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Our Public Education System:

One Parent's Perspective



**Testimony Presented by Pam Farino
Re: The Proposed 2012-2013 Executive Budget**

January 23, 2012

Thank you for granting me the opportunity to share with you a side of our education story you don't usually hear - A Parent's Perspective. My name is Pam Farino and I am a parent from Smithtown, which for those who don't know, is in Suffolk County, on Long Island. During the past nine years, I have become well versed in the education system; attending and often actively participating in over 200 Board of Education and committee meetings in my school district.

My parents moved here from Ohio in 1964, excited to begin teaching in one of the best public school systems in the Country. I am a product of the New York Public School System. In fact, I graduated with a Regents diploma as a high school junior. I had an excellent education and I assumed my children would receive the same. Boy was I wrong. Everyone who comes before you today will show you educational data, so I won't waste your time on the data. After all, we know data can be manipulated to prove different points of view. Instead, I want to share what I, as an interested parent, have learned and observed. During the past decade New York's education has been in a downward spiral. My children have been in a school system that currently ranks somewhere around the bottom third of all state systems! Districts throughout our State are faced with a multitude of similar challenges, some of these problems are caused by the local entities but, many others are caused by ridiculously, complex laws and the language that is quietly maneuvered into many bills.

I would first like to discuss an issue that Smithtown and four other districts are reeling from. These five districts have received punitive penalties due to a paperwork deadline that was inadvertently missed. While I understand the need for regulations and deadlines I do not understand the enormous penalty thrust upon us-in excess of 10 million dollars-and that is just the punitive penalty for Smithtown! The legislation must be changed so that the district is held responsible for its error and the adult(s) responsible are punished. Unfortunately, the current punitive system forces our children to ultimately bear this burden. In the past, legislative bills to remediate these issues passed with no concern. Finances are different now, I get that, but imposing a double-digit penalty for a 3.5 million dollar clerical error is excessive.

Speaking of excessive- has anyone read even one of the many collective bargaining unit contracts of the past 10 years? I have read many and they are mind boggling. The long-term outstanding debt for districts' statewide takes a person's breathe away. The Triborough Amendment **must** be tackled this year. We The People are always starting a lap behind in a two lap race, putting all communities at a **dis**advantage, because there is no incentive to negotiate fairly. How does one really prove "in **good** faith"-it's subjective. My district is currently in negotiations with four of our units, yet **no** Board of Education member is present at these meetings. Why are We The People **not** represented in this process or informed prior to agreements being signed? We are the **ones** that must pay what has been negotiated. The Triborough Amendment has driven the employee compensation to historically high levels that are unsustainable.

The Triborough is not the only legislative issue that must be addressed immediately; you must also deal with "Last in First out" and **sen**iority lists. These two clauses are in almost every contract and do nothing to insure that a **high** quality, effective teacher is in each and every

classroom. Districts all around the state are laying off wonderful, effective, and motivated teachers and principals all because of these two clauses. The legislature must enact State laws to repeal this archaic and ineffective system, and put language in place that reinforces the need to keep quality teachers and principals no matter what their longevity is.

Every year at budget time our local BoE and Superintendent(s) publicly tell our community to "write to our legislator's and tell them we want our fair share. We aren't getting enough", and to be quite honest dollar for dollar we are not even close. However, I have never heard a public representative say; "hey no worries we have plenty of money"! Not even during the years of plenty. Over the past decade my district's State education aid went up just over sixteen million dollars, and our Federal aid went from 1.6 million in the year 2000 to 9.9 million in the year 2010. The problem of not enough money is about to be exacerbated by the fact that the large infusion of federal funding will no longer be there to prop up the addictive spending habits that too many in our education system have developed. The ruling of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit must be dealt with, because ultimately it will effect the education monies distributed throughout the State. It is time for the State to use more current fiscal data when developing the State budget. If I can FOIL and receive 2010 financial data why is our government not using it to prepare for the coming budget?

Race to the Top, what can I say other than we never should have applied. Now we are at risk of non-compliance with our application. While I understand the concerns of the teachers and principals, their refusal to get on board has now put all students in New York at risk. When we sat here last February, the heads of the two most influential teachers' unions publically expressed their dissatisfaction with the development of a new evaluation process. This is why the State involved their people in the process of the development of the framework and regulations. How is it two men have the power to put all of New York's children at risk? Because, You have allowed it. They have more pull here in Albany than any other lobbying group. I would sympathize with them and their organizations if they were currently insuring New York's educational outcomes had actually increased this past decade, but instead we have gone in the other direction. To make matters worse, the director of the school board association, who has at least advocated for mandate relief on behalf of our children, has done little to resolve the current stalemate. The leadership of all the involved groups MUST come to a compromise and soon. If we lose \$700 million dollars in federal funding it will seriously affect all districts, and the least wealthy ones will be hit the hardest- as usual.

The Board of Regents must move quickly to direct the commissioner to revamp the New York State Report Card on Schools. The report card should reflect the number and percentage of students attaining the scores that both the Regents and institutions of higher education have agreed should be set to ascertain college and career readiness of New York's students. The current form is deceiving because it does not show how well students are prepared to enter into a career or college after graduation. Yet, too many schools and the associations that represent these schools do not want the public to know these numbers--because they are really, really bad, even in the best districts! When I graduated in 1985, a Regents diploma actually meant something, not just to the colleges and universities in the SUNY system, but out-of-state schools

schools were impressed as well. Now that I have completed the college application process with my daughter I realize that other States just don't care about New York's Regents diploma, and why should they? We are no longer one of the national leaders in public education. For the past two years I have heard a lot of talk about reform, but no real action has been taken. While the Board of Regents has tackled some issues, most are cost neutral or only offer a small bit of relief. For far too long we have heard the term "mandate relief", well folks kick it into four wheel drive and get it done.

On a bright note I want to thank the legislature on passing the tax cap, it was long overdue. Unfortunately, scare tactics are already being used by local school districts purposely freaking parents out with doomsday cuts, just so they can secure an override of the 2% tax cap. What the local Boards of Education and Superintendents do not explain to the public is that promises made to collective bargaining units, as well as State legislative language, have driven up the costs exponentially. Due to these financial obligations that **must** be paid, there is no money for smaller class sizes, better academic programs, extra curricular programs, and the list goes on and on. It's as if a chess game is being played and our children are the pawns.

If we all have a common goal of a well educated society, why are so many adults blocking the way? I have come up to Albany a few times on my own. I have watched and listened to entourage after entourage come and visit many of you. Last year, I spent Valentine's Day here - lobbying for the children. I may have even visited your office, but I am sure no one remembers me--because I was just one woman stopping by to speak with you-our State Representatives. I am fed up with association after association wanting what's good for them and the people they represent instead of lobbying for a better, more comprehensive education for our children. There is so much more to discuss but in 10 minutes time one can only highlight a few of our systemic problems. My district's Superintendent loves to say "we are in the people business", it just seems that those in the people business forgot which people the education system is supposed to serve--The Children. The future is now - and our children are the future.

Thank you for your time and attention today.

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The New York State District Report Card

**Comprehensive Information Report
2009 – 10**

District **SMITHTOWN CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

District ID **58-08-01-06-0000**

Superintendent **EDWARD EHMANN**

Telephone **(631) 382-2005**

Grades **K-12**

Regents Exams

		All Students				General-Education Students				Students with Disabilities			
		Total Tested	Percentage of students scoring at or above:			Total Tested	Percentage of students scoring at or above:			Total Tested	Percentage of students scoring at or above:		
			55	65	85		55	65	85		55	65	85
Comprehensive English	2009-10	812	100%	99%	63%	744	100%	99%	68%	68	97%	93%	4%
	2008-09	769	98%	97%	58%	695	100%	100%	64%	74	85%	76%	5%
	2007-08	778	99%	98%	56%	709	99%	99%	61%	69	91%	83%	6%
Mathematics B	2009-10	212	76%	52%	4%	206	77%	54%	4%	6	67%	0%	0%
	2008-09	644	86%	76%	36%	637	87%	77%	36%	7	57%	29%	0%
	2007-08	563	96%	89%	48%	555	95%	89%	48%	8	100%	88%	25%
Integrated Algebra	2009-10	960	97%	93%	41%	827	99%	97%	46%	133	84%	68%	7%
	2008-09	893	97%	95%	43%	789	99%	97%	48%	104	83%	73%	5%
	2007-08	820	99%	97%	49%	752	99%	98%	52%	68	96%	82%	15%
Geometry	2009-10	762	98%	91%	37%	719	98%	92%	38%	43	88%	72%	7%
	2008-09	0				0				0			
	2007-08	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Trigonometry	2009-10	486	99%	94%	51%	483	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
	2008-09	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	2007-08	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Global History and Geography	2009-10	907	96%	90%	53%	798	98%	94%	58%	109	82%	65%	17%
	2008-09	821	97%	92%	58%	736	98%	95%	63%	85	81%	64%	12%
	2007-08	792	98%	95%	64%	712	100%	98%	70%	80	83%	66%	10%
U.S. History and Government	2009-10	814	98%	95%	69%	742	99%	98%	74%	72	85%	67%	18%
	2008-09	756	98%	97%	72%	688	99%	99%	78%	68	84%	74%	16%
	2007-08	780	99%	98%	73%	715	100%	99%	77%	65	94%	86%	23%
Living Environment	2009-10	892	99%	97%	65%	790	100%	99%	72%	102	93%	79%	18%
	2008-09	870	100%	100%	71%	801	100%	100%	74%	69	97%	96%	32%
	2007-08	774	99%	97%	59%	704	100%	99%	64%	70	90%	76%	11%
Physical Setting/Earth Science	2009-10	901	97%	92%	52%	788	99%	95%	58%	113	86%	73%	11%
	2008-09	832	95%	89%	51%	742	97%	93%	56%	90	82%	59%	10%
	2007-08	807	96%	89%	45%	738	98%	92%	48%	69	81%	59%	10%
Physical Setting/Chemistry	2009-10	523	99%	93%	17%	520	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
	2008-09	528	99%	91%	16%	525	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
	2007-08	516	98%	87%	11%	511	98%	86%	11%	5	100%	100%	40%
Physical Setting/Physics	2009-10	307	95%	90%	41%	307	95%	90%	41%	0			
	2008-09	299	92%	83%	35%	296	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
	2007-08	256	93%	84%	41%	254	-	-	-	2	-	-	-

NOTE

The — symbol indicates that data for a group of students have been suppressed. If a group has fewer than five students, data for that group and the next smallest group(s) are suppressed to protect the privacy of individual students.

Smithtown Central School District
 Regents Examination Scores
 June 2011, Grades 9-12

Regents	Total Tested	Number Meeting Criteria	Percentage Meeting Criteria
June 2011 scores, 9-12, 80 or better			
Regents Algebra2/Trigonometry	598	353	59.0%
Regents Geometry	766	494	64.5%
Regents Integrated Algebra	671	446	66.5%
Regents Living Environment	686	542	79.0%
Regents Physical Setting/Earth Science	874	634	72.5%
June 2011 scores, 9-12, 75 or better			
Regents Comprehensive English	820	734	89.5%

As per the foil request, these numbers exclude August and January Regents results as well as 8th grade Regents results.