



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Are we Making the Grade?

The new school year is well underway now.

I admit that I personally dread the week it begins. Maybe because I remember that sinking feeling as the days of summer would wind down and we prepared for homework, books, and bedtimes. Nowadays, it's the never-ending lists of school supplies and the coordination of jam-packed calendars that puts a damper on things.

In that light many of you have asked me about recent efforts to implement a more rigorous core curriculum and a shift in what many perceive as an overreliance on testing. While I wholeheartedly agree with raising the bar for everyone – students, teachers and parents alike – I actually have reservations about how all this was implemented. I've spoken to parents and educators and while there are lots of opinions, this we know for sure: Long Island has consistently produced some of the finest schools in the county. I'm certain that foisting a cookie-cutter approach onto those who've already achieved this success is not necessarily helpful. This isn't political theory, just common sense. Academic rigor is not something we shy away from, but the reality is that we have great schools and the results of our children's achievements speak for themselves.

Yet there are some districts here that need help. I've personally visited many of them and met with everyone: children, parents, teachers and administrators. I've

seen firsthand that each is unique and requires individualized remedies for very specific challenges. It's nonsense to think each district or even schools within a given district have the exact same problems. In fact, the inverse is true. There has to be an effort to examine districts on a one-by-one basis then tailor approaches that solve specific issues. That's why local school boards exist, because they understand those issues better than anyone. Unfortunately, the truth is they are not always equipped to meet the challenges.

For example, local educators tell me the new standards are worthwhile when students begin their academic career with them and have the advantage of the system the whole way. But they also know that blindsiding older students and asking them to suddenly switch gears and do well without preparation is fruitless. The result has been dismal scores in districts that were historically successful with more challenged districts marred by outright failure. Unfortunately, the Governor threw fuel on the fire by recently proclaiming a "death penalty" state take-over for those failing schools. It seems these students are inadvertently being set up for failure by a system that required our children be taught certain curricula and now tests them on material they were not even taught. If the State Education Department has decided to roll out a new standard, would it not make better sense to roll out the new tests to those who have had the benefit of the more rigorous lessons?

Here's some food for thought: I recently met with a local district superintendent who explained that the local high school's graduation rate hovered at around 97% each year. Yet just a few blocks away, across the district border in Queens, the graduation rate is 47%. Demographically, the two communities are identical so how do we explain the marked difference in performance? I don't have an answer. It's an open-ended question, but I suspect that leadership, expectation, and aspiration have a great deal to do with the results.

Success is a manifestation of a communities' combined resolve – those best wishes we have for our children for a better tomorrow and our confidence conveyed through our words and actions that our children can achieve whatever they put their mind and effort to do. We have seen this success cut across demographics in varied communities. But why do some succeed where others do not? That deserves an answer but discovering it and achieving it will take time and great concentrated effort.

Rome wasn't built in a day. The work of government is tedious and we must engage it thoughtfully or we run the risk of doing more harm than good. Hopefully, officials, educators and parents alike will demand the same improvement in our approach that we expect in our children's grades.