

**NYS PTA Testimony before the Senate Standing Committee on Education
The Regents Reform Agenda: "Assessing our Progress"
Syracuse, New York
October 1, 2013**

Senator Flanagan, members of the Education Committee and Friends. My name is Richard Longhurst. I am Executive Administrator of the NYS Congress of Parents and Teachers or NYS PTA. I wish to share with you a rationale for strong support of instruction reform based on Common Core standards coupled with a deep concern for the future of that reform based on aspects of its implementation.

If you ask our members (and we have), our concerns aren't based so much on a fear of instructional change, but with a perception that we have become obsessed with student testing, with preparation for tests and with the use of test results for purposes never intended by their designers. The bottom line for parents is that extraneous issues such as APPR and student testing have become so closely associated with the common core that this potentially positive reform effort is threatened over its linkage with other factors.

We strongly believe that parent support and understanding of this reform effort is essential to a successful future. Conversely, a strong and emotional rejection could doom the reform to failure. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

As students, most of us remember asking ourselves, how am I ever going to use this stuff when I grow up as echoed in the words of Paul Simon's song Kodachrome. While Kodachrome may be gone, as parents, we recognize the potential value of shifts from mile wide and an inch deep instruction to deeper understanding through development of key cognitive and analytical skills. We welcome instruction that expects us to not only learn facts but also to apply them to everyday life. Most of all, we welcome instruction that builds on the pride that Americans have in our abilities to think independently and to create. We see these shifts as necessary to enabling our children to compete with their international counterparts and we welcome the attention to change that will develop skills necessary for future success prior to high school graduation.

While we welcome the promise that Common Core instruction offers, we are also wary. The achievement of change can't be one sided. When our members perceive that tests and preparation for tests are narrowing curriculum by focusing more on high stakes exams than on preparation of the whole child for a successful life, the experience based perception becomes reality. When non productive test stress replaces the positive stress associated with the effort to learn new skills, parents often fail to separate what they experience from the original instructional goal. Instead they focus their fear and anger squarely on the Common Core, the very movement we are trying to support.

What do we do about that? The answers lie in keeping our eyes on an essential prize by recognizing the need for a sequence of essential implementation steps. These would include not only the development of technical components but also strategies designed to assure understanding and commitment among those who implement the technical components, the families that provide essential support, and the students who ultimately benefit.

We compliment the NYS Education Department for their efforts to develop the excellent resources found on EngageNY.com. We also acknowledge their efforts to bring these resources to practitioners

through Network Teams and we applaud the results achieved by schools that have embraced common core instruction from its inception. Still, for many parents, the common core is more associated with a perceived obsession with high stakes tests than with the original promise. If we are to realize that promise we must get our efforts on the right track.

To that end, NYS PTA has worked closely with members of NYS's Educational Conference board to express concrete reasons for the support of the Common Core and promote a five point plan to assure a productive forward path for positive aspects of Common Core reform. We strongly support that plan.

Getting into the detail of that plan, however, leads us to ask a number of specific questions. How do we know that Common Core concepts are being implemented? How do we know that our teachers and principals are adjusting their teaching styles to reflect a different approach to student learning? How are schools engaging families as partners in assuring student success? How are we taking advantage of today's experiences to improve tomorrow's strategies? Student tests alone cannot provide the answers. We must give increased emphasis to skilled observation, ongoing feedback and continuing professional development for both educators and families.

In the end, while the process is difficult the answer is easy. We should not be in the business of developing skilled test takers. We must be in the business of developing people; teachers, principals, families and most importantly, the children we seek to be motivated as lifelong learners. Does this mean we oppose all testing? Absolutely not. We need to measure what our students learn. We must use those measurements as part of our effort to support improved student learning and we must be accountable to a public that supports these efforts with their tax dollars. Most of all, we cannot allow a perception that we are obsessed with one part of our accountability system to take our eye off the prize by threatening what is not only good, but also necessary to our children's future.