiency levels on the State exams – even with the new cut scores. These schools are leading the way and making no excuses. And if these schools can do it, then it is our challenge to ensure that all schools do it.



I know that across the City, parents and students are struggling to make sense of the new proficiency standards and that you are likely hearing frustration and surprise from your constituents. This isn't easy and I do not in any way want to minimize or underestimate the challenges for students and families. At the same time, we have shown that it is possible for a large urban school district to narrow the achievement gap and raise a graduation rate that had been stagnant for decades. Now, we must build on that progress while aiming toward a new, higher goal: ensuring that all of our students graduate college and career ready. Achieving that goal will require all of us working together—students, parents, teachers, principals, communities, and our civic and political leadership. Our students are counting on us to help prepare them for higher learning, rewarding careers, and bright futures. We must not let them down.

