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Social Media And The Governor's Race

Candidates' approaches differ in pursuit of viral moments

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How 4 LI Women Faced Breast Cancer

EXPLORE LI

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INSIDE THE REGENTS PHASEOUT



Baldwin High School seniors Stephanie Rodea, left, and Javan Alexis work on a project to improve backpack design to reduce back pain.

3 LI schools offer a look at how students could be assessed under new graduation requirements

A2-4

VIDEO AT
NEWSDAY.TV



WHAT THE GIG ECONOMY LOOKS LIKE ON LI

A20-21

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TOP STORIES

3 LI SCHOOLS LOOK

High school graduation requirements evolving beyond tests for Class of '28

BY DANDAN ZOU

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High schoolers huddled in teams near life-size skeleton models during a recent anatomy and physiology class at Baldwin High School.

Their task? To consider an everyday object — a backpack — and look for ways to improve its design to solve a problem that ails so many — back pain.

Senior Mikayla Lorusso's team decided to widen the straps, add a buckle around the wearer's waist and insert more inside pockets to distribute the weight of books and laptops.

The goal, teacher Michelle Schrick said, is to encourage students to apply their knowledge to real-world problems, in addition to learning facts like the location and function of human bones.

"These project-based learning activities bring it all together and bring it to life in a way that really requires them to understand the content and then apply that to solving a problem," she said.

Lorusso, 17, who plans to become a nurse, agreed: "That helps you get the idea rather than just memorizing terms."

Starting next year, high schoolers across New York

could see similar programs roll out in more classrooms, as the state phases out Regents exams as a requirement for high school graduation.

New state initiative

Under the proposed vision of a yearslong initiative known as New York Inspires, seniors in the Class of 2028 would instead be asked to demonstrate proficiency in ways beyond standardized tests — including, possibly, capstone projects, industry-recognized credentials, work-based learning experiences and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses.

State officials have said high-stakes exams like the Regents block students who may not be good test-takers from graduating. They argued the change is about creating a system that is more equitable and relevant to what students will need to succeed after high school.

But in interviews with more than two dozen educators, students and experts about the state's ambitious plan to reshape secondary education, reaction has been mixed.

Many expressed excitement

and said they believed it would benefit students and open space for more creativity and innovation in the classroom.

"It's a transformation," Brentwood schools Superintendent Wanda Ortiz-Rivera said. "It just feels like a different era."

Others, however, said they worried poor execution of the state's lofty goals could end up lowering academic rigor and widening inequity.

Individual districts have been told by the state to begin "immediately" drafting assessment plans. But some educators expressed reluctance to do so without first knowing what the state will require for graduation.

Many have also expressed confusion over what the new graduation measures would look like across districts — Would a diploma from Buffalo, for example, carry the same weight as one from Babylon?

"How are they going to make sure that [students] are accountable for what they know?" said Gloria Sesso, president of the Long Island Council for the Social Studies. "They tore down the system without a substitute for accountability."

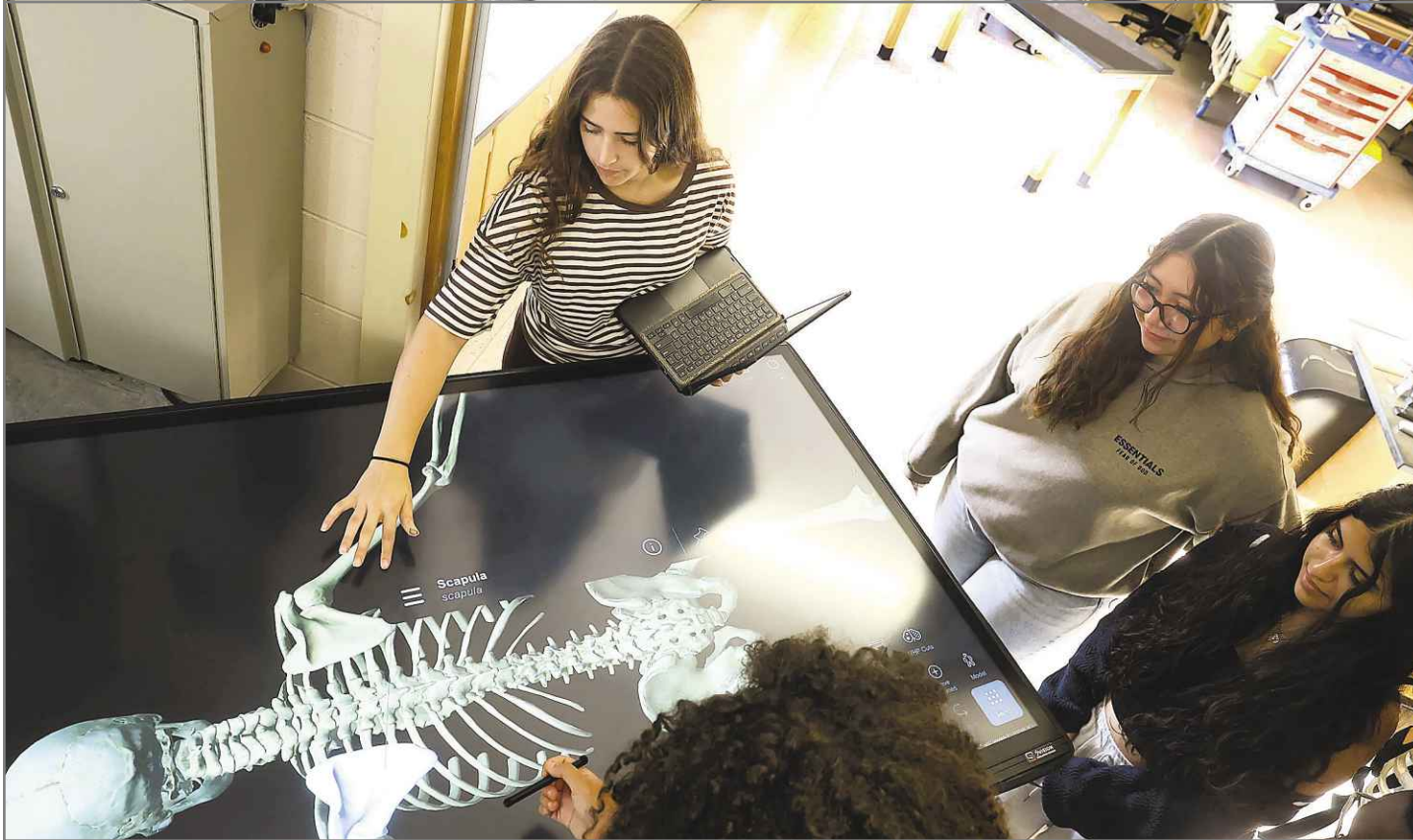
State officials said more guidance will be rolled out in the coming months and have pushed back on critiques that decoupling Regents exams from graduation would lower academic expectations or weaken standards.

Students will continue to



Brentwood students work with the harvest from the school's state-of-the-art hydroponic lettuce wall.

BEYOND STATE'S REGENTS EXAMS



Students work together with a life-size skeleton during an anatomy and physiology class at Baldwin High School. ■ Video: [newsday.tv](https://www.newsday.tv)

take state assessments to comply with federal law. Regents exams have been used to satisfy federal accountability requirements but the Education Department said new assessments will be developed to compare student achievement statewide.

Another planned major change to come would be to replace the 22 credits currently required for graduation with competency-based criteria beginning in the 2029-30 school year. "Removing the requirement to pass a prescribed set of Regents exams does not suspend evaluation of student learning," state Education Department spokeswoman Karen Male said in a statement.

Too many left behind

The spark for New York Inspires was ignited in 2019, when Education Commissioner Betty A. Rosa, then Regents chancellor, argued the state's current system left too many vulnerable students behind and called for changes.

In September, Rosa reiterated a single test taken on a single day cannot fully cap-

ture everything a student knows or can do, and a reliance on high-stakes testing fails to prepare students for life beyond high school.

"New York can no longer be held hostage by critics who insist that clinging to outdated models somehow preserves rigor," she said in a statement.

While a general framework, known as Portrait of a Graduate, has been developed, the state has yet to put in place the specific criteria that will replace the role Regents exams have played for decades as a graduation requirement. With less than a year to go, that has led critics to argue it is unclear how the initiative will work in practice.

Programs currently operating in three Long Island schools, chosen as part of a pilot program in 2024, could offer some clues.

Baldwin High School, Brentwood High School and North Babylon's Robert Moses Middle School were among 23 schools picked to participate in a state performance-based learning pilot program to ex-

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **The state is planning to phase out Regents exams** as a requirement for high school graduation starting next school year.
- **Critics have complained the state** has not provided enough clarity into what the new graduation measures will look like.
- **Three Long Island schools chosen to participate in a pilot program** could offer some clues, with students evaluated on factors such as how well they collaborated on a project.

plore alternative ways to measure student achievement rather than standardized tests.

In Schrick's anatomy class, for example, students were evaluated on their final design and their individual contribution to the end product. Schrick graded them on whether their design accurately reflected anatomical structures and how they collaborated with their peers. Schrick also used "exit tickets" to test student knowledge and ran traditional exams.

Schrick's rubrics checked off several of the qualities outlined in Portrait of a Graduate. These included determining how her students worked to make the backpack better — creativity and critical thinking — and how they did so by talking to their

classmates — communication.

In North Babylon, meanwhile, sixth graders learning about mythologies were tasked with creating their own god or goddess. They also learned to fly drones and researched their history.

Teachers involved in the pilot program said they saw more engagement from students because they were able to take on more ownership of their learning.

Juliet Daly, who has taught for more than two decades, said it was hard for her at first to relinquish some of the control in the classroom.

"You teach a certain amount of years. You're very used to, 'I'm telling you what to do, right? You're supposed to fol-

low,'" she said. "Now we're seeing that their eyes are lighting up when they have more control over what they need to do."

The teachers still drive the instruction. They set parameters and limit the number of choices students have. But giving students that choice has made a big difference, Daly and her colleagues said.

"They're saying: 'OK. Well, I can choose between these two. I'd really rather not do it this way. I want to do it this way. Awesome. I'm going to put so much more effort into it,'" she said.

In Brentwood, students at the freshman campus grew lettuce on a hydroponic wall and the leafy produce was used in the school's salad bars. Vincent Leone, director of programs and policy, said Brentwood plans to scale up performance-based learning in culinary arts and other areas throughout the district.

"It's not just about taking an exam," Ortiz-Rivera said of the new initiative. "When they go out there and even go for a college interview, they will be able to speak about those experiences in a way that an exam is not going to be very good for."

Lack of clarity cited

Removing Regents exams as a graduation requirement will "not automatically transform teaching and learning," Baldwin schools Superintendent Anthony Mignella said. That will take "a shared vision, strong instructional practices, and a commitment to maintaining academic rigor," he said in a statement.

The question is how that can be achieved across the state's more than 700 districts. Long Island alone has 123 instructional districts. Even supporters of the state initiative have said the guidance released so far is too vague and lacks clarity.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, former deputy chancellor of the Department of Education in New York City, said he supported the state's shift away from making Regents exams the gatekeeper for a diploma.

"But for it to work, there has to be a really clear and strong plan from the state," he said.

See REGENTS on A4

MANY QUESTIONS LINGER IN SWITCH

REGENTS from A3

Shari Camhi, former Baldwin superintendent and a board member of the National Assessment Governing Board, said a successful implementation requires a lot of “pre-work” and it’s labor-intensive to design and grade performance-based learning.

“Are we looking at performance-based assessments for every single course?” she said. “Or are we limiting the number of exit assessments that we’re requiring? . . . There are, to me, so many outstanding questions.”

Kenneth Bossert, president of New York State Council of School Superintendents and superintendent of Great Neck schools, said the uncertainty has caused unease.

“There is some angst in the region . . . because sequentially the department announced that there would no longer be Regents exam requirements but has not yet said, ‘And here’s what we are doing,’” he said.

When developing assessment strategies, the question for districts to consider is not what to do instead of Regents exams, said Shannon Logan, the state Education Department’s project director for New York Inspires.

What they should do is “look at assessment holistically and . . . identify the ways that the district knows that the student has learned and can do the knowledge and skills that are required through the standards,” she said.

Michael Bennett, deputy commissioner for P-12 operational support at the state Education Department, said the localized approach reflects the state’s recognition that every school community has its own culture.

“We want to be able to allow school districts to be able to build upon that but at the same time be able to give an academic experience to their kid that is equal from school district to school district,” he said.

Accountability, inequity

Danyela Souza Egorov, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, called making Regents exams optional an attack on school accountability.

“I think it’s just really dangerous that now every single



Robert Moses Middle School students fly drones through an obstacle course. Robert Moses is part of a pilot program to explore project-based learning to replace state Regents exams.

high school is going to . . . have their own rubric on how kids are meeting those standards,” she said. “It’s going to dilute the value of the high school graduation diploma.”

Graduation rates on Long Island varied by districts. Last year, they ranged from 100% in Cold Spring Harbor to Wyandanch at 64%. The overall graduation rate on the Island was nearly 92% in 2025.

Critics have raised the potential of growing inequity because more affluent districts may develop more rigorous standards than others.

Education department officials said the state’s learning standards will remain consistent across districts regardless of ZIP codes and schools will continue to “assess learning every day through classroom assessments, assignments, projects, examinations and other evidence.”

Male, the department spokeswoman, also called it “a misleading impression that districts are waiting for assessment systems to exist.”

Jeff Smink, deputy director of The Education Trust-New York, said his organization supports the goals of the state initiative but is concerned about its rollout. The greatest challenge the state faces is low proficiency rates in foundational reading and math skills, he said.

Only about half of New York students in grades 3-8 scored proficient in English (48%) and math (57%) in 2025-26, according to preliminary results

released in August.

“It’s hard to see how a student who’s not reading at grade level or not doing math at grade level can do the kinds of innovative learning that New York Inspires envisions,” Smink said.

The group has called on state officials to pause its implementation for two years, arguing the state “should not tear down the measuring stick before it builds a better one.”

Smink pointed to Pennsylvania as a cautionary example. That state in recent years allowed students who struggled with standardized tests to demonstrate college or career readiness in alternatives like credentials. Educators there reported a troubling trend in which students obtained “low-value” credentials such as a two-hour-long ladder safety course to count toward graduation requirements.

“That’s why there’s got to be guardrails in place from the state before we just move forward with this initiative,” Smink said.

Sesso, for her part, still believes in the value of Regents exams. She said the exams test a student’s minimum knowledge. She agreed some students have a harder time passing them but a better approach would be to support those students rather than “throwing out the baby with the bathwater,” she said.

To get through a high-stakes test itself is a skill, she argued: “Can you go through life not taking one exam?”

Outcry

Experts: Mailers fuel anti-Muslim sentiment

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY BAHAR OSTADAN

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In the season of political mailers, Republicans have ramped up the rhetoric by releasing a series of ads painting Democrats as sympathetic to the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks, a strategy that experts said stokes fear and anti-Muslim sentiment to drive voters to the polls.

As Muslim Long Islanders condemn the ads, experts said politicizing Sept. 11, 2001, is a risky strategy that targets a subset of voters and, sometimes, signals a desperate campaign.

“9/11 continues to evoke strong emotional reactions for voters,” said Costas Panagopoulos, a political science professor at Northeastern University in Boston. “It’s not surprising that campaigns are trying to leverage imagery and recollections of 9/11 for their own political purposes, especially in a place like New York.”

John Geer, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University, said publishing propaganda for political gain was nothing new. “Usually you do this type of thing when you’re in trouble,” Geer told Newsday. “You’re willing to take a gamble if you’re behind.”

Two weeks after the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attacks, Dean Tarulli, a Democratic candidate for the state Assembly’s 15th District, covering parts of Hempstead, North Hempstead and Oyster Bay, opened his mailbox to find a campaign ad attacking him. The ad, paid for by the New York State Republican Committee, showed an image of his face next to the quote, “America deserved 9/11.”

The quote did not belong to Tarulli, nor to New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a fellow Democrat whose image also appeared on the mailer. It was a quote from Los Angeles-based, far-left online streamer

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

■ **Political campaigns** on Long Island have intensified since early September, with Republicans using ads to link Democrats to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which experts said aims to stoke fear and anti-Muslim sentiment to drive voter turnout.

■ **Controversial ads** have falsely attributed quotes to Democratic candidates, leading to backlash from Muslim communities and to accusations of exploiting 9/11 for political gain.

■ **The strategy** of politicizing 9/11 is not new and has been used by both parties in the past, often as a desperate measure when candidates face challenging election prospects.

Hasan Piker, who has become a lightning rod for Republicans nationwide to attack their political targets. Tarulli said he has never met Mamdani or Piker, and he later sent a cease-and-desist letter to Republicans asking them to retract the ads.

State Republicans are standing by the mailer, claiming it was factual and “backed up by citations,” giving them no reason to abide by the cease-and-desist demand.

The mailer cites sources like “FOX NEWS, 6/26/26” in its footnotes, but those news outlets did not report Tarulli or Mamdani saying, “America deserved 9/11.” (State Republicans also have sent a cease-and-desist request to Democrats over mailers in a Nassau congressional race.)

When Isma Chaudhry, a board member for the Islamic Center of Long Island, saw the mailer attacking Tarulli, she said campaigns had hit “rock bottom.”

“It’s beyond in poor taste,” said Chaudhry, a member of Nassau’s Minority Affairs Council and the district attorney’s Faith Leaders Advisory Council. “It’s turning a national tragedy into a political weapon to win an election. Where is their integrity?”

Republicans aren’t the only ones who have invoked 9/11 in