

Good Morning and thank you Senators for inviting me to speak today to you, the member of the Senate Standing Committee on Education. My name is James Gounaris and with a deep sense of pride, I address you as the current President of the Herricks School District Board of Education, but more importantly a parent and citizen.

I come to you today not to complain about issues I could and probably should complain about. I come instead to talk about what could – and should - be. The data on the most effective schools in the world is clearly, unequivocally, and in our mind, extraordinarily convincing. Many of the preconceived notions about what makes effective schools is just that - preconceived notions without the data to support them. To have you understand that please allows me to take a 200 year step backward.

The Herricks School District has been serving our community for 200 years. We are currently celebrating our Bi-Centennial. For all those years Herricks has proudly offered its residents progressive methods of Education Excellence, using cutting edge innovative tools, lessons, instruction plans, the hiring great teachers and administrators, and most importantly community based guidance with regards to expectations of its graduates for continued College studies.

Our district has consistently been at the fore front. In the modern era, the Herricks School District figured prominently in the issue of prayer in schools when a 1962 Supreme Court ruling decreed that government-written prayers were not to be recited in public schools and was unconstitutional. The case was brought by a group of Jewish families in New Hyde Park who said a voluntary prayer written to “Almighty God” by the state board of regents violated their religious beliefs. The Supreme Court’s ruling on the case referred to one of the country’s founding principles of religious freedom – a principle that was familiar to the early settlers in the area even before the U.S. Constitution was written. Even 50 years ago it became apparent to us that the State Board of Regents control was out of touch with our community.

We continue this year a 4 decade strong Educational success record as we boast

-A 99.8% Graduation Rate. Almost all our graduates move on to higher education. Many to some of the most prestigious colleges and programs in the State, Country and World.

-Most of our special Ed students receiving Regents and advance Regents diplomas.

-Almost 80 % of this year’s graduates took at least 1 AP course in high school and 75% getting 3’s or higher!

-Herricks Ranked in the top 3-4% on the states Common Core Grades 3-8 assessments.

-Two thirds of our students scored a 3 or 4 on the Common Core ELA and MATH tests.

-95% of Herricks Grade 11 Students were “College Ready” or better on this year’s English Regents.

These successes are testimony to the amazing job all the levels of our education system provide. Our elementary schools providing the strongest foundation for our students so as they move through the

system they excel. The newly transformed Middle School where a programming and Curriculum based renaissance has taken place. And in the high school, the expansion of their mental capacity, the way of courses are taught and the variety course offerings. The numbers I just mentioned speak for themselves.

All of these successes weren't achieved over night and were not some sort of miracle because of the new state education reforms instituted in recent years by The Regents. The successes are ours and belong to our community, as they demanded it from long ago and continue to demand greater and more challenging achievement goals.

The new state mandates while understandably necessary for New York City and continually low achieving school districts like Hempstead and Roosevelt actually prevent school districts like Herricks to continue its great work. If the goal is to raise standards for all the students in New York State, the question that needs to follow should be do we have districts currently at those levels, and if yes how have they achieved them. At that point those districts should be left unto themselves to continue their consistently great achievements, or better yet be put in to a group possibly named "THE EMPIRE GOUP" and excluded. Districts like ours, Great Neck, Roslyn, Manhasset, Garden City, East Williston, Carle Place and Rockville Center have worked tirelessly do be at the top of education reports. By excluding us and district likes us, SED can redirect their focus rightfully on those that really need assistance in elevating academic goals. Instead of just having the Regents come up with new plans and requirements for all the school districts themselves, have them establish goals and have the most successful school district superintendents review it and plan a guideline and implementation plan for the others. NASA doesn't use small scale model builders to design its rockets and space information systems-they use the best in the industry to do so. If the Regents want our kids to soar for the stars, then why force them to be subject to "model builders" as opposed to the education industries best and brightest as well.

The States recent reforms have actually made it harder for us to what we do best in Herricks. Let's begin at the "recent beginning";

1-The 2% tax cap. While I personally believe the cap itself was necessary because of the runaway school taxes, as I have previously explained to Senator Martins, the issue we had was with its immediate and catastrophic implementation, The state was complicit in the runaway school taxes and in the end, did nothing on their side of the equation to also feel the pain of the cap's implementation. A staggered approach of 4% the first year, 3% the second year and 2% the third year would have given districts the opportunity to slowly implement the changes necessary. The state could have shown true back bone and deemed it an education fiscal emergency and voided all existing labor contracts and put them all up for renegotiation but my personal belief is no one had the intestinal and electoral fortitude to battle organized labor. In addition that intestinal fortitude is absent when it comes to the out of control Retirement system payments along the dramatic increases in Health Insurance. A School districts biggest expense is its employees and at the same time, after the students our biggest resource. Of our \$100 million budget, 85% of it is labor and benefits, leaving us 15% for the students, text books, libraries, educational equipment, their surroundings, and now the tax cap. The caps effect

on Herricks has been the loss of close to 100 employees, a dramatic rise in class sizes, deep cuts in Athletics, and devastatingly dramatic change in certain services and extra-curricular activities. Was the states goal to make Herricks look more like New York City or for NYC to look more like us? Still we are able to boast about our educational successes, but for how long. The caps devastating effects throughout the state were truly made evident to me at a round table discussion with other board members last year in Albany-in those districts, you could take any foreign language you wanted as long as it was Spanish. You could play and instrument you wanted as long as it was a string instrument, as there was no longer a band for wind instruments, and you could join any sport team you wanted to as long as it was one you could afford after school since there were no teams left. I am not sure if any of you are truly aware of what this did to so many districts.

2-The Cost of APPR was almost \$300,000.00 to Herricks. In the states infinite wisdom, we implemented one state standard for the measurement of student achievement but then allowed 700 school districts to implement 700 different methods plans of evaluation, and that system was contrived by each district and their teachers union. Where was the true standard setting for the evaluations? That same evaluation system still to this day has no clear proviso in place for the removal of poor performing teachers and didn't even mentioned the ridiculous tenure system and it's hand binding policies. Great and Good Teachers reputations are also tarnished by a districts inability to remove a tenured teacher.

3-For assessments, the steps taken to implement the Common Core, putting an emphasis on critical thinking, research and application of knowledge, rather than simply checking off one of four choices for the right answer, are good ones. Common Core wasn't as big an issue for us as we had already been using similar methods to educate our students. Again a good teaching method in a great school district.

4-Similarly the implementation of new, much more demanding college readiness standards for high school students also makes a great deal of sense. The likelihood is the exams that go with them are not perfect and will need to be refined, but they are steps in the right direction and vastly superior to what has existed in far too many schools for far too long. With regard to the upcoming ELA and MATH achievement levels, we are going to be successful at getting our most at risk 9<sup>th</sup> graders ready for the new assessments in three years, because we trust and have confidence in our educators and administrators to devise a plan for those students success-again with no help from the state.

Our Superintendents have provided the Board of Ed members with research from the OECD, PISA for Schools, and Andreas Schleicher on the most effective schools in the world. It makes a lot of sense to us and our community. Why no one in Albany seems to pay much attention to it is anyone's guess. To the best of our ability we will make that research the foundation of our district as we move forward because The data clearly shows that effective schools are effective not because of culture, history, national norms or even levels of spending. The most effective schools share four things in common:

1-Hiring top educators from among top college graduates, like Herricks does

2-Setting high standards for all students, like Herricks does

**3-Massive amounts of targeted professional development, like Herricks tries to continually do**

**4-Intervening early and forcefully in dysfunctional situations, like Herricks does, not just using the state minimums.**

Many countries have followed these principles for quite some time. Others have only recently adopted them and followed them but they too have begun to make significant strides in the achievements of their students. Canada did this a decade or so ago and as a result has moved into the ranks of the top-achieving countries in the world. It is my understanding that Poland has recently undertaken similar reforms.

If one looks at the most successful schools in New York and elsewhere in the United States, the similarities with the most effective schools in the world are stunning.

We are excited for Herricks to participate in the PISA for Schools testing. PISA for schools is a student assessment tool geared for use by schools and networks of schools to support research, benchmarking and school improvement efforts. It provides descriptive information and analyses on the skills and creative application of knowledge of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science. The PISA-Based Test for Schools will provide important peer-to-peer learning opportunities for local educators – locally, nationally and internationally – as well as the opportunity to share good practices to help identify “what works” to improve learning and build better skills for better lives. The Board of Education was eager to put Herricks Students and in essence Herricks Staff up against the best of the world. If we benchmark ourselves with the best and brightest in the world, challenging us against others who share the same aspirations, as well as learning at the same time is what we at Herricks are all about. The information we receive from this will study will guide us in many ways, especially in the area of staff development. The best organizations in any industry don’t stay on top of their game without finding ways to re-invest in themselves and their work force so they can continue to evolve and be the best at their craft and boast the best products, which in this case is the best educated student in the world!

My plea is FOUR-fold.

**1- Part of me wants to say-can’t you just get off our backs and give us a chance to breathe, but that is not going to happen, although it should. Herricks and other districts like us don’t need be under the oppressive hand of the state, we are successful by our own right, and not by any commandment from SED or its commissioners, past and present. But there is an election year on the horizon and there is too much campaign money in play right now.**

**2-Next is focus on the areas that need the utmost scrutiny and help-50 years have gone by and the students and communities in places like Hempstead, Roosevelt and NYC need help. While attending that same meeting in Albany we spoke of the reform initiatives that were just getting underway. I talked about the extraordinary costs we were going to be asked to shoulder with little or no promise of improved results. I also noted that we were being asked to shoulder these at a time when we are making deep reductions in teacher and other school staff, rising class sizes and reducing or eliminating**

programs for students. I said, however, that I would clearly advocate giving this money to school districts such as Hempstead where I believe it could be better used to support the improvement of education for students who have long been denied the education they deserve. The data internationally clearly demonstrates that the best school systems are ones in which all students succeed. That same data demonstrates that those with the highest level of excellence also have the highest level of equity.

The State has allowed this never-ending cycle of inferior education, urban devastation, and the socio-economic, financial and moral degradation to continue and why. The children going in to Kindergarten and first grade can't even be guaranteed they will graduate from high school. In fact the odds are better that they will drop out-Now who in SED wants to take the credit for that. Unless one believes that those children are inherently less capable or less willing to work hard, there is no reason they should not be able to compete with the best in the world so I see no reason to sell them short. The state needs to look within and truly soul search. Again, Herricks would have gladly given up the cost of implementing APPR if it meant changing the course for those students, and I am sure others would have followed.

3-I would ask that you carefully assess whether reform efforts in New York are actually producing results. Many years ago Al Shanker said that the only real measure of an educational reform is whether it produces improved student assessment. Great ideas in concept which do not produce results are really not great ideas. Just as school boards, superintendents, principals and teachers are being held accountable by the Regents and SED, they too must be held accountable for their initiatives. If their initiatives are not successful, those who have tried their best to carry them out should not be faulted. And to what expense to the Student. And who in the end is holding a group of non-elected Bureaucrats accountable for their mistakes. By the time a mistake is found out, the damage to the students has already taken place.

4- Many of us sincerely doubt the advocacy of many aspects of New York's reforms and believe that they will only produce a wide variety of consultants and private companies selling products and services in the name of reform, rather than producing substantial results. We would strongly urge that you consider listing the reforms along the lines of the four factors I enumerated earlier. Since NYS has embarked on its own reforms, most of which do not coincide with the four key factors I delineated above, I can only hope that our reform experiment succeeds. Based on the data about what succeeds elsewhere in the world, I have real questions about whether this will prove to be the case or simply an extraordinarily expensive, although well intentioned, experiment.

Some of the steps taken by New York to improve its schools make sense. My children's future, the future of children in Herricks, and the future of children elsewhere in NYS depends upon them being ready to make the most of the skills and knowledge our education system can provide them.

As I conclude I leave you with the following thoughts:

After all the race to the top money vanishes, and after all the political sound bites have been captured and recorded, and most of those who made them have vanished or moved on to higher and higher

**offices, who will be left-People just like me and my kids, we will still be here, fighting every day for quality education for all.**

**So now it's up to you, will you continue to penalize and punitively punish the successful school districts for the sins and faults of others?**

**If you really want to know the true worth of the New York State Education Experience, testing every 15 year old in the state against all the others in the world is the best first step, but does anyone in the political annals of New York State really want to know the truth? My suggestion stands-get the best and brightest superintendents together-let them run the state education department-I am sure it would be a labor of love. They have the knowledge and the real life experience to launch the New York State Education system to the moon and beyond because they have the most at risk-their integrity and reputation as true educators. All of New York State's Children deserve it!**