

New York State Senate Education Committee Hearing

Testimony of Carrie Remis, Founding Director of the Parent Power Project

Buffalo, NY

Oct. 16, 2013

Senator Flanagan and Members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to give testimony today and share the parent perspective as you take stock of the Regents reform agenda. My name is Carrie Remis, I am the founding director of the Parent Power Project, a Rochester-based organization working to support parents in low-performing districts as they navigate their children's path to college or career. Examples of our capacity-building work include workshops on FERPA and media training for parent leaders. In addition to our capacity-building work, we support a pro-parent advocacy agenda that includes teacher evaluation and LIFO reform, parental school choice, Common Core and parent trigger.

On a personal note, I am the mother of a sophomore in one of the state's best high schools, a point I make to say that I have a foot in both New York's highest and lowest performing districts and understand well the competing pressures you face. I face them as well. That said, I am here today to urge you to stand strong and not retreat on the Regents reform agenda, and to offer some insight into the parent position as you move forward in this important and challenging work.

Understanding parent opposition to the Regents reform agenda.

First, let me say that I believe that parents who oppose the Regents agenda—some of whom have given testimony at your hearings—are in the minority. This conclusion is based on both my organization's direct work with parents and the many polls that suggest that the public is in agreement with the goals of standards and accountability and the need for intervention. Some examples:

- Only 29% of Americans say they have a "great deal of confidence" in the public education system, a new low in public confidence in our schools (Gallup)
- 7 in 10 likely voters say it's urgent to improve our schools (Alliance for Education)
- Nearly 8 in 10 are "extremely" or "very concerned" about low graduation rates and large majorities are worried about college-readiness (Alliance for Education)

Still, despite this apparent agreement between the public and policy makers, some parents have loudly voiced their concerns with the Regents agenda. We cannot reform the public education system without parent buy-in and these parent concerns have the potential to derail the change New York's children need. Underlying these parent concerns are two factors:

1) Parents in general feel side-lined by the day-to-day experiences with their local educational bureaucracies. We often struggle with schools that are unresponsive to us. There is not a parent among us who has not encountered unanswered phone calls or maddening bureaucratic red tape. Too often, parents who want to constructively participate are kept in the dark and relegated to bake sales and advisory committees that make no impact. These day-to-day experiences are not within the Regents control to fix, but they are part of the parent context. Under these circumstances, it can be difficult for parents to embrace an agenda that feels disconnected from their day-to-day concerns.

2) Special interests—namely the New York State United Teachers and their surrogates—are expertly taking advantage of parents who feel excluded, amplifying our concerns and distorting the issues.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the only remedy is true parent empowerment. Specifically, I urge you to consider the following three measures:

Incentivize autonomous parent organizing. Last week's PTA meeting in Poughkeepsie is not unique, in fact, many parent organizations across the state have been similarly hijacked by the teachers union. More troubling than disrupted public meetings is the fact that these hijacked parent organizations are also charged with electing parent representatives to every school-based management team in the state under CR100.11. As you know, these school-based management teams are where the Regents' policies are implemented at the local level. The teachers union would never tolerate another stakeholder sitting in on their organizational meetings, interfering with their representation or scripting their policy positions. But this is precisely what happens to parents and why many of us find it difficult to identify the parent interest in these policy discussions and speak for ourselves.

Mandate increased transparency, particularly around collective bargaining agreements. Conspiracy theories thrive in the dark, whether they are about Common Core, APPR or student data. In our work on these topics, we have found that most of the conspiracy theories key on the public not knowing the difference between state mandates and local determined decisions. As a result, the Regents and Commissioner are routinely scapegoated for decisions made at the local bargaining table.

For example in Rochester, the City School District negotiated an elaborate system of locally developed pre-tests to measure student growth for the APPR, rather than using the prior year's state assessment scores, the minimum requirement in the statute. When parent complaints surfaced about the pre-tests, due to student reports that teachers were coaching them to "tank the pre-test so they looked smarter on the state tests" and that they were stressed by the additional battery of tests, the district simply blamed Commissioner King's testing mania.

The public needs the full story if we are to engage in these discussions in a meaningful and productive way. Without access to the complete collective bargaining agreement--which includes many hidden addenda and related memos of understanding--parents, taxpayers and even members of the media do not have a full understanding of the issues. To that end, we ask that you mandate on-line disclosure of all collective bargaining agreements and related documents and require the public ratification of all bargained agreements, not just the contract proper.

Spur innovation in the parent development arena. Unlike teacher and principal professional development, parent training is largely conducted by the local district administration. A recent rash of misinformation from Monroe County school district officials about the Common Core State Standards underscores the conflict of interest inherent in this arrangement. As the following parent reports suggest, in many of our districts, Common Core has replaced the No Child Left Behind Act as the new education "bogey man":

"Because of Common Core, our district is eliminating accelerated 7th grade Math."

"The school won't evaluate my daughter for special education because it will cost too much under Common Core."

"All of the schools must use a new master schedule in order to comply with the new state standards."

"Parts of the International Baccalaureate program will be dismantled in order to comply with Common Core."

“Recess [for elementary students] is no longer defined by going outside nor does it necessarily mean physical activity. I was told that recess is defined ‘as a break from the Common Core Curriculum.’”

“Special education teachers are at risk of being fired under the new APPR because their students won’t test well.”

(Accounts provided by parents, relaying information shared by Monroe County school district officials between May and September 2013.)

While policing these district-run misinformation campaigns would be a fool’s errand, we do ask that you explore state policy to open up the parent development space to outside providers who do not have the district’s conflict of interest and would be more objective in their parent education work. Community-based organizations, civic groups and community colleges are among the unbiased voices that could be enlisted to facilitate an informed dialogue about Common Core and other components of the Regents agenda in our communities.

A Call for State Intervention in Failing Schools.

Rochester, like all of the Big 5 districts, faces a terrible dilemma that the Senate Education Committee and Board of Regents must keep foremost in your minds: these communities are desperate for radical change for their students, but lack the political power to take on the educational status quo. For most of the last thirty years, the Rochester educational establishment has creatively avoided any fundamental change that would have benefited students, opting instead for a steady stream of edu-gimmicks and paths-of-least resistance turnaround strategies that have garnered a lot of headlines, but no student gains. The result is the lowest student-to-teacher ratio and highest spending in the state, but the worst student outcomes. Today, only 5% of Rochester’s children are proficient and only 9% of our black males on time—the lowest in the country. (Schott Foundation, *The Urgency of Now*)

The urgent, fundamental change that Rochester’s children need and deserve is impossible with our local players. On behalf of their parents and their children, I urge you to pursue in earnest, aggressive state interventions in our failing schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the parent perspective. I welcome any questions.