



In her first major policy speech, Elia talks charters, Common Core, opt-out

Elia. (AP Photo/Mike Groll) By Keshia Clukey 9:33 p.m. | Feb. 4, 2016

ALBANY — After seven months as state education commissioner, MaryEllen Elia gave her first significant policy address Thursday evening, highlighting the need for transparency and continuous feedback.

Elia discussed a number of hot button issues, but tread lightly on topics such as the Common Core standards, the growing test refusal, or opt-out movement, teacher evaluations and support for charter schools.

“People in New York — many people, across many areas — who reflect on what’s happening in our schools are at a high pitch,” Elia said during an address at Teachers College, Columbia University, in Manhattan. “We need to unplug and we need to step back and we need to say ‘what are the things that need to be changed.’”

“But the way that New York got to the high pitch was moving at a warp speed,” she said. “Maybe the things that were done would have ended up much better if they hadn’t been done in the time sequence that they were.”

Elia also noted that the education department and state Board of Regents are reviewing the controversial Common Core learning standards, the state's teacher evaluation system and state standardized tests.

"This process, the new word that's very, very critical is transparent ... people need to understand they will have the opportunity to give feedback and ultimately we will move forward on an adoption of the revised standards," she said.

Elia stressed the importance of quality assessments and not administering just one test at the end of the school year to gauge student growth. Rather, she said, multiple measures should be used throughout the year. Discussing the challenges in the third- through-eighth grade math and English language arts exams for this spring, Elia noted the tests were shortened.

"We have shortened the assessments, not a lot, but we have shortened the assessments," Elia said, adding that the department will continue to look at the exams in the future.

Last spring, more than 20 percent, about 240,000 of the state's eligible students opted out of the third- through eighth-grade state standardized, Common Core-aligned exams.

"I am not dealing just with the opt-out movement," Elia said of her plans moving forward. "I think that would be very short-sighted. I think what we have to do is look at all these things, listen to people and appropriately make changes."

She pushed for more local control, noting that the education department is not in charge of creating the curriculum, though it does provide resources to assist districts.

"New York is not a state where everyone does the same," Elia said. "And I think it's really important that we put local control back in place and allow school districts to work with their educators and develop curriculum that will get their students to those high standards."

Elia's short but controversial appearance Tuesday at a charter rally in Albany was also brought up Thursday night, as the moderator fielding submitted questions asked about the education department's role in charter schools. New York State United Teachers criticized her appearance at the rally, saying it "sends the wrong message."

Elia made light of it, especially the amount of attention the appearance was given in the press. She said she only spoke for about five minutes and that she hadn't given any opinions on charter schools other than supporting choice.

"I believe that charter schools have to be accountable like all public schools. They receive public money and I think that's a very important thing," Elia said. "It's important for us as the department of education, just like I think it's important for us, if we can provide support for non-public schools we should do it. It's part of our mission ... to support the students of New York and let me remind you charter school students are public school students."