Regent Johnson defends study on graduation rules

ADDRESSING EDUCATION’S PRESSING ISSUES

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It irks Judith Johnson that some believe the state Board of Regents is looking to water down high school graduation requirements to drive up graduation rates.

“Why would this board deceive 3 million children?” she said. “We’re not charlatans.”

The Regents, who make educational policy for New York, are about to launch a yearlong study of what it should take to earn a high school diploma. The role of the board’s namesake Regents exams could well change, and the process will be closely watched.

Johnson represents the 9th Judicial District on the board — Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Dutchess and Orange counties. She talked to The Journal News/lohud at Rockland BOCES about the pressing educational issues before New Yorkers as the 2019-20 school year begins.

“If we don’t consider multiple pathways to graduation, we are not identifying the talents, the skills, kids have,” she said.

Johnson, who lives in New Hempstead, Rockland County, was appointed to a five-year term as a Regent, effective

Judith Johnson, who may be the best-known educator in the Lower Hudson Valley, represents the region on the state Board of Regents. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS
April 1, 2015, by the state Legislature.

She served in administrative roles for the Mamaroneck, Southern Westchester BOCES, Nyack and White Plains school systems before moving into the federal Department of Education during President Bill Clinton’s second term. Johnson was superintendent of Peekskill schools from 2001 to 2011, and interim superintendent of Mount Vernon schools from 2012 to 2014.

Here are highlights from the interview: Reviewing graduation requirements: Johnson knows it won’t be easy for the Regents to develop more flexible diploma requirements. But the time has come to develop new ways to assess what students know and can do, plus their readiness for civic engagement. Affluent school districts and top private schools already do these things, she said. “Sure, there is the possibility that [graduation standards] will look different in different communities; I don’t have an answer on that yet.”

Johnson said that watching a high school senior deliver a project presentation is proof that Regents exams aren’t enough. “It can bring tears to your eyes to see what they’ve learned when they’re invested and have passion,” she said. “Sure, it’s easier to score a test item than a performance-based assessment. But what do we want, ease of scoring or quality?”

“Substantial equivalency” for private schools: This has become one of the most difficult issues facing the Regents. “I don’t know how this has escalated to such a level,” Johnson said. The board will vote this fall on proposed regulations that outline enforcement of an old state law requiring academic instruction in private schools to be “substantially equivalent” to public schools. The regulations, aimed at Hasidic yeshivas that limit secular instruction, have been denounced by Orthodox Jewish, Catholic and independent school groups.

“We have a small group of schools that may not be doing the job, and we have to make sure that gets turned around — we can’t break the law,” Johnson said. “But I don’t know how we’re going to resolve this. It’s become an albatross. We should be sitting around the table working this out, and not having shouting matches in the media.”

Segregation: New York has been routinely criticized for the ongoing segregation of students along racial lines. Johnson does not see a clear solution. “Segregation is not law in New York. It becomes a practice because of where people live, where they can live,” she said. “We don’t mix wealth in communities. So you end up with segregated communities.”

Presidential hopeful Kamala Harris raised the old, lightning-rod issue of busing in the first Democratic debate. But Johnson doesn’t want to go back there. “Busing is not the answer anymore. There isn’t an appetite for busing. But if we’re not going to force integrated communities, and I don’t believe we should, then every neighborhood school must have have the resources it needs.”

Johnson does believe that magnet schools can successfully foster integration. She believes the Regents will propose financial incentives to promote voluntary integration.

Equity of opportunity: With integration an elusive target, equity of opportunity depends largely on access to resources, Johnson said. It’s past time for the state to revise its funding formulas, she said, to drive more money to the kids starting furthest behind. “We are not going to break the trend of intergenerational poverty, which is represented in low-performing schools, until we provide the children in those schools with all they need,” she said. “Let’s not kid ourselves. They don’t have the money in high-poverty schools to provide the basic programs that high-wealth schools do. Which is not to say that high-poverty schools don’t do a great job. They do, with what they have.”

Asked about New York’s high property taxes and already steep spending on education, Johnson said, “Before anyone says we spend so much money on education, look at the costs of failed education in the incarceration budgets.”
Choosing a new education commissioner: MaryEllen Elia stepped down as commissioner at the end of August. Johnson is not on the Regents’ search committee that will pursue a successor. But she said the next commissioner must focus first on supporting teachers — by honoring the profession in the public’s eyes, promoting training for teachers, and developing ways to get and keep top teachers in urban school systems. The next chief’s second priority, she said, should be to close the “opportunity gap” that separates students.

Accomplished superintendents should be considered for the job, she said.

The future of state testing: Johnson said the state will soon start looking for a testing company to design new math and ELA assessments. But the Education Department needs to reexamine the entire testing experience, she said, “not only the quality of the tests, but the length, the scope, all of that.” She said the state needs the buy-in of educators and parents that state tests have practical, reliable value. She was aghast that a principal sent home letters to parents warning that third graders’ test results showed they were not career- and college-ready. “Can you imagine?” Johnson said. “We have to celebrate education, not shame teachers and kids.”

The role of learning standards:

Johnson said she has heard few recent complaints from educators or parents about the grade-by-grade Common Core standards (now known as New York’s New Generation Learning Standards). “Maybe because people have resigned themselves to using it or ignoring it,” she said. “We assume school districts have found their ways.” Johnson said that districts still choose varied curricula. “Standards don’t stop you from being an incredibly creative teacher,” she said.

Johnson’s future: She wasn’t ready to say she’ll seek a second term on the board. But she did say she’s not about to abandon her work.

“It’s easier to score a test item than a performance-based assessment. But what do we want, ease of scoring or quality?” said Judith Johnson, discussing watching seniors deliver project presentations. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS