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Educational finance to support high learning standards: a synthesis[☆]

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Abstract

By 1997, the New York State Board of Regents had required that all students would be subject to the rigorous requirements of the Regents exams in order to graduate from public high schools. These high learning standards were to be fully implemented by 2005. Realizing that these standards would require substantial increases in the performance of students in virtually all school districts, and that such an effort could likely mean changes in aspects of the educational finance system, the Regents commissioned independent research on this issue. This paper provides background and context to the research symposium, *Educational Finance to Support High Learning Standards*. It also briefly summarizes the papers in this volume that were part of this symposium. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The New York State Board of Regents 1997–98 Educational Finance Symposium addressed the topic of school finance for high learning standards. How should New York's educational finance system be restructured to achieve uniform high learning standards for all students, especially in schools where student achievement historically has been low?¹ To explore this topic in detail, a panel of experts in educational policy and school finance were assembled.

New York State has a long history of reaching out to

the academic research community to help inform the policy process. This is the fourth education finance symposium. Each has provided insights that have been important to the development of educational policy in New York.

The New York State Board of Regents, as the policy setting body for education in the State, has required that all of the State's students receive a challenging academic curriculum and be able to attain high learning standards. This agreement has taken the form of detailed curriculum changes and high stakes learning standards for all students. The centerpiece is a requirement that all students must pass five Regents examinations to graduate from high school. Historically, Regents exams have been a set of rigorous curriculum-based external exit exams that have largely differentiated college-bound high school students from their peers. The new Regents standards for all students are acknowledged to be of comparable quality. They will be phased in beginning with the graduating class of 2000, and fully implemented for the class of 2005.

The topic of this symposium is particularly timely.

[☆] The research that is reported in this paper is solely attributable to the individual authors. The data presented, statements made and views expressed do not necessarily represent the New York State Board of Regents.

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¹ The Commissioner's charge to the panel is contained in Appendix A.

The new learning standards represent an enormous change for many students, teachers, administrators, and support staff in New York. Meeting these standards will require that every aspect of the educational system be aligned with the standards. Aligning the finance system is of special importance. More broadly, many states are developing high learning standards of one form or another. Although some states have begun to think about how their school finance systems could support the work of their standards, most have not. Thus, the work of the panel should have applicability beyond New York.

The panel met twice. At the initial panel meeting April 11–12, 1997, panel members were presented with the Commissioner of Education's charge. The panel also received background briefings from State Education Department staff and heard comments and questions from New York State legislative and agency staffs, and representatives of various educational constituency groups. The authors of the policy briefs reconvened October 28, 1997 for presentation of their work to representatives of New York's educational policy community. The panel received feedback from expert respondents and from the audience in general discussion. Based on that feedback the following policy briefs were prepared. The table below (Table 1) provides a list of the panel members and their policy brief titles included in this volume. This paper provides background for the policy briefs and synthesizes their findings. The remaining sections include a general discussion of methods to align the goals of the system's stakeholders with the standards, a discussion of how other states are adjusting their finance systems to align them with recently adopted standards-based reform, and a synthesis of some of the major results of the policy briefs.

2. Aligning the educational environment with standards

By creating high learning standards for all students, the Regents have established a very ambitious policy

goal. The goal is ambitious because the Regents standard represents both an absolutely and a relatively high learning threshold for students. New York's standards are ranked fifth on a scale comparing 'high standards for all children and assessments aligned with those standards' across states. (Education Week, 1998) The standards are also ambitious because the current performance in many school districts is far from the standard. In 1995–96, 40% of all high school students in New York received a Regents diploma, indicating they had successfully passed Regents examinations in eight courses. The move to a standard that requires students to pass five Regents exams to graduate represents a substantially more demanding standard for the majority of New York students. Typically, between 35 and 45% of New York students cannot meet basic proficiency levels on the NAEP exams, leaving them roughly in the middle of all states. These performance measures are substantially worse in urban districts than in the rest of the state. For example, in the Big 5 cities (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, and New York) only 19% of graduating students received a Regents diploma June 1996. More than twice as many students (42%) received a Regents diploma in the non-Big 5 districts (the remaining 709 districts in New York State). Roughly half as many students in New York urban districts are able to perform at the 'basic' level proficiency on NAEP exams as compared to their nonurban peers. How then can the Board of Regents help structure an educational environment where achieving the new standard for all students is a realistic possibility.

The Regents face three general challenges to successfully realizing high learning standards. First, there must be sufficient resources to reach the desired outcomes. The new standards represent a substantial increase in performance in most districts. Without sufficient resources administrators, teachers and students will be frustrated by their inability to reach the standards. Second, the State Education Department and each district must develop an implementation strategy capable of moving students from the existing performance levels to

Table 1
Policy briefs and authors

Authors	Policy brief title
David Monk and Samid Hussain John Bishop, Joan Moriarty, and Ferran Mane	Resource allocation implications of increased high school graduation expectations Diplomas for learning, not seat time: The implications of New York State Regents examinations
Nicola Alexander William Duncombe and John Yinger	The impact of curriculum standards on student achievement Financing higher student performance standards: The case of New York State
Robert Strauss Thomas Downes	Who should teach in New York's public schools? Does fiscal dependency matter?: Aid elasticities for dependent and independent school districts
Thomas Parrish	Restructuring special education funding in New York to promote the objective of high learning standards for all students

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