

**TESTIMONY TO THE
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE
ON EDUCATION
PUBLIC HEARING
THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA:
“ASSESSING” OUR PROGRESS**

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Testimony to the Senate Standing Committee on Education Public Hearing

The Regents Reform Agenda: “Assessing” Our Progress

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During the last two (2) decades, terms such as increased standards, teacher accountability, education reform effort, unified curriculum, no child left behind, “highly-qualified teachers,” research-based curriculum, increased teacher certification criteria and annual professional performance review have been coined, used and overused in an effort to “improve student achievement.” It is clear from the plethora of current terms around educational reform that the focus is centered on teachers.

As an educator, I have spent my entire professional life in education starting my teaching career in inner city Philadelphia and New York City. Subsequently, I served as an administrator and Superintendent in upstate New York, in New York City, and on Long Island. I have spent the last 10 years serving as a Community Superintendent in New York City and a District Superintendent on Long Island, the last three of which I have been the Superintendent of a moderate wealth, high-performing district. I share this with you as I think these experiences offer a unique perspective. The primary focus of my work has been, and continues to be, working with teachers to determine what students should know, be able to do, and be able to use beyond the situational classroom. This work has included curriculum alignment both horizontal and vertical. Once aligned, common proficiencies are determined; they are recorded and used to inform the development of common assessments and scoring rubrics. Simultaneously, teachers are engaged in professional development related to shifting classroom practices to support

increased student achievement. In addition, common benchmark assessments have been identified and administered at regular intervals as a way of checking student growth as the program is developed.

It appears that the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards carries with it, at a very broad level, a reasonable alignment philosophy. In addition, they demonstrate higher levels of rigor that will likely result in increased student achievement in some districts, if implemented in a thoughtful, student-centered manner. However, for me, the issues at hand are not the Common Core Learning Standards or their value; clearly these standards were developed with a level of thought and expertise that resulted in some very valuable components. Rather, the primary issues and concern include the loss of local control, the over emphasis on standardized tests, and the ill-conceived manner in which said tests are administered and the results utilized.

There is little argument that there are struggling schools; schools that need to be redesigned with appropriate supports. However, there is also no argument that the vast majority of public schools in New York are providing a very solid academic program with many going above and beyond any requirement set forth by Federal and State governing bodies; schools that are supporting student achievement at the highest levels; schools where nearly every student goes to college – whether public or private; schools producing students that are not required to take remedial-level courses when they get to college. I would argue that the new New York State assessment protocols actually hinder the ability of these schools to continue to provide such an education – in essence, the focus on standardized assessments which force a narrow, prescribed view of the Common Core, is actually “dumbing-down” these schools.

Before I continue, I want to emphasize that I am not here to criticize or blame, and I can state emphatically that I, my teachers and administrators, my community, and my fellow superintendents support rigorous programming and high levels of accountability for all students and staff. What we struggle with are altered and not yet complete, mandated structures intended to force curricular changes that are then funneled through very narrowly constructed, assessments.

Regarding these change efforts, whether in successful schools or schools that are struggling, Peter Senge, renowned organizational theorist from MIT, says, “The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared ‘pictures of the future’ that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counter-productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt.”

As we consider the imposition of outside mandates such as the Common Core Grades three to eight state assessments and related changes to our program, a program we value, I offer the following: The State Education Department, Board of Regents, and other entities (corporate and political) invested in measuring student growth and achievement via standardized assessments related to the Common Core reform effort, may actually produce lost opportunity; opportunity to provide a well-rounded educational program that supports student success; success in areas that will support our goals and the goals of individual students in high school and whatever they choose to do after they leave high school and, in many cases on Long Island and in my home district, Commack, that typically means going to college. I would argue, and have proven with real data, that Commack has been more than adequately preparing students for college (see

Attachment A) and/or career opportunities for decades with significant increases in that regard over the last several years (see Attachment B). Our record speaks for itself. It is clear; our program, and the program of many districts statewide, prepares all students for high levels of achievement; so why the forced change? If schools can demonstrate through real data that their students are prepared for college and career; if they can demonstrate that they are continually monitoring student growth and making instructional adjustments; if they can demonstrate that their academic program goes above that provided by the State, why superimpose such a dramatic change? These questions are not meant to be rhetorical.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin indicated that research shows a significant shift away from the accepted norms and models of “preservice” or “inservice” training and more toward “the hard work of developing concrete exemplars of the policies and practices that model “top-down support for bottom-up reform” (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995, p. 2). In Commack, like many other districts across the state, our top down support of bottom up reform allows for the following:

- Teachers and administrators continuously working to determine what we want students to know, be able to do, and truly understand;
- Teachers and administrators regularly reviewing and aligning their curriculum;
- Teachers and administrators engaging in professional-learning opportunities as they work with all students toward success;
- Teachers and administrators monitoring student academic growth regularly;
- Teachers and administrators adjusting their curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of students; and

- Teachers and administrators helping produce some of the most successful students in the country year in and year out (see Attachment B).

So, why the forced change? Why the insistence that we abandon structures and methods locally determined for those developed by others who are unfamiliar with the strengths of our students and staff? Why force additional assessments on students? Why force the expense related with what the data proves are unnecessary changes?

More importantly, I would argue that by altering educational programs to meet the demands of assessments that have been rushed, that have an altered “cut score,” that have no research-based evidence that they better measure a child’s readiness, at least none that has been produced to date, is a very professionally dangerous thing to do. If we, in our rush to raise test scores, eliminate parts of our program that support the exit outcomes our students need to gain acceptance into the college of their choice or career path they desire, we are doing them a disservice. If we abandon the arts, social emotional, physical fitness, and other types of programs not measurable on a standardized test, we risk creating generations of “test takers” as opposed to thinkers and innovators.

As mentioned earlier, this last round of assessments was fraught with significant shortcomings. I offer the following as examples:

The spring 2013 New York State mathematics and ELA assessments:

- Were developed prior to the final publication of the related curriculum;
- Were administered prior to the first full year of curricular implementation;

- Were unseen by teachers;
- Were developed and, subsequently administered, in different forms in different schools and in some cases in different forms in the same school;
- Included field test questions that did not count toward the final score;
 - Depending on the version of the assessment, the field test question(s) may have been at the beginning of the test, in others at the end – keeping in mind these are timed tests.
- Were very time intensive for young children; and
- They claim to measure a child’s college and career readiness – However, to date, no evidence to support this claim is available.

Some of these issues will be addressed in the second year of administration. However, much damage has been done to our students and potentially to our programs, should we choose to veer from the course, a course that was locally determined, a course that works.

Other very real concerns arise when we consider that there will be changes to Regents exams. Should those changes result in the same, or similar, decrease in passing rates as the Grades three (3) to eight (8) assessments, students may fail these exams through no fault of their own or the school. In a New York State Education Department News and Notes message to the field in August 2013, it was indicated that, regarding the passing rates for 2013 Grades three (3) to eight (8) assessments, “...the change in proficiency rates does not mean teachers are teaching less or that students are learning less than last year.” If this same precept is adopted when making changes to Regents exams, students who will score at significant levels on Scholastic

Aptitude Tests (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) exams, may actually “fail” Regents exams.

Over the last year or so, several of my colleagues and I have met with the representatives from the State Education Department, the Lieutenant Governor, Senators Marecellino and Flanagan, have attended meetings with the Commissioner, and I am testifying before you today regarding the rushed implementation of the Common Core and particularly the related assessment protocols to share **our** concerns with this "reform" effort. At this time, I don't want to editorialize more than I already have. However, I would argue that these efforts to standardize instruction and instructional programs, no matter the **strengths** and challenges of a system, are ill conceived. Darling Hammond and others have indicated, “New course mandates, curriculum guidelines, tests, or texts cannot produce greater student learning and understanding without investments in opportunities that give teachers access to knowledge about the nature of learning, development, and performance in different domains” (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995, p. 2) both the child’s and their own.

Before I finalized my comments for today, I took significant time to reflect and asked myself, “What if I’m wrong? What if my assertions are incorrect? Right now I feel right – clearly my statements about standardized assessments indicate that I think I am RIGHT. Given the stakes, the learning opportunities of our students, the APPR scores of our teachers and principals, the use of very limited resources and more, I felt a duty to assure I was at least on the right track. In that regard, I continue to live in a state of *inquiry*; before making changes, it is imperative that I gather additional information through theoretical and empirical research as well as active

conversations with people in the field, people actually engaged in educating students, practitioners who are bright, thoughtful and honest. There was, and is, no doubt that inquiry is called for when suggesting changes to our programs, changes that will have an impact on the lives of our students. I believe it is our professional obligation that prior to making changes that affect student learning opportunities, we do the necessary homework to assure, at least to the best of our ability, success.

- We should not force change on schools that are successful, actively reflective, learning organizations – we should identify schools that need change and act accordingly;
- We should not force schools to adopt assessment protocols that have not been fully vetted and shared with the field and most certainly not before the associated curriculum is fully developed, released, and implemented; and
- We should not force young children to sit for the abundance of assessments set forth in New York year in and year out in the name of measuring the progress toward college and career readiness – to do so demonstrates a lack of understanding about the developmental abilities of students and the learning process.
 - *Student learning is best understood when employing strategies that have been developed whereby teachers are provided categories in specific content areas and descriptions of variations in students' thinking about the subject matter. In this manner teachers are able to have discussions not only about the subject matter, but also the “‘theoretical’ knowledge of the characteristics and development of children’s thinking and ‘particular’ knowledge of problems” (Berne & Wilson, 1998, p. 181).*

- I believe, and research supports, the use of the right assessments for the right reasons;
 - *“Schools must achieve a better balance between activities that incorporate ideas of distributed cognition and those that stress only individual competence” (Borko & Putnam, 2000, p. 5).*
- I believe, and research supports, the active use of formative, diverse assessments to understand student abilities throughout their career;
- I believe, and research supports, giving teachers continuous feedback in a non-punitive, non-prescriptive manner where everyone understands that improvement is ongoing, is the most effective way to assess teaching and learning.
 - *Cognitive psychologists agree that “the essence of knowledge is structure.” Knowledge is not a ‘basket of facts’” (R. Anderson, 1984, p. 5 from Borko and Putnam in New Paradigms, p. 36). Shulman et al, indicate that teachers draw on seven domains of knowledge when planning and carrying out instructional programs: general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of students, knowledge of subject matter, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of other content, knowledge of the curriculum, and knowledge of educational aims (Borko and Putnam, 1995, p. 36). Virtually all cognitive psychologists share a fundamental assumption that an individual’s knowledge structures and mental representations of the world play a central role in perceiving, thinking and acting (Putnam, Lampert & Peterson, 1990). Teachers’ thinking is directly influenced by their knowledge. Their thinking, in turn, determines their actions in the*

classroom. Thus, to understand teaching, we must study teachers' knowledge systems; their thoughts, judgments, and decisions; the relationships between teachers' knowledge system and their cognitions; and how these cognitions are translated into action. Similarly, to help teachers change their practice, we must help them to expand and elaborate their knowledge systems (Borko and Putnam, 1995).

In closing, I believe we stand at the precipice of doing significant damage to our schools if we allow the continued, unfettered implementation of narrowly developed and focused standardized assessments that do not support our mission to provide a well-rounded education so that every child can develop the skills and acquire the knowledge necessary to be successful in whatever they choose to do after high school. Thank you for your time and attention.

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ATTENDANCE DATA FOR COMMACK HIGH SCHOOL
CLASS OF 2013

ATTACHMENT A

	Public, Private, In - or Out-of-State	Percent of Commack Students
4 Yr College	Overall	82.13%
4 Yr College	Public In-State	29.95%
4 Yr College	Private In-State	20.45%
4 Yr College	Public Out-of-State	16.26%
4 Yr College	Private Out-of-State	15.46%
2 Yr College	Overall	17.55%
2 Yr College	Public In-State	17.23%
2 Yr College	Private In-State	0.16%
2 Yr College	Public Out-of-State	0.16%
2 Yr College	Private Out-of-State	0.00%

Academic Data for Commack High School Class of 2013

Academic Data:

Advanced Regents Diplomas	2009 - 73%	2013 - 82.3%
SAT Scores (average)	2009 - 1603	2013 - 1665

Class of 2013: 99% will attend college or military academies

Class of 2013: 2,742 acceptances to the most competitive and highly-competitive colleges in the country

Other Information for 2012-2013:

- 368 student were enrollment in college level courses in our high school;
- 961 of the 1,244 juniors and seniors took at least one IB course;
- 329 juniors and seniors were enrolled in a full IB Diploma program;
 - Senior class IB Diploma Candidates total 135;
- Number of registrations for IB/AP Exams: IB=1,470 & AP=232

Commissioner of Education King in his testimony at the 2012-2013 Joint Budget Hearing, stated, "I was fortunate enough to visit Commack High School with Senator Flanagan and see both an incredibly impressive International Baccalaureate program where students were doing very rigorous academic work, but also a school-wide community commitment to public service and a real urgency around community service for these students, it was very impressive and heartening to see."

Know that we strive to provide the best possible educational program for every student; a program that allows them to accomplish whatever they desire upon graduating from our high school.