



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Where Is the Students' Lobbyist?

You may recall that I recently called for the resignation of New York State Education Commissioner, Dr. John King. The initiatives he has undertaken in his brief tenure as Commissioner of the State Education Department, including his roll-out of the Common Core curriculum, testing, teacher evaluations, and gathering of student data, are shaping up to be among the most controversial issues I've ever dealt with as a public servant. It's easy to see why. These changes have created confusion among parents, anxiety for our children, and put life-long educators at odds with the department of education in Albany. This was only exacerbated when he cancelled town hall meetings on the issue.

So on Wednesday, November 13, I moderated a forum, coordinated with the 15 school districts from our Seventh Senate District, at Mineola High School. Dr. King attended and fielded questions from parents, educators, school board members and even students on the Common Core standards and rollout, teacher evaluations, testing, and student privacy. We had more than 800 in the audience and over 2,000 watching on a live feed via the internet.

Reporting the event's conclusions is a challenge best summed up by a letter I received from an attendee who said it was like blind men trying to explain an elephant by describing just

one body part at a time. The issues we're facing in education in New York are multidimensional and require a holistic approach to appreciate and address them.

It's not just the rollout of the Common Core and its impact on students and teachers.

It's not just the teacher evaluation system that has created conflict and anxiety without any apparent purpose or meaningful result.

It's not just the overreliance on testing and its impact on a child's educational experience and the teacher's role as educator.

It's not just the concern of parents for the protection of their child's privacy.

It's all of these things individually and collectively and much more. It speaks volumes to the reality that we are moving too quickly with no apparent purpose other than the claim that it will all be better when we get "there", wherever "there" is.

The writer went on to conclude "that no care was invested in a process" that should have been conducted with "years of close observation and input from actual teachers and administrators in the classroom." I agree.

Most importantly, we are left asking the most basic of questions: How does any of this improve the educational experience of our children?

In theory, as the Commissioner explained, it may.

In reality, as we heard from parents, students, teachers, and educators, it has not and will more than likely have just the opposite effect. It's seems wiser then to reevaluate these initiatives as a whole and take the time to phase in only the parts that work.

While we all want higher and more rigorous standards for our children, it must be rolled out gradually, allowing teachers to properly prepare and students the advantage of growing with the new curriculum. Judging by the temperature I took in that auditorium, parents and educators are more than up to the task should Dr. King care to work with them and I hope he will.

While I feel the evening was productive in identifying these issues, I know full well that political pressure will ultimately be necessary to institute any changes. The powers that be seem entrenched in their position however wrongheaded they may be.

Which brings me to the title of this column: "Where Is the Students' Lobbyist?"

You may remember that a few years ago during his "State of the State," Governor Cuomo remarked how students were the only group in schools that didn't have a lobbyist and valiantly volunteered to take on that responsibility. He recognized then that our children had to be protected from special interests more intent on exploiting education for gain, than furthering learning and life opportunities for students. He pledged to do so.

But he's been notably silent.

Let's hope for our children's sake that he has not abandoned his post as the students' lobbyist and that he's not counting on blind men to tell him what the elephant looks like.