



TESTIMONY

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

DATE:
OCTOBER 1, 2013
SYRACUSE

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
KEVIN AHERN, PRESIDENT
SYRACUSE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION
TO THE
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON
THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA:
"ASSESSING" OUR PROGRESS
OCTOBER 1, 2013
SYRACUSE**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to provide testimony. My name is Kevin Ahern and I am honored to be the president of the Syracuse Teachers Association, representing over 2500 professionals working in the interest of children here in the Syracuse City School District. I am also a proud graduate of Nottingham High School right here in the city.

Syracuse, as you may know, is the first district in the U.S. to implement the program "Say Yes to Education" citywide. We are pioneering a comprehensive strategy to surmount the barriers of poverty.

Our collaboration includes the Syracuse Teachers Association; the Syracuse City School District; Syracuse University; the Syracuse Association of Administrators and Supervisors, the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, the American Institutes for Research, and many Syracuse area business, non-profit, and philanthropic organizations.

Through "Say Yes," graduates of Syracuse city schools are guaranteed free college tuition once they earn admission into a participating college or university.

Just as importantly, through "Say Yes" we work to provide our students with the high quality ongoing wrap-around services —including academic, social, emotional, health, and family supports — that are essential in combatting the effects of poverty.

And yet, these efforts are being threatened by the Regents' Reform Agenda.

I have read with great interest the testimony offered in your previous hearing held in Long Island. I was struck by the consistency of the message that came from educators and non-educators alike: The Regents Reform Agenda, as implemented by the State Education Department, is not working and, in fact, may be doing more harm than good.

I will not take our time today to document the many similarities of our Reform Agenda experiences here in upstate to the downstate experiences. Suffice it to say that problems with the rushed implementation of the Common Core, the over-reliance on testing, the lack of adequate resources, and the demoralization and de-professionalization of teachers are all happening right here, right now. The impact of this agenda has been devastating, forcing an already struggling school district into crisis.

In Syracuse, over 80% of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and over 50% live below the federal poverty line. We have an ever-increasing population of students who don't speak English as their primary language and a very high percentage of students with disabilities. Since 2009, reduced state aid

has forced the SCSD to cut nearly 25% of its staff, including hundreds of teachers and teaching assistants. While the student population of nearly 20,000 has remained stable, the number of adults working with them has decreased dramatically.

It is within this context — a high needs student population and a chronic lack of resources to support them — that the negative impact of the Reform Agenda is most severely felt. New more rigorous tests administered without necessary curricular support to students who historically struggle with standardized tests is not “ripping the band aid off,” it’s rubbing salt on the wound. Add to this the challenge of developing and implementing SLO’s or alternative measures of growth at scale and the stress placed on under-resourced systems such as ours undermine our collective efforts to improve outcomes for kids.

The Reform Agenda also brings with it punitive measures for schools that are not performing well on state tests. In Syracuse, 19 of our 32 schools have been identified as “focus” schools. Because three of the four so-called turnaround models prescribed by legislation are no longer available to us or simply not feasible, we are forced to develop school improvement plans for these schools that include removing the principal and 50% of the staff. Five of our schools went through this painful process last spring and summer and we’ll have to put five more through it this coming school year. Like many reform mandates, this so-called turnaround strategy is not a research-based practice with any demonstrable history of success; it is simply an arbitrary concept developed by non-educators to convince other non-educators that activity will somehow lead to achievement.

More important, however, is the disruption this practice causes to those individual school communities. Family connections with educators forged over many years and, in some cases, several generations are ripped apart as teachers and leaders are removed. Trusting relationships between teachers, principals, parents and students are severed without regard for the potential consequences. A Reform Agenda that encourages the deliberate destabilization of school communities in our most vulnerable neighborhoods among our poorest citizens is unconscionable. I submit to you that if this practice were occurring in wealthier suburban districts, parents and legislators in those enclaves would never stand for it.

Equally unconscionable is the State Education Department’s failure to ensure adequate support and guidance as 700 districts across the state try to comply with unfunded mandate on top of unfunded mandate. Speaking with colleagues from around the state, the rushed implementation of APPR has been a nightmare in virtually every school district. Linking teachers to students, developing and implementing SLO’s and/or other student growth measures, training administrators and teachers and meeting the ever-changing criteria from the SED for plan approval is expensive, time consuming and complicated work. The SED’s response to those challenges has been inadequate to say the least. To use an old expression, they have been “a day late and a dollar short” at every turn. The result of this absurd and dangerous “building the plane as we fly it” mentality has brought into question the credibility of the entire teacher evaluation system.

The Reform Agenda, as it has played out in New York State, has a credibility issue. The state’s implementation has most educators believing that it is more about sorting teachers than it is about improving their practice and, by extension, outcomes for kids. More and more parents, it seems, believe that reform is replacing true learning with constant testing. The teachers I represent are demoralized by careless rhetoric about “death sentences” for schools, a chaotic implementation of APPR, constant testing and a chronically underfunded school district that is struggling to implement the student-centered supports we know are needed to counter the burdens of poverty.

If we are serious about a teacher evaluation system that is designed to inform and improve instruction, then we must provide teachers with what they need. Research shows that student achievement and teacher retention improves when teachers have supportive school leadership, an engaged community and

parents, a safe environment, time to plan and collaborate, high-quality professional development, and an atmosphere of trust and respect. The Reform Agenda does not adequately promote or support any of these things.

It seems clear that a moratorium on the high stakes consequences attached to test scores for teachers and students would be the first reasonable step toward a Reform Agenda course correction. There must be time for properly aligning and implementing curriculum, developing accurate and reliable tests and pursuing appropriate researched-based practices.

There is also a tremendous need for appropriate funding to school districts that will support the technology, materials, and professional development necessary for an effective implementation. School districts must have the capacity to support this state mandated reform.

Finally, and most importantly, legislators must realize that the biggest problems in public education are not failing schools or “ineffective” teachers. There is little if any evidence to support either assumption. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that points to poverty as the single biggest barrier to educational attainment. The research is voluminous and as old as public education itself. It is therefore no surprise that the schools here in Syracuse and across the state that have been identified as failing — “focus” schools — virtually all exist in poor neighborhoods. Any discussion of education reform that doesn’t begin with addressing the barriers faced by children living in poverty isn’t a discussion worth having. The current Reform Agenda not only doesn’t address the impact of poverty, it actually exacerbates the problems by punishing and destabilizing schools and school districts in high poverty areas.

In closing, I am calling on you to commit to student-centric reforms supported by parents, the Syracuse Teachers Association and New York State United Teachers.

I urge you to join teachers and parents in our call for best practices in measuring student achievement. That means ensuring that our youngest students are not forced to take tests that are developmentally inappropriate. That means requiring transparency in the state's use of standardized tests.

I ask you for the time students and teachers need to gradually implement the new learning standards in order to “get it right.” That should include postponing the implementation of the common core Regents exams as a graduation requirement. It should include a three-year moratorium on high stakes consequences for students and teachers —who are doing their level best against great odds to surmount the stress caused by the state’s rocky implementation.

Finally, I urge you to provide in full the resources districts need to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to master the state’s new learning standards. Our students’ challenges are only worsened by the state’s hyper-focus on testing instead of the supports and services they need.

Students living in poverty need state-sponsored support and not state-sponsored disruption. They need safety nets, not sanctions. The Reform Agenda should be supporting the development of state of the art community schools and efforts by organizations like Say Yes that not only provides scholarships, but also create unprecedented collaborations between stakeholders to bring resources to our kids and their families. If New York is really interested in providing every student with a first class public education, the fundamental issues of poverty — access, equity, opportunity — must be seriously addressed.

Thank you.

36511