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Testimony at the New York City Council Education Committee

Good Afternoon Chairman Jackson and the members of the New York City Council Education Committee.

My name is Ruben Diaz Jr. and I am the Borough President of what I call "God's country," the beautiful borough of the Bronx. I want to commend Chairman Jackson and all on the committee for holding this very important hearing today to discuss this past year's shocking results on the New York State Reading and Math tests. I am hopeful that this will be the beginning of a process that gets to the truth on what caused the drop in scores and also examines what has happened both at the State and City level over the past several years.

Last year in Math, 82 percent of 3rd through 8th grade students in New York City were deemed proficient. However, this year that number has fallen by 28 points to an alarming 54 percent. Reading scores also suffered the same dramatic drop, as last year's 69 percent proficiency rate fell by 27 points to just 42 percent this year. Recently the State Education Department has requested that the New York City Department of Education develop a corrective action plan for our English Language Learners (ELLs). The Bronx numbers for ELL students on both the State Math and ELA tests are at crisis proportions:

44.1 percent of Bronx ELL students scored at Level 1
44.9 percent at Level 2
10.2 percent at Level 3 and only .8 percent at the highest level of proficiency, Level 4.

In Math, 26.8 of Bronx ELL students are at Level 1,
49.3 percent are at Level 2
19.7 percent are at Level 3 and 4.2 percent are at Level 4.

The general response that has been given by both the New York City Department of Education and the New York State Department of Education is that students are still doing as well as they did last year, but that the measurement used by the State has become more rigorous.

However, education experts have questioned whether we are now reverting back to standards that were lowered over the past several years. These experts feel that there was a deliberate reduction in scoring which lead to “astronomical” gains in both Reading and Math in recent years.

Plain and simple, in the short answer portion of the test the raw scores were lowered, in some cases dramatically, and we need to understand how and why this happened.

I included with my testimony to the committee a sheet that contains the entire Grade 3-8 ELA cut score/raw score comparisons from 2006-2009. On this sheet you will see dramatic drops in the raw scores, where in some cases the score is almost halved.

For instance, in 2006 the Grade 5 ELA Level 2 raw score was 12, in 2008 that number was dropped to 9.

In 2006, the Math Grade 3 Level 2 raw score was 17, in 2009, that number was dropped to 11.

I have many questions regarding this issue that I urge this committee to pursue:

Why did former State Education Commissioner Mills lower these cut scores?

Did the Regents approve this decision?

It has been stated to me and my staff that the New York City Department of Education was aware of these reductions as early as 2008. If so, then why did they continue to promote these tremendous gains when they knew that the State had in essence lowered the bar?

In New York City schools have been closed, bonuses have been awarded and students have received or not received additional help as direct consequence of these tests. The results of these tests raise the core question, “What is the state of our education system?”

Many have argued that we should not play the blame game or look into the past, but instead move forward. I feel that this type of rhetoric is hypocritical, especially when over the past eight years we have had an education system that has prided itself on accountability, and we have based major reforms on this premise. You cannot just have a select few accountable and give those in positions of power a free pass. This is unjust and I urge this committee to not allow that to happen.

I was happy that Senate Education Chair Suzi Oppenheimer has agreed to hold a hearing on this issue as well, but I believe that the magnitude of these findings requires that hearings not only occur in Manhattan, but throughout the State and have written her a letter with this request. I urge this committee to also join me in that request. Chairman Jackson and members of the committee I would also ask that you consider holding hearings throughout the City so that in all Boroughs every single parent, student, community member and educator has the opportunity to voice their concerns and get to the truth of this situation so that we can truly move forward.

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Members of the committee with more students scoring at Level 1 and 2 than reported in previous years we also need to have a detailed plan from the New York City Department of Education as to when, where and how these children will be receiving the services needed to get up to grade level and beyond.

The borough of the Bronx, as well as all of the residents of entire State of New York, deserves a full and detailed response as to what truly occurred here. I am confident that this committee will aggressively examine these issues. Chairman Jackson, I urge that you and the members of this committee join me in calling for not only former State Education Commissioner Richard Mills to testify but also the members of the Board of Regents, our New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein, and Deputy Mayor of Education Dennis Walcott .

I thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns.

Grades 3-8 ELA Cut Score Comparisons (2006-2009)

| | Achievement Level | 2006 | | 2007 | | 2008 | | 2009 | |
|---------|-------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | | Raw Score | Scale Score |
| Grade 3 | Level 2 Cut | 16 | 617 | 16 | 618 | 15 | 618 | 14 | 618 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 24 | 653 | 24 | 652 | 25 | 653 | 24 | 651 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 32 | 744 | 32 | 732 | 32 | 720 | 32 | 720 |
| Grade 4 | Level 2 Cut | 19 | 616 | 19 | 615 | 18 | 613 | 16 | 614 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 28 | 652 | 30 | 652 | 28 | 650 | 27 | 650 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 39 | 711 | 41 | 721 | 41 | 723 | 41 | 721 |
| Grade 5 | Level 2 Cut | 12 | 609 | 12 | 612 | 9 | 609 | 9 | 613 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 20 | 650 | 22 | 654 | 20 | 650 | 21 | 652 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 28 | 712 | 30 | 727 | 30 | 718 | 30 | 713 |
| Grade 6 | Level 2 Cut | 16 | 601 | 12 | 599 | 11 | 602 | 7 | 590 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 26 | 650 | 28 | 653 | 28 | 652 | 27 | 651 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 35 | 706 | 37 | 708 | 38 | 715 | 38 | 696 |
| Grade 7 | Level 2 Cut | 17 | 601 | 16 | 600 | 12 | 601 | 9 | 602 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 29 | 650 | 31 | 653 | 28 | 651 | 28 | 650 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 38 | 713 | 39 | 716 | 40 | 729 | 40 | 705 |
| Grade 8 | Level 2 Cut | 21 | 602 | 19 | 602 | 19 | 604 | 13 | 602 |
| | Level 3 Cut | 33 | 652 | 33 | 650 | 34 | 653 | 31 | 650 |
| | Level 4 Cut | 42 | 728 | 43 | 726 | 43 | 726 | 43 | 717 |

Grades 3-8 Math Cut Score Comparisons (2006-2009)

| | | 2006 | | 2007 | | 2008 | | 2009 | |
|---------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | | Raw Score | Scale Score |
| Grade 3 | level 2 cut | 17 | 624 | 16 | 625 | 13 | 624 | 11 | 624 |
| | level 3 cut | 25 | 650 | 24 | 651 | 23 | 652 | 21 | 650 |
| | level 4 cut | 36 | 704 | 36 | 706 | 37 | 710 | 38 | 710 |
| Grade 4 | level 2 cut | 25 | 622 | 23 | 622 | 23 | 623 | 22 | 623 |
| | level 3 cut | 40 | 650 | 39 | 651 | 38 | 650 | 37 | 651 |
| | level 4 cut | 62 | 702 | 63 | 702 | 63 | 703 | 62 | 704 |
| Grade 5 | level 2 cut | 17 | 619 | 15 | 619 | 15 | 619 | 13 | 620 |
| | level 3 cut | 27 | 650 | 26 | 651 | 24 | 650 | 23 | 652 |
| | level 4 cut | 41 | 700 | 41 | 702 | 41 | 701 | 40 | 699 |
| Grade 6 | level 2 cut | 16 | 616 | 16 | 619 | 13 | 618 | 13 | 620 |
| | level 3 cut | 28 | 650 | 27 | 651 | 25 | 650 | 24 | 652 |
| | level 4 cut | 44 | 698 | 43 | 700 | 43 | 698 | 43 | 699 |
| Grade 7 | level 2 cut | 17 | 612 | 16 | 613 | 14 | 615 | 11 | 616 |
| | level 3 cut | 28 | 650 | 28 | 651 | 26 | 650 | 22 | 651 |
| | level 4 cut | 41 | 696 | 43 | 696 | 43 | 695 | 43 | 695 |
| Grade 8 | level 2 cut | 19 | 617 | 19 | 617 | 18 | 616 | 15 | 616 |
| | level 3 cut | 38 | 650 | 38 | 650 | 38 | 650 | 35 | 651 |
| | level 4 cut | 63 | 701 | 64 | 702 | 63 | 702 | 64 | 704 |