

Testimony of John J. Hogan
Superintendent of the West Hempstead Public Schools
Before the New York State Standing Committee on Education

September 17, 2013

Dear Chairman Flanagan, Members of the Committee and Distinguished Guests:

I am John J. Hogan and I have the honor of serving as Superintendent of the West Hempstead Public Schools, a position I have held since 2007. Prior to being in West Hempstead, I was a district and building administrator in the Elwood Public Schools in Suffolk County. In some ways I am not your typical superintendent in that I served as a teacher and administrator in the Diocese of Brooklyn for 18 years, prior to entering public education, where I have served for the past 17 years. West Hempstead is a K-12 district servicing just over 2100 boys and girls in our 5 schools and another 1500 students who we transport out of district to private and parochial schools on a daily basis. The community is a diverse one with especially strong connections to its religious beliefs and heritage. It is also a community that is very supportive of the school district, whether the choice is to attend our schools or not.

Over the course of the past five years, the West Hempstead UFSD has encountered numerous financial challenges brought about by the economic collapse of 2008, increased health and retirement costs, tax cap implications and the ever increasing need to meet legislative and SED mandates that carry additional costs. Since the 2007/08 year, the average annual budget increase in West Hempstead has been 1.99%. (Appendix A) In the 2009/10 school year there was a 0% increase. Since that budgetary year, the average annual increase has been 1.15%, which started before the tax cap law went into effect. As you can see, West Hempstead has been very fiscally prudent. Additionally, a contract was settled with our teachers' union which called for a two-year step freeze, affording the district significant savings not only for those two years, but annualized into the future.

Even with such fiscal prudence, the district has exceeded and/or eliminated over 100 employment positions across the board since 2009. This has had an impact upon our class sizes, academic, extra-curricular and athletic programs. For 2013/14, the district found it necessary to eliminate the nine period day at the high school and middle school. As a result, students no longer have the opportunity to take 32 classes over 4 years, but rather only 28. This impacts both advanced and general electives. Art and Music are also impacted as student must make choices within a truncated academic day. We are very concerned that these two programs, which have served thousands of students over the years, will continue to be decimated. Additionally, we have lost student clubs and athletic teams, including wrestling, golf, volleyball and basketball teams at varying grade levels. (Appendix B)

Academically, we have lost our Directors of Data Collection and Analysis (at a time when SED is requiring more and more data on a daily basis), Social Studies, Music, Business/Foreign Languages and Family/Consumer Sciences. Principals, Assistant Principals and the remaining Directors are now supervising numerous departments. The burden placed upon them, especially as a result of APPR requirements, is quickly becoming insurmountable, if it is not already there. The evaluation process, along with its dependence upon growth scores and student learning objectives is unwieldy and impacts the efficacy of building administrators on a consistent basis. This does not even begin to address the amount of training time required for all.

Add to all of this, the APPR requirements previously mentioned, along with the implementation of Common Core State Standards and the resulting assessments, and one begins to wonder “what are we doing and is this where we really want to be?” APPR has been, for all intents and purposes, handed down to the school districts, with it seems very little forethought and input from the practitioners. The amount of training required has pulled district and building administrators out of their schools for significant amounts of time, to teach them how to observe teachers, when many of these same administrators have been evaluating teachers for many years and, quite frankly, know effective teaching when they see it. In our case, we lost 180 days of administrative time to training and, in many cases, need to send people for updated training or calibration training as the state may require.

The amount of administrator and teacher time in September, June and August now taken to calculate scores, issue those scores to teachers and parents, and then, file all of that information with the state has become a serious issue for it takes our focus away from the students in our care and places it upon responding to state deadlines. This says nothing of the amount of time now spent at the beginning of the school year to create new and/or revised Student Learning Objectives with numerous teachers, when we should be reflecting on practice and establishing goals for the coming school year. Our mission of servicing the boys and girls is being lost to bureaucratic minutiae.

Rubrics have been established for teachers and administrators that attempt to make everything about numbers, when we serve in a field where much of what happens is subjective. Curriculum and assessments have been rushed into place before the teachers were adequately trained and ready. What is worse is that children are being assessed before being ready. If you had a child who didn't know how to swim, would you throw that child into 20 feet of water and tell them “it's okay if you sink, eventually you will learn to swim.” What if your child drowns first? Or, would you start in the shallow end, where the child could still stand, and build confidence and skill in a reasoned and prudent manner? I submit that the state threw its children into the deep end of the pool before they were ready.

My training and experience in education goes back to my college days in the mid 1970's. I clearly remember my class on Tests and Measurements. In that class we were told the following by Professor Healy:

“If you give an exam and more than half your students fail, you did something wrong. Either you did not teach the material well or your constructed a poor exam. You have the obligation to determine what went wrong and fix it...either by re-teaching the material or re-structuring the exam.”

Interestingly enough, Professor Healy never thought to address the possibility that you would give an exam to your students before you had the opportunity to totally absorb the material yourself and teach it to your students as thoroughly as you could. I am especially confident that he never thought one would give an exam to students knowing,

before giving it, that significant numbers of students would fail. That is exactly what the State of New York did last year. Numerous students, who have always been proficient, are now labeled as failing students. Administrators, teachers and parents alike are scrambling to explain how this could happen. The State Education Department itself issued a caution of dropping scores prior to the assessments and then, when the self-fulfilling prophecy came true, explained it as the establishment of a new benchmark, with the Commissioner stating: ***“I want to make it very clear that the change in test scores (including, possibly, one in your child's score) does not mean that students are learning less or that teachers and schools are performing worse than last year.”***

There seems to be a “rush” to accomplish the implementation of the Common Core Standards with little thought as to whether “the experts” are correct and that the standards are in fact best for the boys and girls. Assuming that they are the best thing, why hurry? Why not give the teachers and students the opportunity to become proficient? I understand and support the need for high standards and appropriate assessments, every thoughtful educator does, but have we done enough to prepare ourselves and our students?

“Experts” on the other side of the issue question whether the Common Core really ensures “college readiness” at any correlated level and further question whether or not the assessments are in fact aligned with the standards. Add to this that teachers cannot really utilize the assessments for analysis sake and determine where they and their students may be coming up short, and the quagmire just gets worse. Assessments should be utilized as teaching tools after they are given. This is common sense and good practice.

This past July, the West Hempstead Board of Education sent a letter of concern in regard to the assessment structure, common core, APPR and the loss of local control to Governor Cuomo and a number of state legislators. (Appendix C). Concerns as addressed in the letter include:

- The amount of testing – from Student Learning Objectives to Common Core Assessments to required Field Tests
- The abdication of testing construction to large corporations
- The lack of concern for the children of an individual community
- The loss of local control
- The linkages of student results to APPR scores for teachers
- The loss of parental confidence in the assessment structure as evidenced by the “opt out” movement
- The rush to online testing, before anyone is really ready or in a position to afford it

Perhaps the most telling paragraph in the Board’s letter is the following:

“We respectfully submit to you that it is time to step back and take a serious look at the implications of all these endeavors, ostensibly taken in the name of enhancing

education, and question whether or not the end is justified by the means taken and, more importantly, is the end really where we wanted to be? The stress level placed upon our children and parents, not to mention our teachers and administrators, to comply with policies and procedures that support the concept that all education can be quantified, is particularly troubling. The reality of education is that much of what happens in the classroom is subjective and has to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of the children on any given day and at any given moment. Teachers understand this and act accordingly. The present policies and procedures may well be counter to all that we hope to achieve for the students in our care”

Over the course of my seventeen years in public education, I have seen the standards change on a number of occasions. Since I was appointed superintendent, I have seen standards and assessment structures change three times. Once, a few years ago, we saw the “passing grade” change after the assessments were given. That’s like a teacher giving a student an exam with a passing grade of 65%, but upon grading it, the teacher decides the test was too easy, so the passing grade is changed to 80%. Talk about “pulling the rug out from under” the teachers and the students in their care. Now, it is not enough to pass regents exams, to be considered “college ready,” it is expected that you will attain a grade of 80% in Integrated Algebra and 75% on the English regents.

Our regents exams used to be the benchmark of solid assessments, why is that no longer the case? Perhaps this issue can be traced back to the institution of the “All Regents” high school and diploma. It used to be that to get a Regents Diploma, one had to pass the English, Global, U.S. History, Math and/or Science sequence and a Foreign Language Regents. Now, one need only pass English, Global, U.S. History, one Math and one Science Regents to receive a Regents Diploma. Notice that there is no longer a Foreign Language requirement and there is consideration of eliminating the Global Regents.

There is no longer a Foreign Language Proficiency exam at the 8th grade level. There is no longer a Social Studies assessment in grades 5 and 8. There seems to be a disconnect. We seem to have lost our way. In this global society, how could such courses as Social Studies and Foreign Language be downgraded? How could such assessments be eliminated? What have we gained by eliminating the Comprehensive High School in favor of the All Regents high school? What have we gained by eliminating the local diploma? What have we gained by downgrading trade courses such as electronics, carpentry, etc? I respectfully submit to you that we have not gained, we have lost.

Students have become data. Our boys and girls are losing their identity to the world of data collection and analysis. The amount of data required to be sent to SED on an almost daily basis is unfathomable. Who is looking at all this data and how is it benefiting our students? I fear that the joy of learning is being lost. I fear that the joy of teaching is being lost.

Large testing companies are reaping significant profit by constructing the exams, grading the exams and then creating textbooks, workbooks and online resources to assist students in doing better on the standards and assessments. These are standards and assessments

that in many ways they have developed. It is a self-serving structure of profit. The connection between the state education department and these companies is somewhat disconcerting to say the least. Additionally, student data is now being stored by companies outside of the state and the state education department.

Parents are becoming quite concerned by all of this. People who have always supported their local school districts and the work they do are now questioning the amount of testing that is going on. The average student at the elementary level now takes the following assessments:

- In September – Student Learning Objective Benchmarks
- From September through June – the normal teacher quizzes, exams, mid-terms, finals, essays and projects
- At varying times of the year – field tests from SED
- In April – English Language Arts and Mathematics state assessments
- In June – at the 4th and 8th grade level – Science Assessments

The result is the “opt out” movement that many districts encountered. This movement is the byproduct of parental concern and has placed parents at odds with their school district’s responsibility to administer the exam. Districts are told they must insist that the students take the assessments, so districts pass this information to the parents. Parents then make their own decisions, which districts are not in any position to challenge. Districts, however, may suffer the consequences of not making APR as less than 95% of the students may have participated in a particular assessment.

On another front, Special Education and English Language Learner students are being placed in the untenable position of having to take and pass assessments that they are oft times just not ready to take. The Common Core assessments were extremely difficult for general education students; think about how difficult they were for classified students and students with English language difficulties. All educators agree that “no child should be left behind,” but the answer does not necessarily lie in giving students exams that they cannot pass.

I recall a few years ago observing a high school student who was classified as learning disabled. This student was going to a BOCES program to learn an occupational skill and was doing quite well. The “bump in the road” was the requirement that the student sit for the Algebra regents before being allowed to take a Math RCT to achieve, hopefully, a local diploma rather than an IEP diploma. I watched as this student broke down into tears as she tried desperately to succeed on an exam that was clearly beyond her. I have to ask, what is the point of placing students in “no win” scenarios? It seems to me that this is simply cruel. This particular student scored less than a 20% on that regents. She then took and passed the RCT and graduated with a local diploma. Again, what was the point of insisting that the regents be taken?

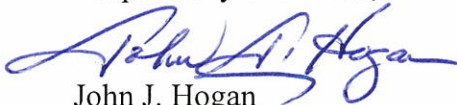
As a final thought, I respectfully ask the committee to consider the amount of local control that has been lost to federal and state initiatives over the course of the past

thirteen years. Most recently, federal and state aid has been connected to compliance issues having to do with “value added assessment” growth models, institution of common core standards and evaluation structures that are overseen in state capitals and reviewed by individuals who have never done what administrators and teachers do on a daily basis. Law students are employed to analyze APPR plans as negotiated by administrators and teacher unions at the local level, with no real knowledge of what we do. Neither do they know and/or understand the culture and fabric of the communities in question. These employees may know a lot about the law, but they do not necessarily understand education. For them, it all becomes a matter of whether you have adhered to the strict interpretation of the APPR regulation and completed the formulas correctly. In the past, local school boards, elected by their communities have overseen the progress of education in their schools. They did this in partnership with their state colleagues. This independence and partnership has been substantially lost to the micromanagement of the federal and state governmental entities.

We as a state, parents and educators must, like doctors, do no damage. Our job is to embrace our children, teach them well and place them in the best possible position to succeed. Are we presently doing that? It is a question worth considering.

On behalf of the West Hempstead UFSD and community, I thank the committee for the opportunity to present these thoughts. Together, as partners in education, we can move forward and meet the needs of all the students in our care.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John J. Hogan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "H".

John J. Hogan

Superintendent of the West Hempstead Public Schools

APPENDIX A

Seven-Year Budget History

Year	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	Proposed 2013-2014	Average Annual Budget Increase
Budget	\$50,766,963	\$52,607,660	\$52,607,660	\$52,891,477	\$54,397,183	\$55,188,693	\$55,675,720	
% Increase	4.57%	3.63%	0.00%	0.54%	2.85%	1.46%	0.88%	1.99%

APPENDIX B

**WEST HEMPSTEAD UFSD
POSITIONS ELIMINATED SINCE 9/1/08**

Directors	4
Teachers F/T	21
Teachers P/T	13
Permanent Subs	11
Teaching Assistants	4
Nurse	1
Clerical F/T	2
Clerical P/T	4
Custodial F/T	1
Custodial P/T	1
Clubs and Coaches	46
Total	108

APPENDIX C

WEST HEMPSTEAD UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

252 CHESTNUT STREET
WEST HEMPSTEAD, NY 11552-2455
(516) 390-3118
Fax (516) 489-1776

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District Clerk

July 17, 2013

Dear Legislator:

The West Hempstead Board of Education has become very concerned about the amount of standardized and student learning objective assessments that are now required by the State Education Department and supported by the Board of Regents, Governor and State Legislature. We are further concerned about the inordinate weight being given to the results of such assessments as developed by “experts” who neither know, nor care very much, about the students, school district and community of West Hempstead. Add to this, additional field testing as required by the State Education Department, which takes even more classroom time away from our students, and our concern grows stronger.

The amount of time being dedicated to such assessment and data gathering has impacted teaching and learning opportunities significantly. It has cost the district additional money and training time that has taken both teachers and administrators out of their schools. The APPR structure that has been developed by the State Education Department leaves little room for local control and links APPR compliance to state aid structures that are absolutely essential for a district such as ours to remain fiscally solvent. As such, compliance is being achieved via threat rather than through real conversation and debate as to the efficacy of these new structures.

As the Board of Education, we feel that local control over the education of West Hempstead’s school children has been severely compromised in the name of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, our ability to independently finance, as a community, necessary educational programs for our children has been limited by an imposed tax cap founded in the realm of political expediency and popularity rather than rooted in traditional democratic structures, such as “one person, one vote,” and the needs of children. We now have a state imposed budgetary process that requires a 60% majority to override an imposed tax cap, placing greater weight on the value of the “no” votes of the minority than the “yes” votes of the majority. Only school districts are required to secure such a 60% vote, as other municipalities can override the tax cap through board or local legislative action.

The West Hempstead UFSD and community have always been supportive of state efforts to enhance the educational product being offered to our school children. We have additionally been supportive of accountability efforts, as well as the need for Common Core Standards that strengthen the educational process. This support has extended to our governor, legislators and state education officials. We anticipate that such support will continue as you attend to our concerns as expressed in this letter.

However, we find at this time that parental and community questions are arising pertaining to the thoughtfulness and value of the assessment and accountability structures that have been put in place over

the course of approximately the past 12 years, beginning with No Child Left Behind in 2001 and recent federal edicts rooted in Race to the Top requirements and funding. We find that supportive parents are now wondering whether they should “opt their children out of” state assessments, thereby placing them at unwanted odds with state regulations and school officials.

We are deeply concerned about the linkages between the State Education Department and assessment/publishing companies that now develop, score and analyze our local data. These same companies benefit financially by selling these assessments, along with the data analysis and textbooks that go with them, not to mention online applications as well. Our State Education Department appears to be rushing down the road of online PARCC assessments and data dashboards that further link it to outside concerns other than what is best for children, all in the name of data collection and teacher growth scores. All of these initiatives will come with additional costs to already financially strapped school districts. Parent, teacher and administrative voices, reasonably questioning the efficacy of all this, are going largely unheard.

We respectfully submit to you that it is time to step back and take a serious look at the implications of all these endeavors, ostensibly taken in the name of enhancing education, and question whether or not the end is justified by the means taken and, more importantly, is the end really where we wanted to be? The stress level placed upon our children and parents, not to mention our teachers and administrators, to comply with policies and procedures that support the concept that all education can be quantified, is particularly troubling. The reality of education is that much of what happens in the classroom is subjective and has to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of the children on any given day and at any given moment. Teachers understand this and act accordingly. The present policies and procedures may well be counter to all that we hope to achieve for the students in our care.

We further submit to you that public education is now being micromanaged from state capitals and Washington D.C. and that local control, which has always been at the heart of public education, has been usurped. Our great concern is that the joy and freedom of learning, and the ability of our teachers to adapt to the needs of the students in front of them, has been severely compromised in the name of unwarranted assessment, data collection and analysis.

In closing, please know that we certainly understand and support the need for sensible assessment and accountability in education. We ask that you review whether or not the efforts currently underway are in fact sensible, reasoned and rooted in good educational practice. We look forward to continuing our partnership with you as we seek a great education for all our children.

For the West Hempstead Board of Education, we are:

Sincerely yours,

Karen Brohm
Board of Education President

John. J. Hogan
Superintendent of Schools