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**NYC DOE's Test-Obsessed Promotion Policies Leave Families in Limbo:
First day of summer is NO VACATION for parents wondering if children will be promoted**

New York City – In recent weeks the Department of Education (DOE) sent letters to thousands of students, including some with passing and even excellent grades, notifying them they have not been promoted to the next grade. Shocked parents, teachers and principals have been left scrambling to keep children from being unfairly held back.

Unlike the rest of New York State, the city bases promotion decisions for 3rd-8th graders on test scores from the annual state English Language Arts (ELA) and math exams, regardless of student performance throughout the year. Yet since 2010, when the state began administering tests in April and May instead of January and March, promotion decisions in NYC have been based on preliminary test results because final scores are not released until mid to late summer. This has meant that some students are sent to summer school and denied the opportunity to participate in graduation ceremonies, even though their final test scores will qualify them for promotion.

A middle school principal, who asked to remain anonymous, expressed her distress at having to tell an 8th grader he could not participate in graduation because of his preliminary test score in math. She asked, “What happens at the end of summer if his actual score shows he passed? He can’t walk for graduation. That only happens once.” The principal and his math teacher both believe the student’s performance met the bar for promotion.

This year’s uncertainty about student promotion was compounded by the introduction of state exams based on the “Common Core Learning Standards,” to which schools and teachers are still in the process of transitioning. The exams themselves were wholly experimental. In fact, NYC Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott acknowledged in a [February letter to parents](#) the serious challenges inherent in using scores from the April 2013 exams to assess student performance: “This year, because the tests are new, we cannot predict how the State will determine performance levels.” Nonetheless, the DOE is sending thousands of children to summer school based solely on *preliminary results from experimental exams*.

“Our 8th grade daughter has been performing well in school all year,” says one Bronx mother, “How can the fact that she did not do well on the April math exam erase a whole year of learning and academic achievement?”

Further, public school parents in NYC and across the country are increasingly skeptical about the reliance on standardized tests to make high-stakes decisions about the performance of students and teachers. As a result, a growing “opt out” movement has meant that hundreds of students in NYC refused to take this year’s state tests.

Students without state test scores as well as those scoring in the bottom 10 percent of preliminary state exam results are subject to an inscrutable “portfolio review” process, which is largely based on yet another test. Conversations with parents and educators throughout the city reveal that:

- (1) The process by which students are denied promotion is not at all transparent. Parents are not routinely informed that students with failing test scores or no test scores will be asked to take another test.
- (2) Most parents whose children go through the “portfolio review” process are not aware that:
 - Their children are held to a higher standard than children promoted based on their state test scores,
 - Alternative tests comprise the bulk of a student “portfolio,” supplemented by only a few pieces of actual student work,
 - Despite the recommendations of a child’s teacher and principal, the district superintendent makes the final decision about promotion,
 - There is no consistency across districts in superintendent evaluations of portfolios.
- (3) In some districts, students who refused to take the April exams – including many with high grades – seem to have had their portfolios singled out for a higher level of scrutiny.

“As parents we are particularly concerned because in so many ways our children’s teachers, who are best equipped to assess them, are excluded from the process, resulting in unnecessary work and anxiety for everyone,” said Andrea Mata, a parent in District 6.

Although students who are denied promotion are not required to attend summer school, they are strongly encouraged to take additional tests in August to move on to the next grade. These exams, created by the city, are yet a third set of tests used for student promotion decisions in New York City that further subject children to arbitrary promotion criteria and ignore the judgments of the people best qualified to assess their academic performance – their teachers.

Change the Stakes calls on the NYC Department of Education to immediately disclose information on the number of 3rd-8th grade students in each district who were “recommended” for summer school, the number of portfolios submitted by principals to superintendents in support of student promotion, and the approval rate for such portfolios for each district.

We also join parents across the city in calling for student promotion policies that are transparent in how decisions about individual students are made, proactive in communication with parents, and consistent across districts. Given the high number of unresolved contested student retention decisions in districts across the City, the DOE should designate a central office to handle inquiries and grievances relating to student promotion this year.

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[Change the Stakes](http://changethestakes.org) (changethestakes.org) is a group of parents and educators working to reduce the harm caused by high stakes-testing, which we believe must be replaced by valid forms of student, teacher, and school assessment. Change the Stakes believes decisions about a child’s promotion to the next grade should be made by educators who know the child using a broad range of information and tools to assess the child’s readiness to perform at the next grade level.