



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

JACK M. MARTINS August 23, 2011

| ISSUE: **EDUCATION**

Don't Fix What's Not Broken

One size definitely does not fit all or at least it rarely does. It's a lesson big government needs to remind itself. Case in point would be the State Board of Education's recent efforts to redesign how our teachers are evaluated.

You may recall that New York was fortunately awarded \$700 million from the federal government's "Race to The Top" program which seeks to improve student scores by holding teachers more accountable. The idea is a good one and certainly no one wants to turn away much-needed monies for our schools, but as usual, it's in the implementation of good ideas that problems arise. One of the main issues is teacher evaluations. I recently met with school officials from throughout the district regarding the new regulations and the impact – costs and otherwise – to our schools.

In an effort to meet "Race to the Top" standards, our State Education Department decided to, in essence, reinvent the wheel. In this case, it decided to revamp the process by which teachers are evaluated. Our school administrators and principals currently are required to be certified in order to qualify for those positions, but with the proposed changes would have to be retrained by third party contractors in a new "rubric" approved by Albany's bureaucracy.

This new approach would be forced not only on underachieving districts where intervention may be warranted, but also on our very best schools, replacing local control and determination with a one size fits all approach that does not make sense.

The reality is that in an area like ours, with numerous outstanding schools that regularly outperform national averages, we run the risk of fixing something that isn't broken. We have informed and involved PTAs and school boards that hire experienced superintendents and expect them to know their students, families, and teachers and subsequently craft a plan that maintains high standards. Those key people, responsible for so much of our success, are now being left out of the equation.

Of course the action also carries with it a price-tag. Our board of education (taxpayer) has to pay for these contractors and the training at a projected cost of over a \$100,000 per district. Equally as disconcerting is that the focus shifts away from performance to how these evaluators are trained and accredited and to what standards they themselves are being held. We've taken our eye off the ball and essentially created what may be another level of bureaucracy in a system overflowing with red tape. To what end?

So what is the answer? For starters there seems to be universal agreement, even among local administrators, that underachieving school districts need greater attention. For reasons particular to each district, some problems stem from within the system itself. Yet even in those cases, key officials have to play an active role. It's also obvious that that formula simply does not, and should not, apply to successful school districts. In those cases we have to establish partnerships that keep the engineers of these excellent districts with their hands on the wheel while meeting the state's standard of documenting teacher accountability. We may just establish best practices to be replicated in other communities rather than the top down approach our state bureaucracy appears to prefer.

It is not acceptable to pass a directive and hope everything falls into place. The job of parent, administrator, teacher, and yes, even state senator is to work together to develop a plan that works best for our kids. The philosopher Voltaire wrote, "No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking." Our children, families, teachers and administrators deserve nothing less.