



TESTIMONY

TO THE
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON
THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA:
"ASSESSING" OUR PROGRESS

DATE:
SEPTEMBER 17, 2013
LONG ISLAND

NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS
800 TROY-SCHENECTADY ROAD ♦ LATHAM, NY 12110-2455 ♦
518-213-6000
WWW.NYSUT.ORG
MAC.NYSUT.ORG

*REPRESENTING MORE THAN 600,000 PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE
AFFILIATED WITH THE AFT - NEA - AFL-CIO*

**TESTIMONY OF
NADIA RESNIKOFF
PRESIDENT, MIDDLE COUNTY TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
AND
NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS
TO THE
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON THE
THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA:
"ASSESSING" OUR PROGRESS**

**SEPTEMBER 17, 2013
LONG ISLAND**

My name is Nadia Resnikoff, sixth-grade teacher, President of Middle Country Teachers' Association and a member of NYSUT's Board of Directors. I'd like to thank Senator Flanagan and the Senate Standing Committee on Education for the opportunity to address you today regarding the Regents Reform Agenda: "Assessing" Our Progress.

I am testifying on behalf of our members on Long Island and all across New York State. We are here today to testify that we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with parents in our shared belief that neither students nor their teachers should suffer the consequences of the state's obsession with high-stakes testing.

The concerns we raised in testimony to your committee in June 2012 have only intensified in the wake of SED's rushed and rocky implementation of new learning standards and tests. It's time for New York State to make urgent changes. For the sake of our students, we need to "get it right."

Parents across New York State will soon receive their children's individual scores on the new, significantly more rigorous state tests administered last spring. Student scores have dropped dramatically, exactly as the State Education Department predicted, with two-thirds failing to achieve a "proficient" score. In some schools with the highest number of children living in poverty, virtually every child is deemed to be failing.

Parents are understandably shocked and outraged to hear that their children's scores plunged, and they are justifiably anxious about broad-brush statements that their children are not college and career ready.

Similarly, the vast majority of school districts across the state recently completed new evaluations for teachers. Like parents, teachers are understandably shocked and outraged to see that these evaluations incorporating flawed student test data too often fail to reflect the reality of student progress, and in many cases, bear little relationship to their own effectiveness as dedicated professionals.

This year's performance data is meaningless. It doesn't accurately measure student achievement or teacher effectiveness because — despite repeated warnings from teachers, parents, administrators and superintendents to slow down and get it right — the State Education Department proceeded with a premature implementation of Common Core testing. The result: thousands of students were tested on material they had not yet had time to learn.

In one school, for example, accelerated eighth-graders aced the high school math exams they took but performed poorly on the state's eighth-grade math tests. Clearly, the only thing these test scores show is that the state is still not able to measure student and teacher performance accurately. These meaningless scores are based on bad data that in isolation are misleading and hurtful for both teachers and their students.

New York State's march forward in public education is at a crossroads.

Two key questions confront all of us who care about public education and our children's future: How did we get here? And where must we go from here?

NYS IS FALLING SHORT IN PROVIDING TIME TO GET IT RIGHT

New York's public education system is under tremendous stress. The system is overloaded by the State Education Department's rush to implement new tests and standards under an unrealistic timetable. While 45 states have joined New York in adopting the new Common Core Learning Standards, New York State stands virtually alone in rushing to require the new tests last school year.

Parents, students and educators worked very hard, facing numerous setbacks and challenges beyond their control as they sought to cope with this hurried implementation. Here on Long Island, more than 200 Long Island educators detailed the problems this caused when they spoke at a NYSUT "Tell It Like It Is" forum. Thousands more from across the state sent letters to the Regents. They shared devastating first-hand accounts about how the state's obsession with testing was hurting students.

A NYSUT survey documented the problems. Teachers polled said two-thirds of their students lacked textbooks aligned with common core. A majority of parents had not even heard of the new Common Core Learning Standards. SED, meanwhile, rolled out new materials in some cases just days before the tests were being given.

Worst of all, students were exhibiting signs of severe stress. The day of the tests, many students put their heads down on their desks and wept. Many were physically ill and weren't able to partake in the remainder of the school day. Our youngest children especially were overwhelmed.

Administering tests before instruction flies in the face of everything that teachers know is good for students. And when students are tested on material they have not been taught, it is no surprise that scores plummet. This is especially acute in districts where resources are scant and students are burdened by poverty — the single biggest common denominator of low student achievement.

By failing to provide the time and capacity to implement the new learning standards in a quality way, New York state is endangering the very reforms intended to advance teacher development, student learning and our shared mission of closing the achievement gap.

NYS IS FALLING SHORT IN PROVIDING RESOURCES TO GET IT RIGHT

New York State's public education system is under tremendous stress caused by shortfalls in funding. The test scores released in August once again spotlight the distressing, persistent and unacceptable achievement gap that continues along racial and socio-economic lines. Adequate resources for public education are essential if students are to achieve at higher levels. Yet, as classes began, school districts were burdened with less state aid than they received in 2009 and by the constraints of a restrictive and undemocratic tax cap. Despite the aid restorations contained in the two most recent state budgets, close to three-quarters of school districts are receiving less state aid than they were five years ago.

Ironically, even as New York state introduced new standards, tests and a new evaluation system, state budget cuts were eroding funding for Teacher Centers — the very vehicle school districts use to deliver professional development to teachers. Likewise, funding for mentoring programs that help boost retention of excellent new teachers was chopped.

The state's fast-forward timetable includes SED's expectation that future Common Core assessments will be computer-based, perhaps as early as 2015 — while in many of our resource-strapped districts, as one teacher put it: "The few out-of-date computers we do have are missing keys." Districts need the time and funding to introduce technology necessary to meet state requirements.

In the latest Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, the public once again affirmed that it wants to invest in public education and identified inadequate school funding as the biggest challenge facing public education. Yet as a state we have fallen short in making the most cost-effective investment possible: providing the resources needed for all students, especially those who live in poverty, to achieve excellence. Pearson, however, the publisher of these NYS tests, is one of many for-profit companies that create, own, and charge for the resources that align with the common core learning standards. Who profits from our students' failing scores?

If New York is serious about raising achievement by all students, it must invest far more in public education.

HOW WE CAN GET IT RIGHT

We call upon the Legislature to provide in full the resources districts need to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to master the New Common Core Learning Standards and to address the shortfalls dating to 2009. That includes funding for materials aligned with the standards and the technology needed to support them; reasonable class sizes; additional instruction and support for students who need it; and funding for a rich, comprehensive education that goes beyond "fill in the bubbles" to produce thinking citizens.

Similarly, if we are going to get it right in implementing the common core, the state must provide increased funding for quality professional development for teachers. Teachers need the time and resources to develop new lesson plans and incorporate the instructional shifts necessary to implement the common core correctly.

In order to implement the common core learning standards effectively, we need to put the brakes on to allow for them to be gradually phased into each grade level so that there are no gaps between the previous curriculum and the common core curriculum.

We ask you to support teachers and parents in our call for best practice in measuring student achievement; and for necessary transparency in the state's use of standardized tests.

As you know, NYSUT supports bills that would require transparency, not only about the millions spent on standardized tests, but also about the frequency and duration of student testing; the loss of classroom instruction time; and the real impact on student learning.

Well-designed standardized tests, tied to high academic standards and aligned with classroom lessons, should be only one of many tools used jointly to assess student progress, evaluate teachers and inform instruction. No single test can accurately and fairly reflect all the many factors that go into teaching and learning. Teaching is as complex as the students we teach, and no single data point can account for all the educational and societal factors that influence what happens in our classrooms.

So many of the horror stories at our "Tell It Like It Is" forums came from elementary teachers describing the inappropriate nature and harmful impact of these tests when administered to our youngest students. These tests are not only developmentally inappropriate; studies show they are invalid for young children. Best practice requires that tests for children in grades K-2 be grade-appropriate and diagnostic in nature only.

Unfortunately, the state test scores released last month are of little help. Teachers are barred from seeing all the test questions or the acknowledged correct answers and using them to improve instruction. Districts are unable to use these results for meaningful professional development that would promote student success.

We ask you to support teachers and parents in our call for sufficient time to implement these significant changes in learning standards and instruction before testing on the standards. We are calling for a three-year moratorium on high stakes consequences for students and teachers as a result of this rushed and rocky implementation — including postponing the implementation of the Common Core Regents exams as a graduation requirement. Assessing students and evaluating teachers should not be punitive or a game of "gotcha." While the state has made it clear the scores represent a resetting of the bar — what it sees as a new baseline —and not a step backward by students or teachers, that hasn't provided the assurances parents and teachers want and need.

These student test scores from the state's ill-thought-out implementation are unfair and must not be used to make high-stakes decisions for students or teachers. "High stakes" potentially means that some students won't get promoted to the next grade; some won't make the cut-off

for gifted and talented programs, and some will be — wrongly and inaccurately — labeled as needing remedial services. For teachers it means evaluations that will be skewed by invalid and inaccurate test results. A three-year moratorium would allow districts and teachers to make the necessary adjustments while setting a reliable and valid baseline.

A moratorium is essential to prevent the mistakes of last year from being compounded by the state's planned move to implement Common Core standards and tests at the high school level. SED plans to administer new exams this school year based on Common Core in Algebra I and English Language Arts alongside the traditional "gold standard" Regents Exams. SED also intends to begin using Common Core Regents exams as a graduation requirement for students who start ninth-grade next year. Implementation of these exams should be delayed for three years to forestall a drop in Regents scores and graduation rates similar to the recent plunge in grade 3-8 test scores. If high school scores were to parallel what happened in elementary and middle schools this year, it could mean that only one third of our students would graduate high school. A three-year moratorium on high stakes consequences would give parents, educators and students at all levels the time and breathing room needed to tackle the challenges of Common Core and "get it right."

NYSUT will vigorously advocate for and defend any teacher subjected to professional harm from the misuse of useless data, and we will take every possible step to ensure that the state's testing system is not used against students or teachers. As we work to strengthen an already strong school system, a moratorium will help ensure against harm to students and teachers.

It's time to listen to the commonsense voices of parents and teachers.

We've been told we should accept this bumpy ride because the rush to implement requires "building a plane in mid-air." That is a formula for a mid-air disaster.

We've been told that these major changes must be done in a hurry because at some point you need to throw children in the deep end to see if they can swim. As teachers who work our hearts out every day on behalf of the children in our care, that's not acceptable. It's time to pull our children out of the deep end and devote the time and resources they need to achieve the higher standards.

"Getting it right" means respecting the voice of educators and parents. New York must learn from the painful experiences of the last few years and include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration and respect. The recent national Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found that the vast majority of Americans have confidence in dedicated professionals who teach in our nation's public schools. A majority of parents would give their schools an "A" or "B."

NYSUT members continue working to meet what is a monumental challenge — using the collective power of our professional voice, together with parents, to press for necessary change, while simultaneously tackling the everyday classroom realities of implementing Common Core

We spoke as One Voice at a June rally that drew more than 20,000 parents, teachers and students to Albany to tell the state: "Get It Right!" We continue speaking with One Voice at the

many events, escalating around the state, which — like the recent rally in Comsewogue — result from the anger and frustration at a process that is harming our students. We ask for your support as, together with parents, we continue to fight for the future of public education.

We ask you to get it right.

We ask you to provide in full the resources districts need to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to master the new common core learning standards.

We ask you for sufficient time to gradually implement the common core learning standards.

We ask you to gradually phase in the common core learning standards.

We ask you for a three-year moratorium on high stakes consequences for students and teachers.

We ask you to postpone the implementation of the common core Regents exams as a graduation requirement.

We ask you to support teachers and parents in our call for best practices in measuring student achievement and for the necessary transparency in the state's use of standardized tests.

And finally we ask you to respect and listen to the voices of educators and parents.

Thank you.

36507