

Senate Standing Committee on Education Public Hearing

The Regents Reform Agenda: Assessing Our Progress

October 1, 2013

Dear Senator Flanagan and Distinguished Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to address education reform issues presently underway in New York State. I humbly offer you the following testimony:

Public education in the United States is currently engaged in a massive reform effort. It is widely perceived that this country has fallen behind. Statistics show the United States is outperformed by other countries in reading, math, and science. These statistics are based upon results of The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).

To attain these results, higher-performing countries have dramatically changed education and improved student outcomes. They have done so by organizing curriculum around problem-solving and critical thinking skills, investing in high-quality preparation, mentoring and professional development for teachers and administrators, providing time in the school schedule for collaborative planning and ongoing professional learning, funding schools equitably, and paying teachers competitively.

New York State is in the midst of sweeping reform efforts as a result of its Race To The Top federal grant. Most of our schools are not failing and embrace the need to develop curriculum emanating from the Common Core Learning Standards that promote rigorous thinking. However, successful schools need to elevate the rigor of instruction based on the need to be competitive with higher-performing countries. Additionally, we have districts struggling as a result of a large number of students living in poverty. Their task is much more complex. In the end, all students must be successful and able to compete in a global economy.

This requires altering our curriculum, adjusting our instructional practices, restructuring our assessments, and rethinking our vision. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all students are prepared for the competitive world they will enter.

In choosing to adopt the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS), New York joined 46 other states in supporting more rigorous standards that ensure college, career, and citizenship readiness. This simply means that we want our students to enter college or the workforce prepared to succeed without need for further remediation.

Why the Common Core Learning Standards? They are:

- Aligned with expectations for college and career success;
- Include both content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards and standards of top-performing nations;
- Clear and realistic, so educators and parents know what they need to do to help students learn;
- Consistent across all states, so that students are taught to the same standard no matter where they live; and
- Internationally competitive-informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy.

The Common Core Learning Standards allow school districts to make their own decisions about curriculum. Targets are clear, and teachers are able to develop their own lessons and tailor instruction to meet individual student needs. At Fayetteville-Manlius (F-M), we have been able to employ a strategy called Curriculum Mapping to engage teachers in developing a curriculum that aligns with the Common Core and provides the ownership teachers need to teach the curriculum with understanding and passion. Our teachers agree with the rigor CCLS employs. However, the time allotted made the task of developing and learning the curriculum daunting. Our teachers “stepped up to the pump.” This required resources above and beyond what has been spent in the past. We are blessed at F-M with a community that is able to support such initiatives. The results on the 2012-13 state assessments demonstrated the efforts made by our teachers in writing and teaching curriculum aligned to the CCLS. We have a ways to go, but we have had a good start.

Many schools are under serious fiscal stress but will continue to do their very best to adopt and adapt CCLS. Those schools able to write curriculum and receive necessary professional development are demonstrating that many students are able to respond to increased rigor. It will take more resources, more time, and more support for financially distressed districts to close the gap. But, the gap must be closed if we are to continue to grow and succeed as a country.

While change can sometimes be difficult, the movement to embrace Common Core Learning Standards is vital and necessary to the success of our students. They are graduating into a world that will require critical thinking, problem-solving and citizenship skills to address new challenges most of us could never imagine. Learning continues to evolve at a rapid pace, and we have an obligation to prepare our students for success in a global society.

With regard to high stakes testing, we are “on the fence.” The tests have proven stressful for students, teachers, and families. Higher-performing countries do not employ such assessments, yet out-perform American children on PISA. The PISA assessments do not measure a particular curriculum. Instead, they measure whether students can apply the knowledge they have gained and the skills they have mastered

to real-world challenges. PISA assessments determine the degree to which students are prepared by their education for life. These assessments are administered every three years.

Our present approach to testing consumes teacher time, especially during administration and scoring. Valuable time that should be spent on teaching is spent administering tests and then scoring them. At F-M, we estimate that 18-20 days of various teacher time was spent in preparing for and scoring tests. The district incurred \$ 40,000 in the cost of substitute teachers for these activities. Our parents are not happy about the amount of time the teachers must spend out of the classroom. Additionally, there is a feeling that develops after the testing that the year is over, causing yet more unproductive time.

While we do not believe that the stress of testing is good for students and may cause teachers to be swayed to “teach to the test,” there are some advantages. The data generated by the assessments is valuable. It helps to pinpoint where teachers need to improve instruction and helps us to follow student academic growth. Data has generated excellent discussion about teaching and learning and is a great source of professional development.

In higher-performing countries, teacher generated formative assessments are used to determine student growth throughout the year. Teachers are trained to use this formative data to alter instruction on an ongoing basis to adapt to individual student need. As we move through the stages of improving teaching and learning in New York State, perhaps we could consider more formative assessment as a way of determining student growth. Perhaps we could study the approaches taken by other countries.

This brings me to teacher preparation and evaluation. It is no secret that our institutions of higher learning must change their approach to teacher preparation. Universally, teachers agree that they are not well-prepared to teach. They need much more practical experience and guidance as well as more current teaching strategies upon graduation. In addition, time in schools must be provided for ongoing professional development. As an analogy, I will point to the medical profession. Medical schools admissions are highly competitive. They expect students to be high achievers throughout their studies. Ongoing professional development is critical. Can any of us imagine that the doctor we visit would not have the most current technology and expertise in treating us? We should be able to say that about every teacher in every classroom. They should be high achievers with current knowledge of teaching and learning. As with all professions, research leads us to better and better strategies. Children, just as patients, deserve to be taught with the most current knowledge and skills. Our schools must be structured to provide the time for ongoing professional development, and our colleges and universities must have stringent guidelines for admission to schools of education and provide rigorous courses of study with the latest and best-researched teaching strategies.

Our New York State teacher evaluation system is seen as punitive. We have tried to help teachers understand that the appraisal system (APPR) is meant to help them pinpoint areas in which they can improve their practice. But the way in which the system has been developed causes teachers to spend more time worrying about their points than collaborating with peers to improve teaching and learning. However, as with high stakes testing, there are advantages to this evaluation system. It does help both

principals and teachers pinpoint areas for improvement, and we are providing assistance and staff development as needed.

It is the atmosphere that has been created by this system that is problematic. The atmosphere is one of distrust. Educators have been characterized as incompetent, needing external forces to set them on the right path. Rather, as I have stated above, it is our lack of access to excellent higher education and ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators. If these areas were better developed, teachers and administrators would have the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the needs of all learners.

In summary, I believe we should continue to work with CCLS as a means of improving the rigor of education in New York and throughout the country. To best accomplish this, we need to strengthen our schools of education for better teacher preparation, provide time for high quality continuing professional development, think about assessments that are more formative in nature, and provide the resources to schools to get the job done.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Standing Committee on Education Public Hearing. I hope that my comments have been helpful.

Sincerely,



Corliss Kaiser

Superintendent, Fayetteville-Manlius School District