



Update

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Commissioner Elia and the NYS Regents

I attended a meeting on February 25 at which Commissioner Elia outlined what she perceives to be the four key issues currently affecting education in NYS. In a room full of union presidents, she spoke carefully about each issue: Common Core, the Standards, Assessments and APPR. Her words, well selected to match her audience. No surprise there. In summary here's what Elia had to offer.

On the Standards: Clearly the Standards need to be reviewed. The "Aim High, New York" survey received some 250,000 responses. Elia plans to create teams across the state to review the Standards and wants teachers of every level involved. The SED's website offers a link to be a part of this review process. She hopes that the Standards will be reviewed by October and will then be offered again for public review.

On Common Core: She acknowledged that the roll out of Common Core did not allow for adequate time and that there was a significant lack of available materials. She did state that "The Engage New York website was not supposed to be used as a script." She claims that SED and the Regents believe that "teachers should be involved in the making of curriculum based on the new Standards, and that it should be District-controlled."

On the Assessments: Timeliness was again an issue and caused undue stress to students, teachers and parents. SED has already changed companies - Pearson is gone - and has "shortened" the tests and removed the time constraint to reduce stress on the students. She is looking into a possible reduction in the total number of days needed for assessments next school year. In the Q & A session, Elia drew much criticism on this topic. The main concerns were: 1) that the tests, which everyone agrees are inappropriate, are still being given to our students; 2) the tests were reduced by only a few questions or reading passages; and 3) taking away the time limit will only serve to increase the time some students spend trying to complete the test.

On APPR: Elia re-capped what we already know. SED and NYSUT agreed on the APPR regulations; then, many changes were fashioned and we are now stuck with an APPR which the legislators have created but was not negotiated. Elia is looking to implement the twenty-one recommendations of the Governor's Task Force. She claimed that the four year moratorium period will allow for the development of new standards and new assessments. When questioned about changes to the APPR, she said it is now controlled by legislation and she added that any new plan that may be developed would continue to be a "state-wide" plan.

In the end, Elia, a longtime educator originally from NYS, said many things we all wanted to hear. She also, like any politician worth her weight, pawned off much of the responsibility to others. When questioned on several points, she claimed our state legislators or the federal government were in control or to blame. Legislation like the Tax Cap is destructive to school districts, and initiatives like NCLB and Race To The Top created the high stakes testing environment in which we are currently mired. Since Ms. Elia's appointment, Gov. Cuomo has pulled back a bit, at least from the public forum, in terms of controlling the educational process. And, in her defense, in the 8 months she has been Commissioner, we have seen some positive changes. Most would say, and I agree wholeheartedly, that the changes are not significant enough. Time, as always, will tell. Veteran teachers who have been around the educational block know all too well that the pendulum keeps swinging. Well folks, here it comes again!

As you are aware, three Regents, including Chancellor Tisch, will be stepping down this spring. As a result, NYS legislators will be selecting and voting on replacements in early March. Please contact your State Senator and State Assemblyperson and ask them to replace the old backward thinking Regents with new representatives who will support students, schools and teachers. It is not too late to set things right. Ask your representatives to appoint Regents who will reject the high-stakes testing which punishes students, teachers and schools. Ask them to select Regents who will be willing to implement the twenty-one recommendations of the Common Core Task Force. Ask them to appoint Regents who will propel NYS forward on a positive and productive course. You can use the NYSUT MAC app to fax them, or you can email or call them. With a new Commissioner and three new Regents, change is in the air. Together, we can influence the wind. Take action, today!

<http://assembly.state.ny.us/>

<https://www.nysenate.gov/>

In Unity,

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The Myth Behind Public School Failure

In an article in YES! Magazine *Dean Paton* noted “Until about 1980, America’s public schoolteachers were iconic everyday heroes painted with a kind of Norman Rockwell patina—generally respected because they helped most kids learn to read, write and successfully join society.” “Since then,” he continued, “what a turnaround...” Why have so many trashed what was once treasured? Why was war declared against our public education system with vouchers, charter schools, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, tax caps, Common Core’s standardized tests, APPR, and so forth?

Much, but not all, of the answer is \$\$\$\$. According to usgovernmentspending.com, for the 2016 fiscal year, local spending on education in the U.S. will amount to 651 billion dollars. Add to that 291.1 billion in spending by state governments, and 126+ billion by the federal government. That’s over \$3,000 per capita. That hefty chunk of change represents the drug of choice for corporate America, and make no mistake about it, profit is the name of their game. One writer in THE DAILY KOS has a slightly different perspective, “Corporate America sees no reason to educate working class students beyond the most basic level. They are seen as nothing more than future low paid drones in a brutal dog-eat-dog-cat-eat-mouse economy. The war against public education is a class war being waged by the wealthy against a growing working class resistance.”

Who has waged this escalating warfare? Investors, politicians in and out of office, celebrities and movie producers, laissez-faire economists, White House wannabes, radio and television evangelists and ideologues, charter school entrepreneurs, and other self-styled reformers who, for over thirty years, have proclaimed and celebrated what they regard as the death of public education. Education experts all? Not really. The personal academic records of some of them are ludicrous, and the percentage that have had any experience teaching would begin with a decimal point, but hey, “the higher a monkey climbs, the more you see of his ass.” What’s important to them is that there is money to be made, a great deal of it. So they overcrowd classrooms, tighten the noose around public school budgets, and hand public tax dollars to private, for-profit businesses that demand compliance over creativity from a group of handpicked students. Ignoring the fact that students who live in poverty and/or who come from severely dysfunctional homes might be failing because of the environment in which they live, states mandate perverted and punishing standardized “bubble” tests in which corporations set themselves up as the arbiters of success for children, teachers, and their schools, and thus “prove” public education to be a failure. Our unions are attacked as obstructionists and grassroots parents’ organizations are derided as silly little soccer moms for daring to challenge this unconscionable crusade.

Are their darlings, charter schools, doing any better? No! That’s the real myth, a fable concocted by those desiring to protect their investments. A 2014 study of charter school test results in 27 states by Stanford University showed no improvement or “significantly worse” results for 75% in reading and 79% in math. But that’s O.K. “If the statistics don’t match the argument, they are concealed or doctored to fit” said Kristen Steele in her article “Education: The Next Corporate Frontier.”

The truth is that “Few if any public schools are actually failing. This is a manufactured myth designed to fool as many people as possible for as long as it takes” says Lloyd Lofthouse, a former U.S. Marine, teacher, and author, “...a manufactured myth with an agenda behind it that has nothing to do with improving the lives of at-risk children...a tool that serves greedy hedge fund oligarchs or other oligarchs who have their own agenda that has nothing to do with educating children. If the agenda isn’t based on greed,” Lofthouse concludes, “then it is based on fundamentalist, far right, religious beliefs or extreme political beliefs...”

Public education is a cardinal component of our democratic society. The far reaching repercussions of its assassination may well deform America beyond recognition. That’s not the America we would wish upon our children and grandchildren. We hold ownership of our schools in common and we are collectively responsible for their good health and their success. And so, as good citizens with an eye to the future, we have a duty to dispel this myth of failure at every opportunity. How do we do this? We do it by rising to the defense of public education with **our voices and our votes**. With our voices we speak to family, friends, and neighbors, and we make sure we are heard in local newspapers. With our votes, we support those who support public schools, regardless of their party label. **Voices and votes** - that’s how to be effective in a democracy, and that’s how to defend our public schools.

In Unity,
Tom Cook

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