

## **New Diploma System Will Benefit Rhode Island Students**

**By Robert G. Flanders, Jr., Esq., and Peter McWalters**  
**September 2008**

**Should a student graduate** from a Rhode Island high school who is unable to read and do basic mathematics?

We don't think so. Graduating students who cannot even read the words on the diploma perpetuates a fraud that does a great disservice not only to those students but also to the outside world that they are about to enter. The students have been promised an education, yet they have not received one. The students haven't failed, but the system has.

That's why the Board of Regents unanimously voted to amend the groundbreaking High School Regulations of 2003 to ensure that all high-school students in Rhode Island meet a minimum achievement level in English and mathematics before they can graduate.

Even more important, the amended regulations will ensure that all students receive the support that they need to meet the graduation requirements. The amended regulations, which the Board adopted after nearly two years of public hearings and open meetings of the Board and its committees, explicitly state that students not on course toward graduation "shall be provided...with requisite supports" to lead them toward graduation.

The amendments specify that these supports must begin in the early grades. There should be no student entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade without an individual learning plan that documents the students' needs, supports, interests, and the course requirements that will lead them to graduate.

The Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) will be vigilant in making sure that all School Districts provide students with these necessary supports.

**The amended regulations** leave in place key elements of the current Diploma System. Students still must complete 20 courses, including four years of English and mathematics and three years of science. Students still must demonstrate proficiency in six core subjects: English, mathematics, science, social studies, technology, and the arts. And students still must fulfill the "performance-based" demonstrations of proficiency, such as electronic portfolios and senior projects.

The amended regulations, however, for the first time require that students reach a "minimum achievement level" on the state assessments in English and mathematics. The Regents have set that level as "partially proficient" on the NECAP tests, which are administered at the outset of Grade 11.

Does that mean that teachers will be "teaching to the test"? To a degree, they will – and indeed they should, because the NECAP tests are not off-the-shelf, fill-in-the-blank assessments. Teachers and other educators from the three partner states (Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont) developed the NECAP tests to measure what students need to know so that they can demonstrate their proficiency in each subject. The NECAP

tests are anchored in the standards, and they are an excellent tool for instruction and for measurement of student and school-level progress.

**Though we have faith in the validity of the NECAP assessments**, the regulations say that “state assessments shall not be the sole grounds to prohibit graduation from high school.”

We take that prescription seriously. We know that some students test poorly in general or may perform poorly on any given day. Therefore, when a student who has met the other graduation requirements cannot show proficiency on the state test, the obligation falls back on the district to step in and show that the student is otherwise proficient. The district can do so by using other tests or by presenting other evidence of proficiency.

**We also know** that there are schools in which many students receive high grades in their courses while scoring low on the state tests. That shows us that these systems are out of alignment. The classes are not covering the material that the students need to know. The students may be succeeding in their classes, but they are the victims of a failing system.

It will take time, but we intend to make sure that all schools and classes are aligned to the state standards and to the state assessments.

We also must be clear that the Regents will never allow the NECAP tests to be a barrier to students with disabilities or to English-language learners. Students with disabilities or other learning needs will be given all allowable accommodations when they take the tests, and of course they will be given ample opportunities to demonstrate proficiency through alternate means. But we also will not shortchange these students by holding them to a diminished set of learning expectations.

**RIDE will implement these amended regulations** on a reasonable timeline. Many of the details of implementation will be worked out at the district level, following guidelines and workshops that RIDE will offer.

Each school district must develop a set of graduation requirements – including support to students, support to staff, and communication with families – for approval by the Commissioner. Districts have until 2012 to attain this approval.

Similarly, the requirement that students test at “partially proficient” or better in English and mathematics will be put into effect for this year’s freshmen (Class of 2012), who will take the NECAP tests two years from now.

Our goal is not to push students into dropping out of school, but to change the system to meet the needs of all students.

The mission of the Board of Regents is to ensure “that all students achieve at the high levels needed to lead fulfilling and productive lives, to compete in academic and employment settings, and to contribute to society.” We believe that the amended regulations will help us fulfill that worthy goal.

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