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Cuomo Panel Calls for Further Retreat From Common Core Standards

By **KATE TAYLOR** DEC. 10, 2015

A task force Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo created is calling for changes in what New York State students learn and how they are assessed, in a set of recommendations released on Thursday.

The task force, which Mr. Cuomo convened in response to the concerns of parents and teachers, is also calling for the state not to use its test scores to evaluate teachers through the 2018-19 school year, to allow time to develop the new standards and tests.

The report is the latest step in the state's retreat from the Common Core school standards, national benchmarks that New York adopted in 2010, and especially from using student test scores in teacher evaluations. It comes in the wake of a rebellion by parents against testing; one-fifth of students did not sit for the state exams this year, a fourfold increase from the previous year.

Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, appeared to be heeding this anger when he created the task force in September and charged it with making recommendations "to overhaul the Common Core system — to do a total

reboot.”

The transition to reading and math tests aligned with the Common Core in 2013 caused the number of students passing to plummet, unsettling parents, teachers and administrators, and leading many to protest that the standards were too high.

Last year, Mr. Cuomo and the Legislature responded by inserting a measure into the budget that banned including students’ state test scores on transcripts through 2018 and prohibited using scores as the primary factor in decisions about promotion or placement.

The State Education Department, which reports to the Board of Regents, whose members are elected by the Legislature, switched test-makers and said it would remove some questions from the tests next year to make them shorter.

It is unclear how different the new standards will be from the Common Core. The task force’s report calls for enlisting educators and parents to help create them, and it recommends modifying the standards for kindergarten, first grade and second grade so that they are more age-appropriate. But it says little about the standards in the upper grades, in which students take state tests, and it says that, generally, the new standards should “maintain the key instructional shifts set forth in the Common Core.”

The group was not originally charged with looking at the use of scores in teacher evaluations, but it tackled that subject anyway.

Passed in 2010, the state’s first teacher evaluation law mandated that test scores contribute at least 20 percent of some teachers’ ratings. Earlier this year, Mr. Cuomo pushed for that to increase to 50 percent.

In his State of the State speech in January, he derided the state’s evaluation system as “baloney,” because even though only about a third of

students were reading or doing math at grade level, as measured by state tests, more than 95 percent of teachers were rated effective. He said that increasing the weight of test scores would lead to “real, accurate, fair” evaluations.

Teachers’ unions and parents revolted, saying that the governor had declared war on teachers and that there was already too much emphasis on standardized tests. Even though the Legislature ultimately watered down the governor’s proposal, parents and educators remained unhappy.

Two people involved in making education policy said last month that the governor was pushing behind the scenes to eliminate the use of test scores in evaluations. The task force’s report essentially comes to the same conclusion, recommending that students’ scores on math and reading tests in the third grade should not have consequences for teachers and should be used only “on an advisory basis” until the start of the 2019-20 school year.

The task force included teachers’ unions representatives, school administrators and parents, among others.

Mr. Cuomo has done several about-faces when it comes to the role of test scores in teacher evaluations.

Last year, as he was running for re-election, his administration drafted a bill that would have done almost exactly what the task force is proposing now — namely, protect teachers and principals for two years from receiving low ratings because of their students’ test scores.

The administration pushed the bill in response to lobbying by the state teachers’ union. Mylan L. Denerstein, the governor’s former counsel, wrote that it “would provide consistent and essential short-term protections for educators.”

The Legislature passed the bill. But in December, after the union declined to endorse Mr. Cuomo in the election, the governor vetoed it. In January, he

pushed for test scores to be given more weight in the evaluations.

The federal government is also backing off the idea of using test scores in teacher reviews. The new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which the United States Senate passed on Wednesday and President Obama signed on Thursday, does not require states to adopt teacher evaluation systems at all.

“It’s been a historic day, as far as I’m concerned,” Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, said, referring to the task force’s report and the president’s signing of the new law. “Today marks the end of the test-and-punish education ideology.”

Although Mr. Cuomo has wielded influence over the state’s evaluation system, it is the State Education Department and the Board of Regents that oversee the state standards and tests. The governor and members of his administration have repeatedly criticized the department and the Regents for what he has called a “flawed and mismanaged” rollout of the Common Core.

In the last year, the Legislature has elected several new Regents who are critical of the current tests and evaluation system, so a majority of the current board would probably support many of the changes that the task force is suggesting.

If the Regents were to enact any of these changes, it would most likely be at their next meeting, on Monday and Tuesday, or in January.

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