

## **Jennifer Curley , Teacher, AQE**

First and foremost I would like to thank the commission for allowing me to speak.

My name is Jennifer Curley and I have been a public school teacher for twenty years, making me an expert on the front lines of teaching. I applaud our state leaders for taking a proactive stance on budget reform and holding school officials accountable - but I am completely disillusioned with how the state is going about it. Aside from unconditional love, an education is one of the most precious gifts we can give to our children. It is beyond my comprehension how anyone can justify the damage these cuts have caused, while large corporations like General Electric skirt paying any taxes at all and yet clear profits of 14 billion dollars a year. Having said that, I have two suggestions that might lead to more informed, fair, and moral decisions on the part of the people in power.

1. PLEASE come spend some meaningful time with us.

If it's one thing I hear constantly, it's how the individuals making education policy can't possibly understand the realities of daily life in a public school. I ask you, before any more legislation is authored, please spend more time with us. Please do more than pop into a school for a fancy one hour tour, with a catered lunch, escorted by a highly-paid superintendent, to the best class in the district. Please come spend a few hours a day with me in my classroom of emotionally disturbed eighth graders. Spend a few hours a week tutoring a learning disabled student for the state exams. It's truly painful to witness their shame and anxiety. Co-teach Spanish classes of 35 for a week. Shadow a middle school principal during the month June in a larger city . Come to the homes of my students with me because I haven't seen them for a week, and the last time I DID see them, they were beaten up, pregnant, or high on drugs. Public school educators are not looking for a pass because of these situations, we just want the people making these very important decisions to understand the massive influence these situations have on daily instruction and operations of a school. So PLEASE come spend some meaningful time with us.

2. RESTORE public school funding to sustainable levels with a goal of keeping class sizes small and maintaining alternative programs.

Much of public opinion has taken an unfavorable turn in its feelings towards public education driven by an uninformed, but very powerful media crusade. The most dangerous product of this movement is the political pressure to reform educational policy, which regrettably has morphed into hefty educational budget cuts, with the most sad and vulnerable victims being our state's middle class families and children. I will not deny serious change needs to be made within our educational system, but I will beg and plead passionately that these changes not sacrifice the already fragile middle and lower socioeconomic populations. I have an example to bring this point home.

I live in Ithaca, home of Ivy League Cornell University and the prestigious Ithaca College, but more to the point, a substantial tax base. I work in Elmira, a community that is home to two maximum security state prisons and with a meager tax base. The disparities between the Elmira City School District and the Ithaca City School District are stark at best. Elmira lost over 200 teachers in the last two years, while

Ithaca hired. Elmira is closing Ernie Davis Middle School, named after the native Elmira hero who was the first African American to win the Heisman trophy. Ithaca opened a state-of-the-art wellness center, complete with a climbing wall and trained staff. Annually, Ithaca achieves some of the highest tests scores in the state, and yes, as you may have guessed, Elmira does not. There is always room for personal and community responsibility in these sorts of discussions, but the hard facts are that Ithaca has more money than Elmira, and will survive state budget cuts. These gaps will only grow deeper and wider with the current trends in educational cuts. Communities like Elmira suffer much more profoundly in times like these. There are no level playing fields in this game, and everyone knows it. For reasons that I have yet to understand, I don't know how anyone can let this happen. I will now specifically address class size and alternative programs.

#### A. Class size

So I hear any "good" teacher can teach 20 students or 40 students with the same results. This is absolutely 100 percent correct -- IF and ONLY if, every student is motivated, able, and compliant. The problem is, this classroom does not exist---AT LEAST NOT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS. Public school doors are open to everyone. It's incredible, really. Where else do you find such close working relationships, with such highly diverse concentrations of people? The answer is nowhere. In any public school classroom there are students that are gifted to developmentally disabled, wealthy and poor, students with severely disruptive behaviors, to quiet, friendly individuals, eager to learn. We are equally responsible for the success of every single one of them. It defies all logic to say that teaching 20 of these very unique students is the same as teaching 40. I continue to see class sizes grow, with very negative results. We need to keep class sizes at a reasonable number to ensure student success.

#### B. Alternative programs

This issue is extremely personal to me. By most standards, I would be considered successful. I received an excellent education, have a great job, a nice home, and a wonderful husband. I would have NONE of this however if it weren't for public schools and alternative programs. I was NOT, and never will be a traditional, conventional learner. Putting me in a traditional learning setting was nothing short of setting me up for failure. Thankfully, there were educators who saw this, and cared enough to seek out alternative paths for me to get me through school. In the eyes of many, I was not expected to be much; or even graduate from high school. While studying abroad in London a couple of years later, I reflected on how public schools and public school educators made everything possible for me. It was then I decided I wanted to become a teacher, and work with kids who had similar struggles. Fast forward 20 years later: I have had the honor of working on some amazing programs serving alternative students. In the last few years I have seen them, tragically, being cut. When I see these programs end, it's a visceral experience. I see myself walking out the school doors and to God only knows where. It's especially heartbreaking because, in contrast to those people who helped me, I am powerless to stop it. Please restore funding so we can help all students that have the potential to be successful.....just like me.