

Statement for Public Hearing on Education Reform Policies Public Hearing on 9/17/13 chaired by Senator John Flanagan.

Good morning to the distinguished members of the panel, my name is Robert Vecchio, and I am president of the board of education for the William Floyd School District located in Mastic Beach, NY.

We have over 9,300 students, and we are considered a high needs low property wealth district, with almost 60% of our students on free or reduced lunch district wide, and a combine wealth ratio of .57 one of Long Island's lowest.

I will state at the onset, that we support the conceptual goals and intentions of Common Core. We have always supported and strived to increase our academic performance, provide more rigorous curriculum, and increase transparency in our performance. We are in full agreement that we need to better prepare our students to be college and or career ready.

The problem has been with the practical application and implementation schedule of Common Core. Common Core seemed to be fast tracked and severely lacked the proper resources and guidance to be implemented properly. It has been compared to building an airplane while in flight! It seems we were more interested in doing it first then doing it right. I prefer to do something right the first time as opposed to being first and doing it again. It was also not properly aligned with other State assessments especially in the secondary grades.

Instead of rushing into common core it should have been phased in for proper alignment, purchase and development of materials and resources, aligned with Common Core, more time given for professional development and better more effective communication to our parents.

Local control and governance is an essential part of the proper implementation of the Common Core, thus the continued erosion of local control and governance is a major concern. School Board members are duly elected volunteer officials and are accountable to our constituents. We know what needs to be done, we have the same goals in mind, and there is no more greater accountability as a board member. When supported to make sound educational decisions for the children of our districts, we can yield academically successful students. For example, our district several years ago pushed down two high school regents courses to our 8th grade students in Math and Science. We did this to help increase our graduation rates, decrease drop- out rates, and increase the rigor of course offerings in the 8th grade. We have had great success with 80% of the students who sat for the exam last year passing and over 60% of the entire 8th grade entering high school as 9th graders with 2 regents credits already in the bank. However, these same students took the new 8th grade common core assessments and approximately only 30% passed. If I'm the parent of a current 9th grade student, what's the message, my child was proficient enough to pass a high school regents course but not proficient

in an 8th grade assessment? Now some will say the regents exams are not aligned with common core and that's why we see this issue, however it's beyond confusing and the wrong message for our parents and students.

Additionally, Common Core was implemented during a period where districts were reeling from cuts to State Aid, particularly for high needs districts like William Floyd (we lost over \$20 million in State Aid). We lost staff, programs, and resources for professional development.

Our concern going forward will be the resources necessary for continued professional development, technology and academic intervention services (AIS) that students will need based on their individual performance on these assessments. We are greatly distressed on how we will meet the needs to carry out the PARC assessments, which will require a tremendous investment in our technology infrastructure to implement the demands for online testing.

We are also concerned about the costs to maintain and secure student data. Several residents have raised concerns about this issue, and the State needs to be prepared to instill confidence for the public regarding this matter and provide resources for the data dashboards we will be required to have.

We have also been disappointed and concerned about the tenor and tone of some remarks made by the Governor, and our State Education Commissioner. Governor Cuomo recently stated that there needs to be a "death penalty" for persistently poor performing schools. The Commissioner has recently advocated for methods to make a "state takeover" of schools easier. We need to stop the harsh words and or threats, and be solutions focused in a collaborative manner, instead of focusing on sound bites and repeating failed policies and actions of the past (state take over of Roosevelt).

We have to do a better job in making sure our students are college and or career ready, there is no question about that, and at William Floyd, we are proud of increasing our graduation 16% since 2006, but we are not satisfied and know we still have work to do. The same with the results of the first round of Common Core assessments, we know we have work to do, and do not find the performance acceptable on any level regardless, of our opinion about how poorly this initiative was implemented or managed.

While we need to be honest with ourselves as board members about the work we have to do, the State and SED needs to make an honest assessment about the missteps in the implementation of Common Core and the negative impact it is having on students, and maybe take a step back, re-group, and slow down to do it right, and not necessarily first. As a high needs district, I strongly urge that the State provide the resources necessary to carry out the initiative properly. Our students and staff deserve the resources necessary to face the challenges of Common Core as opposed to setting them up to fail.

We need to lessen the length of some of these assessments to help ease the test anxiety that Common Core has created evidenced by opt-out numbers in districts state wide. Commissioner King has been quoted saying “the scores will not negatively impact district, school, principal, or teacher accountability.” While this may be true for SED, it is not true for the parents, residents, or staff of our schools statewide. We are already being negatively impacted by the results and the inflamed media reporting of these results which contradicts the commissioner with their headlines. School Boards and Districts will spend more time explaining results and trying to calm the waters which takes away time and resources to further implement Common Core.

We need to re-evaluate, re-tool and improve the reforms before we continue on the same path that seems to be ill-fated. I also strongly urge that school board members and our State association NYSSBA must have a seat at the table during any further planning stages so that we may help collaborate for optimal results. It’s an honor to be asked to testify here today, but we would have much rather had a voice and influence over the reforms instead of just reporting out on them.

Finally, we need significant, meaningful, mandate relief. We have seen the implementation of the tax cap, common core, APPR, and yet no meaningful relief for districts. It is also finally time to overhaul the State aid funding formulas for proper equitable distribution so that every child regardless of their zip code have a fair chance to succeed and face the challenges of meeting the new standards. This also needs to be a top priority as you consider changes going forward. We have talked about it, we were promised it, and now more than ever, we need it. Thank you for giving me the time to address you today.