



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Stealing With Your Eyes

I don't know whether to be joyful or distressed, so I think I'll simply settle for cautiously hopeful.

I'm sure by now most of you have read the news: New York State Education Commissioner Dr. John King Jr. will resign from his position at the end of this year. He's moving on to become senior advisor to federal Education Department Secretary Arne Duncan which will make him the second highest ranking official there. Depending on where you stand, that's either good or bad news. For most parents I speak with, they're happy to see him leave but worried about his having an even more powerful position. As for me, despite my mostly rocky relationship with him, I do wish him the best in his new endeavor. While we've disagreed on almost every aspect of his agenda, we do agree that our children's education system must be improved and I respect his dedication to that ideal.

That being said, we've tangled with each other from day one. First it was a poorly conceived rollout of Common Core, which sent our kids' test scores and confidence plummeting. While I embrace the higher standards that will keep our children competitive in a changing world, I reject the one size fits all, cookie cutter testing that Common Core thrust

upon them. And I refuse to accept the elevation of this testing to the be-all, end-all position it enjoys under this state's administration. I know from first-hand experience with my own little ones that the emphasis has become the scores and not our children.

Then there was what I interpreted as a cool disregard for the opinions of the very educators who have successfully taught our children all these many years. It was the same disregard he exhibited when he refused to hold parent forums to address concerns here on Long Island. I arranged the local forum anyway and publicly called for his resignation if he didn't attend which clearly landed me on the "least favorite" list with the State Education Department (SED). Gratefully, Commissioner King did attend and heard for himself the very real problems Common Core unleashed. And while those meetings did sometimes get ugly, the old saying is that "democracy is noisy." It just means people are paying attention and it's a good thing.

Adding further injury at a time when no one went unscathed, SED under Dr. King doubled down on a plan to sell off our children's personal data to third party vendor, InBloom. Not only was it without parental consent but our educators were to become the collectors of over 400 data fields per child with absolutely intrusive and controversial subjects like their family relationships. Naturally, I was more than happy to work with my colleagues to dismantle this effort.

What all the circumstances point to is a Department of Education that is entirely tone deaf to the very people who know our kids best: parents and educators. While they maintain they are guarding against those serving only their personal interests, they fail to realize that those "personal" interests are precisely our children. Instead, they're more content to charge ahead for the sake of their belief in being right, problems be damned without input or cooperation. Such attitudes have no place in government especially when they affect our children and their education.

My hope is that the mindset trickled from the top down and that with Dr. King's departure, a more open and cooperative approach will be taken. A lot is riding on the Regents' appointment of a new commissioner. The selection process is happening as we speak so now is the time to contact the Board of Regents and tell them we want a commissioner who'll listen and who's willing to work with us, not against us. I assure you, if ever there was a time to reach out and be heard, it would be now.

I have a friend whose old-school Italian uncle always advises him to "steal with your eyes." In other words, to watch carefully and learn from the people who know. The Board of Regents should heed this wise instruction and take parent and educator input into consideration while selecting a new Commissioner. Or else the next few years will again be relegated to undoing bad ideas instead of implementing good ones and to losing a generation of grade school children to what has become a failed experiment.