



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on March 13, 2017

New York State to End Literacy Test for Aspiring Educators, Claiming it Hurts Diversity

Officials at the New York State Board of Regents believe it is more important to be politically correct than to ensure that the individuals educating New York's students have a mastery of the English language. Associated Press reports that the Board of Regents plans to scrap a literacy test for potential teachers today because too many non-whites are failing the test. Critics claim the test is making it difficult to achieve diversity within the teaching profession.



The test in question is the Academic Literacy Skills Test (ALST), which “measures whether a prospective teacher can understand and analyze reading material and also write competently,” according to the *New York Post*.

The ALST was introduced in the 2013-2014 school year, along with three other assessments, ostensibly to raise the quality of teachers in New York by assessing reading and writing skills and testing an individual's ability to master the Common Core standards for English. New York State Deputy Commissioner of Education Ken Wagner defended the test as one that would help to “ensure that each newly certified teacher entered the classroom with certain minimum knowledge, skills and abilities.”

Improving the quality of teachers is of prime importance to the education reform movement, according to AP. A December 2016 study by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that 44 percent of teaching programs accepted students from the bottom half of their high school classes.

The ALST is comparable to a 12th grade-level assessment, states the executive director of the New York office of the Education Trust Ian Rosenblum, and is comprised of multiple choice questions based on reading passages such as President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address.

When the test was first rolled out, the statewide pass rate was 68 percent, prompting State Education Commissioner John King to announce that New York's teacher-prep programs needed to improve or be closed.

“It's better to have fewer programs that better prepare teachers than having many schools that have teachers who are unprepared for the classroom,” King said.

But focus has been redirected from failing teacher-prep programs to the test itself. Critics claim it hurts diversity because too many non-white individuals are failing it. AP reports that just 46 percent of Hispanic test-takers and 41 percent of black test-takers passed the test at first try, compared to 64 percent of white test-takers.

In 2015, individuals who had failed the ALST challenged the test in court with claims that it is discriminatory, but a federal judge determined that the test was not racially discriminatory.

Judge Kimba M. Wood, a failed Bill Clinton nominee for U.S. attorney general, ruled that just because racial minorities scored lower on the test did not mean it was discriminatory. Wood determined that the



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test accurately evaluates the skills necessary to teach successfully and therefore has a place in determining which individuals should be permitted to teach.

Judge Wood ruled that the state and Pearson, the testing company that helped devise the exam, had adequately ensured that the “content of the ALST is representative of the content of a New York State public-school teacher’s job.”

At the time, New York State Education Department spokesman David Tompkins celebrated Wood’s ruling in favor of the test.

“Our students need and deserve the best qualified teachers possible, and the ALST helps make sure they get those teachers,” Tompkins said, according to the *Times*.

Despite this ruling, however, members on the Board of Regents assert that the test is hurting its agenda of achieving a diverse workforce of school teachers. Professor of Education at Pace University Leslie Soodak, who served on the task force behind the recommendation to eliminate the ALST, said, “Having a white workforce really doesn’t match our student body anymore.”

Soodak contends that the test is not necessary to make sure that teachers are meeting high standards. “We want high standards, without a doubt. Not every given test is going to get us there.”

Soodak and other critics claim that basic literacy tests only measure a person’s ability to write and speak, which may not be as important as other aspects.

Alfred S. Posamentier, former education dean at Mercy College, told the *Times* that the test is not an indicator of who would be a good teacher because it measures “how eloquent a person is in the English language.”

“The question is, is that one of the criterion for determining who will be a good teacher?” Posamentier adds, “My sense is that the answer is no.”

Supporters of the ALST understand, however, that eliminating the test could open the doors to having weaker teachers in the classroom.

According to Kate Walsh, the president of National Council on Teacher Quality, minorities tend to score lower on these exams as a result of other factors, such as poverty and the “legacy of racism,” but that should not warrant the exam’s eradication. “There’s not a test in the country that doesn’t have disproportionate performance on the part of blacks and Latinos,” she said, but removing it as a prerequisite for teachers would be “a crying shame.”

This is not the first time critics have claimed that expectations of reading and writing in proper grammatical English is discriminatory, unfortunately.

An anti-racist poster at the writing center at the University of English claims that American grammar is inherently “racist.” The poster contends that students should not be penalized for using slang or poor grammar in speech or in writing assignments.

According to the poster, “there is no inherent ‘standard’ of English” and that “language is constantly changing.” As a result, there is no real justification for “placing people in hierarchies or restricting opportunities and privileges because of the way people communicate in particular versions of English.”

The irony of this, of course, is that the poster’s message is racist in that it presumes that minority students are incapable of speaking and writing in proper English and require the protection of



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academia to safeguard them from such unfair expectations. But what happens to these students when they are out in the so-called real world away from the “safe spaces” of college campuses and need to construct a well-written cover letter and professional resume?

Apparently, they can go teach in New York State, where literacy will no longer be a requirement for teachers.


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