

My name is Eric Mihelbergel. I am a parent from Tonawanda, NY, just north of Buffalo. I have 2 daughters, one in 6th grade and the other in 3rd grade. About a year ago, my children started coming home from school telling me that they were taking bubble tests in art, music, and physical education. It got me asking some serious questions about what is going on in education. I have learned that we are facing an emergency. One year later I now sit before the NYS Senate Committee on Education to testify on what I have learned.

During the last year I have done much advocating for education in my spare time. I have been part of developing a group called NYS Allies for Public Education which is comprised of over 40 smaller advocacy groups from across the state that are all fighting for our children's education. These 40 advocacy groups collectively have about 20,000 parents represented among them. We help these advocacy groups work together to have a more unified voice for children. For the last 8 months, through my advocating efforts, I have been receiving personal communications from parents across the state in the order of about 30-40 personal communications per day. Over an 8 month period that accounts for over 8,000 personal communications that I have had with parents. I am not a professional researcher, I am not a school board member, I am not a teacher or an administrator. I am a parent that has had over 8,000 communications with other parents about severe concerns for our children's education. Today I would like to share with you those items that I have found to be the biggest concerns from parents.

After 8 months of experiencing 30-40 communications per day with parents, I would like to testify that the single most important concern for parents in general is the high-stakes nature of testing. The high-stakes nature of testing encompasses so many of the problems we are facing in education. Let me clarify what I mean by high-stakes nature. High-stakes nature means attaching test scores to teacher evaluations, attaching test scores to school ratings, using test scores as a primary means to determine school closure, attaching test participation rates to Title I set-asides, using test scores as the primary means to determine if AIS is needed for students. Parents across the state have had overwhelming experience with the negative effects of the high-stakes nature of testing. As soon as we attach test scores to teacher evaluation it immediately shifts the focus from student centered learning to teacher centered teaching and administrator centered administrating. Administrators and teachers are being pressured to do one main thing; perform well on tests. This gives them no choice but to pressure children to do one main thing; perform well on tests.

Here is a list of things that parents have personally told me that they want their children to learn: collaboration skills, life skills, debating, research skills, public speaking, enjoyment of learning, reading out loud, sociology, 3-D thinking, critical thinking, self-awareness, historical literature, planning skills, philosophy, current literature, art, morals, theater, intrapersonal

skills, interpersonal skills, ethics, self-confidence, music, history, relationships, physical activity, spatial relations, naturalism, work ethics, self-control, freedom, playing, science, creativity, psychology, technology, business, and government. These are some of the things that parents want their children to learn. When we put high-stakes focus on Math and ELA testing then we lose focus on everything else. This is not what parents want. Children get frustrated. I hear stories of frustrated children purposely scoring poorly on tests to hurt teachers they don't like. Teachers start teaching solely to the test. Schools get in trouble for cheating on test scores. Students randomly fill in answers because they know the test doesn't count for a grade. The joy of learning disappears and students begin to hate school. Our best teachers start to leave the profession as they can no longer focus on the student. What can we do to fix this? I believe that by removing the high-stakes nature from testing we can begin to restore parent confidence.

The next item of concern that I have discovered over the last 8 months of talking with parents is the intense conflict that is growing between school boards and parents. This relationship is grossly deteriorating in nearly every school district where I know parents. It saddens me. School boards are forced to follow the law exactly as it is written, and parents won't allow their children to be subject to harmful practices within the law. In fact, parents are so concerned about protecting their children that many outright refuse to allow their children to participate in these tests. From my vast communications with parents I would like to testify that in my opinion parents will continue to refuse these tests until either the tests are changed and the high-stakes nature is removed or until there are not enough children left to justify the tests because so many parents refuse. The situation is that serious. This makes for very difficult relationships between school boards and parents. This is not what we want. This is not what we need. We want parents and school boards to be united and working together for the benefit of children. But, instead there is anger, lack of trust, skepticism, and fear that is created by a forced focus on high-stakes testing. This saddens me greatly. What can we do to fix this? I believe that by removing the high-stakes nature from testing we can begin to once again unify school boards and parents.

I have found that we have awakened a sleeping giant. This sleeping giant is parents. A year ago I was very much in the dark about what was happening in our schools. I trusted our schools to do what was best for my children. Then I started to wake up. I started to see what was going on. I started to ask serious questions and take action. Thousands upon thousands of parents across the state are doing exactly the same thing. We have awakened a sleeping giant. My extensive communications with parents has taught me that this "giant" will not go back to sleep. This giant that has been awakened will continue to get stronger and stronger until changes are made. I believe that this is a good thing for education. I believe that nothing can help our schools more than to have more active parent involvement. However, it saddens me

that it has had to happen this way. I believe that parents can get our schools back on track, but we need help from legislators. We need the help of legislators so that the conflict between school boards and parents does not escalate. One conclusion I have drawn from experience with thousands of parents is that the sleeping giant will continue to grow at least until the time that the high-stakes nature of testing is removed from classrooms. I suspect that, due to the extreme negative impacts students have faced from high-stakes testing, parents will forever remain more involved in the education of their children. This is beginning to take on historical significance.

On behalf of all my fellow parents I would like to pose this question in general: “Where is the independent professional research on these issues?” Teacher evaluation linked to high-stakes testing is very new and has not been well researched. Where is the independent study? In January of 2012, the Education Conference Board submitted a letter to the NYS Board of Regents asking for an independent study of APPR. I have included a copy of their letter. Their request was denied. Why? When we are spending millions of dollars to produce very controversial tests, why can’t we spend a small amount of money to see if what we are doing is working? I constantly hear horror stories about children breaking down and crying due to pressure from high-stakes testing. Where is the independent study on these children and the negative effects that are harming them? Just this past month, I heard two stories about teachers becoming physically ill because they are forced, against their better judgment, to administer high-stakes tests to students that are emotionally traumatized by these tests. Where are the independent, research-based interviews with teachers like this? I regularly hear stories about students crying at home while they try to complete homework assignments that are related to high-stakes testing and are too difficult for the student’s level. Where is the independent research on this effect? The only independent research study related to these items that I have seen is The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher (<https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf>). This study showed that teacher satisfaction was down 23 percentage points in 2012 compared to 2008. This study was performed a year ago. I can’t imagine how much lower it must be today. A more rigorous system of independent research on these issues could greatly improve education for our children.

William Bruce Cameron, the sociologist, wrote in his book entitled Informal Sociology: A Casual Introduction to Sociological Thinking, “It would be nice if all the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as the economists do. However, not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” All of which makes a child whole, real, valuable, and unique cannot be measured. All of which makes a teacher effective cannot be measured. When we define the worth of our children solely by that which can be measured, then their worth

becomes the measurement itself, their life is no longer their own, and the owner of the measurement dictates child worth. Parents are not opposed to testing. Parents are opposed to the high-stakes nature of testing. The New York State Code of Ethics for Educators states under Principle #2 that “Educators know the curriculum and utilize a range of strategies and assessments to address differences.” How can we claim to be using a range of assessments when most everything is based on high-stakes state Math and ELA tests?