

Testimony for the New York State Standing Committee on Education
The Regents Reform Agenda: "Assessing" Our Progress
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The New York State Reform Agenda has been arguably the most ambitious set of changes for public education during a time of intense financial retrenchment. There have been many positives that have been seen from these reforms, as well as numerous questionable actions including the process and timeline of implementation.

One positive aspect of the Regents Reform Agenda has been the rigor and challenge that is demanded by the Common Core curriculum. Students at every level are being asked to think more deeply. For example, informational texts are being used to a greater degree with questions requiring students to provide evidence from the text in their answers. Additionally, the resources provided by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) have been of good quality. The majority of the training sessions held in Albany were well developed and provided our district's Network Team with useful information. Having our own Network Team was an absolute positive for our school district as we received the information more quickly and there was no filtering or translation of the information from NYSED. The videos and other information on Engageny.org generally have been found to be useful as we implement the Regents Reform Agenda.

Another positive aspect of the Regents Reform Agenda is that there are many more instructional conversations taking place between principals and teachers with a focus on improving instructional practices for all students. In the past our tenured teachers were observed once every three years and now observations are happening twice per year at a minimum. Our principals and teachers also have undergone extensive training on our teacher evaluation rubric. This jointly agreed upon rubric has helped our school district provide clarity

as to what we all agree upon as being the best practices for teaching and learning. It has also provided common language based upon best practices within our classrooms.

While there are positive aspects as I have noted above, there are many parts to the Reform Agenda that have not been positive. The timeline for implementation was too fast. In order to effect change of this magnitude, more time should have been provided for districts to implement the new mandates. Implementation was further complicated for school districts because NYSED continually changed their own APPR guidance documents, as recently as this past school year. Whenever changes were made within the 135-page document, they were not highlighted or notated in any way, making it even harder on districts as we tried to decipher the changes.

Another flaw with the implementation of the Regents Reform Agenda is the volume of assessments required. While NYS assessments are a portion of this, a good APPR plan also requires districts to develop their own assessments (pre- and post-) for numerous subject areas. In Williamsville last year, we completed these for 185 courses/grade levels. We processed 70,000 bubble sheets during the Spring assessment period. We have also spent over \$1,000,000, and counting, on the implementation of the Regents Reform Agenda. Our expenses are offset by a meager \$74,249 in Race to The Top funds doled out over a three year period.

While the outlay of money to cover the cost of the implementation is a huge burden for school districts during difficult financial times, the amount of time spent on the Regents Reform Agenda has been astronomical. We have had to provide substitutes for teachers to participate in APPR training, curriculum writing, assessment writing, assessment scoring, and other aspects related to the implementation of this initiative. In addition to adding to the overall cost, this has resulted in a tremendous loss of meaningful instructional time for our students who are left too often with substitute teachers.

Clearly this has been a large unfunded mandate at a time when school districts are trying to preserve teachers and programs that have defined our schools for decades. Please consider rolling back the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) and allow districts greater flexibility in meeting the demands of the Regents Reform Agenda. Our local communities should have more say in how our limited educational dollars are spent. School districts should be allowed to focus on innovative instructional practices such as the use of mobile learning devices; flipped classrooms with screencasts; STEM opportunities for our students at an earlier age; a greater focus on arts, music, and physical education; beginning foreign language instruction in kindergarten; encouraging more students to accelerate and challenge themselves by taking Advanced Placement courses, or the ability for every high school student to take a college course free of charge on a college campus while they are in high school. In addition, allow Districts to spend their limited revenue on greater support services for students as our young people are walking through our school doors every day with more and more social-emotional needs that impact their physical and emotional well-being.

The best and most often-used analogy describing the New York State Reform Agenda is: “We are building the plane while we are flying it”. This ill-advised approach has met with limited success and considerable consternation on the part of virtually all stakeholders – teachers, administrators, parents, students, and taxpayers.

Thank you for listening to this brief testimony and I appreciate your willingness to hold this forum.