

Testimony Submitted to the Joint Budget Hearing on Higher Education, February 10, 2015
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I greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss teacher certification. I am a parent of 2014 teacher candidate graduate and the issue I will be addressing affects thousands of candidates from public and private colleges across the state.

As part of his Executive Budget, Governor Cuomo proposed closing teacher prep programs based on failure rates on the four new certification tests introduced last year. However, these exams are indisputably unfair for 2014 and 2015 graduates. Candidates are severely suffering, as they are being denied certification through no fault of their own. Rather, SED is completely at fault as I will prove with irrefutable, concrete evidence, in contrast to baseless assertions from SED and the Regents. People can misrepresent facts, but facts don't lie. I trust that you will fully agree that relief for candidates must be included in the Executive Budget through re-insertion of the previous tests.

To begin, it's important to realize that when criticism was aimed at edTPA, which is one of the four new tests, SED vehemently denied that problems existed. However, after the good work of many of you and others, the department finally abandoned its persistent but completely unsupportable stance by allowing candidates to use one of the previous tests as a safety net in place of edTPA for certification purposes. This showed that criticism levied against edTPA was indeed warranted.

The other new tests were introduced months later, and have proven to be just as rushed and unfair. In fact, two of them – ALST and EAS – are being failed at even higher rates statewide and are causing thousands of candidates to be unfairly denied certification, putting their lives, and those of their families, in emotional and financial turmoil. SED and the Regents are once again denying problems exist, but the facts indisputably prove otherwise; so much so that legislators have described the situation as "a grave injustice" and "grossly unfair."

At the core of the matter, is the fact that evidence unquestionably reveals that SED did **not** give colleges and hence students nearly enough time to prepare for the tests. This is based on the **actual receipt** of preparation material by colleges. Candidates typically begin learning certification content material beginning sophomore year as part of their methods classes. This was impossible for 2014 and 2015 graduates since prep materials were **not** provided until fall 2013. For months, SED had been disingenuously pointing to 2009 and 2010 as start dates for the new exams. However, at that time, they merely began to discuss new tests and did **not** actually approve them and provide prep material until much later, including not until fall semester 2013 for EAS and ALST. In addition, in January 2012, SED announced that draft frameworks of tests and scoring rubrics would be posted for the purpose of, and I quote –**"to enable program administrators and faculty to adjust their curricula and prepare their candidates to pass the exams."** But, again, materials were not delivered until well over a year later. So, you don't have to look any further than SED's own timetable and words for proof that they did not enable colleges to prepare candidates in time.

On top of this, SED has had the audacity to publicly claim otherwise despite past SED Commissioner King's right hand man, Deputy Commissioner John D'Agati, admitting to me in no uncertain terms during a December 2013 conversation that SED was late with their preparation. He said, and I quote: "Speaking candidly, they (Pearson/ test administrator) promised more than they could deliver." End of quote. Now, I appreciate Mr. D'Agati's candor with me, but all your constituents deserve to hear the truth too. It's not an exaggeration to say that this is a state cover-up of epic proportions given the dire consequences. I personally am looking at a potential loss of more than \$100,000. For families with candidates at private colleges, the amount could be triple that. Furthermore, candidates are facing a lifetime of diminished wages and financial struggle. Put yourselves in our shoes and imagine your anxiety and anger.

Prep materials have not only been late, but also extremely minimal, to the extent that faculty are so in the dark that many have resorted to taking the tests to familiarize themselves with their content and design. SED has also been proclaiming the need for more rigorous standards, but this too is disingenuous. They fully know high standards are not being debated, and that the issue remains the fact that candidates were **not** given a fair chance to prepare for the tests. Claims about rigorous standards are nothing more than a smoke screen by SED to distract attention from their obvious late and insufficient preparation. SED's denials and actions are utterly deplorable.

In fact, three separate bills sponsored last spring by Higher Education chairs LaValle and Glick, as well as Senator Lanza, and co-sponsored by more than 30 colleagues, including Education Committee chairs Flanagan and Nolan, stated in identical language: **"It is unfair to change certification requirements for teacher candidates who entered teaching programs under a different set of requirements and are now close to reaching certification."** But these words are just cosmetic if you don't follow them up with action, and the Executive Budget provides the opportunity with which you must do so.

A recent Sunday front-page investigative feature on January 18 by the *Journal News* of Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester Counties made even more evident SED's failures. SED's refusal to own up to them is no different than their actions with Common Core. But, while the governor came to the aid of K-12 students and their families regarding Common Core, he has left candidates and their families to suffer. He even acted against candidates by presenting misleading information in his State of the State address which denigrated them. Perhaps the governor is uninformed, or is being misled by SED, but his criticism of teacher prep programs and candidates is not credible.

Data compellingly reveals that there is no merit to the governor's reference to the 32% failure rate on ALST as proof that New York has too many ineffective teacher prep programs producing unqualified candidates. The precise language from the SOS text on pages 236 – 37 is as follows: "Between September, 2013, and August, 2014, the Board of Regents administered the Academic Literacy Skills Test to approximately 11,000 teachers. To demonstrate partial proficiency, a candidate must perform first-year college-level tasks that rely on literacy skills aligned to 8th grade level Common Core standards. To demonstrate full proficiency, a candidate must perform first-year college-level tasks that rely on literacy skills aligned to 11th and 12th grade Common Core standards. Yet the overall statewide pass rate was only 68 percent overall, and only 7 percent demonstrated full proficiency." End of excerpt.

The following information completely discredits the governor's contention: First, the literacy skills are aligned with Common Core, which he, as well as most or all of you, continue to acknowledge is flawed. Legislation that he supported bans school districts from including scores from Common Core-based tests in students' permanent records. And, districts are banned from emphasizing test scores when making student placement decisions. The governor even ran a campaign ad dedicated to his stance. Logically, if the flaws in Common Core make tests based on them unfair for K-12 students, they do likewise for college students. Flawed standards don't take sides or practice age bias.

Secondly, 312 students from the highly regarded and rated Teacher's College, the graduate school of education which is part of Columbia University, were among the 11,000 candidates that the governor referred to when citing the 32% failure rate for ALST. In the 2015 *US News & World Report* ranking of graduate schools of education, Teacher's College ranked #1 in NYS for both Elementary and Secondary Teacher Education, and 3rd and 5th in the country. Yet, according to results from the ALST, 32% of its candidates are illiterate in terms of 11th/12th grade literacy skills, and 9% don't even meet 8th grade standards. These are candidates from an Ivy League graduate school! On their own, these results show the absurdity of using ALST to judge colleges and candidates. And, alignment with Common Core and lack of preparation make the other new tests equally inappropriate measures.

In addition, in *USN&WR's* rankings of undergraduate colleges, among those with a representative sample of at least 100 candidates who took ALST, the esteemed New York University is top-ranked in NYS among national universities with teacher prep programs, and 32nd in the country overall. Yet, of its 276 candidates, 33% were judged illiterate on an 11th/12th grade level and 16% did not meet 8th grade standards.

Specific to SUNY, Senator LaValle has deep ties to Stony Brook University and is therefore well aware of its reputation for academic excellence. Surely, he must find it impossible to believe that 34% of its 127 teacher candidates were found to be illiterate on an 11th/12th grade level, while 19% did not even meet 8th grade standards. But incredulously, that is what the ALST shows.

This data further supports the pressing need for the previous exams to be reinserted to bring justice to your constituents, Democrats and Republicans alike, who are being severely harmed. With all due respect, you have a moral and ethical obligation to act so that they are not sacrificed for political gain or in the disingenuous name of education reform.

In introducing the safety net for edTPA, past SED Commissioner King said, and I quote, "We've raised the bar for the teaching profession and at the same time we've ensured a smooth transition for teachers who have worked so hard to join the profession." End quote. Based on SED's own reasoning, the smooth transition referred to can only be realized if a safety net is offered for all of the new tests. Giving 2014 and 2015 graduates a choice between the previous and the new tests, including in combination, would be a simple remedy that would allow SED to make necessary revisions to the new tests and keep them in place for candidates from future graduating classes who have a fair amount of time to prepare for them.

Knowing the facts herein, it is imperative that you ensure that relief for candidates is included in the Executive Budget. This issue does not involve an honest difference of opinion or perspective. No, this is a simple case of right and wrong, of fairness vs. injustice. The facts are in plain view, including SED's own document and words. The evidence leaves no doubt that colleges and candidates weren't provided nearly enough time to prepare for the new tests. After all the recent talk about "three men in a room" and following the governor inappropriately joking in his SOS about "the three amigos," here's an opportunity to demonstrate that state government is open, honest, and fair. Teacher candidates and their families have been held captive to political agendas and made to suffer for far too long.

Senator Latimer has already written to the governor to request the re-insertion of the previous tests based on what he described as, and I quote, "[certification] requirements [that] are grossly unfair." Assemblywoman Paulin made the same request in a letter to Regents Chancellor Tisch in which she described the situation as, and I quote, "a grave injustice concerning 2014 and 2015 teacher candidate graduates." Furthermore, following my radio appearance on "Capitol Pressroom," Assemblyman Ra contacted me to say he fully supports such relief. And, after meeting with me, Assemblywoman Glick said she doesn't disagree with anything I said. This broad support and agreement clearly shows that this issue transcends parties and legislative houses. Your full support, leadership, and action are now needed to make the agreed upon relief a reality. I urge you to demonstrate that Albany is truly committed to doing what is right and just by ending this major state disgrace now.

I thank you for your time and consideration and am glad to answer questions now or afterwards.