

As elected officials, we have a responsibility to be leaders and problem-solvers. The test results released this summer demonstrate we have a crisis – too many of our students are not being prepared to succeed.

In Buffalo, our schools deal with the extreme challenges of urban education, including high poverty. But, we must not let this be an excuse. We must hold all of our students to the same high standard, and we must prepare them to meet that standard. The Common Core is a unique opportunity to demonstrate that commitment.

These new standards are based on critical thinking and problem solving skills; the days of rote learning and memorization are over. The common core standards reflect what every parent wants their child to learn in school – how to read and comprehend complex literary texts, how to write persuasive essays, how to evaluate an argument and determine whether supporting evidence is sufficient – these are the things that will prepare children for success in college and in life.

For too long there has been a dangerous disconnect between what students are learning in school and what they will need to know on the job.

The College Board reports that between 40 percent and 60 percent of first-year college students require remedial coursework. A State Education Department survey of SUNY and CUNY schools showed a similar rate. This essentially means that students are paying college tuition to take high school-level math and language arts courses because their high schools did not adequately prepare them for the rigor of college-level work.

Consider that in June, the unemployment rate in the Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan area was 7.4 percent.¹ That comes out to more than 42,000 people in our region who were unemployed, in part because employers were unable to find workers with the right skills. Whereas the most recent unemployment rate in Buffalo is even more alarming being 10.2%.

Buffalo's high school graduates are not ready for college-level work. Among students who started at Erie Community College in 2011, 41 percent needed remedial coursework.²

We cannot ignore that any longer. We have to be honest with our students about what it takes to succeed, and tell them that we expect each and every one of them to live up to that standard. If we aren't preparing our students to be critical thinkers then we're failing them, but the real crime is an unwillingness to own up to that reality. That is negligence on our part.

For the 2012-2013 testing cycle, for ELA, 31.1% of NYS students met or exceeded proficiency standards, whereas 9.6% of Buffalo students did. For Mathematics, 31% of NYS students met or exceeded proficiency standards, whereas 11.5% of Buffalo students did. These results challenge the whole state to better prepare its students, but it reaches levels of alarm in Buffalo.

Under the old standards, students were frequently unprepared for the rigor of college academics upon graduation. While college enrollment has consistently grown, graduation rates have largely remained unchanged. The new Common Core standards and aligned exams are a necessary first step to getting New York students to the next level.

¹ New York State Department of Labor. July 23, 2013. <http://labor.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/prlaus.shtm>

² *Democrat & Chronicle*. "Remediation at community colleges." <http://www.rocdocs.com/database/remediation-community-colleges>

These test scores mark a realistic baseline from which teachers and parents can provide supports to students on their path to college and career readiness. We all have a role to play in helping students succeed. As school board members, we must set a vision and strategy for excellence in student achievement in the district. We must make decisions that prioritize our students, while also making our decisions transparent to the community. As a community, we must raise our expectations for our students and the school district. Through our combined efforts, we can ensure that students reach their full potential and are prepared for college and careers.

Critics of the Common Core State Standards are acting irresponsibly by claiming that our schools and students are fine – they say, “we are not failing them...they are doing better than ever.” Then why are less than 50% of Buffalo’s students graduating from high school? Why are less than 9% of those graduates ready for college? There are real challenges in urban education and they need solutions, not excuses. Buffalo’s students deserve the Common Core – they deserve higher expectations and the opportunity to excel. Change is never easy, but we are failing our students if we shrink from this moment.