

Gov. Cuomo's Education Reform Commission - Long Island Meeting
SUNY College at Old Westbury October 11, 2012
Testimony of Anita MacDougall, Taxpayer, Oyster Bay NY

Thank you for this opportunity to address Governor Cuomo's Education Reform Committee. New York State's education challenges are many. The education cost per student is very expensive and the results have not been the best. Definitely not fitting for the Empire State.

From the Governor's April 30, 2012 announcement of this Committee:

"New York State spends more money per student than any other state in the nation, but ranks 38th in high school graduation rates. 73 percent of New York's students graduate from high school and 37 percent are college ready."

We are stuck in the muck, and the same old strategies will not work – using the words of a visionary of our times, we need to “think different” going forward

As reported by the WSJ in February 2007:

"I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they've become unionized in the worst possible way," said Mr. Jobs during a Q-and-A session on technology in the classroom. "This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy."

"Here's the problem," said Mr. Jobs, using a business analogy: "What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them, when they came in, they couldn't get rid of people they thought weren't any good in the first place? Or they couldn't pay people three times as much when they got three times as much work done?"

What “think different” components should there be?

- **Repeal of the Triborough Amendment**
- **Get rid of tenure**
- **Implement school choice**
- **Introduce “disruptive” innovation in the classroom**
- **Reform school funding**

1) Repeal of the Triborough Amendment, which unfortunately empowers the status quo of bad and failing practices to continue.

The NYS School Boards Association supports Triborough reform

http://www.nyssba.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=Triborough%20Reform&category=advocacy_legislation

The NYS Conference of Mayors and Village Officials supports Triborough repeal as well.

<http://www.nycom.org/documents/email.pdf>

It's really a no-brainer that Triborough Amendment repeal should happen – the obstacle is lack of political will to truly represent the student and the taxpayer in favor of continuing to cater to “special interests.”

Repeal of the Triborough Amendment would also facilitate the implementation of merit pay, sharing of health-care costs and level the playing field during contract negotiations.

2) Get rid of tenure. Tenure is stupid, aka “off the charts crazy.”

I bring your attention again to Steve Jobs' very succinct comments on this topic.

How did teachers ever get elevated into such a lofty position of bubbled protection? Is it possibly the special interest contributions to campaigns that enabled the political promises that now isolate them from the real world? Originally designed to protect college professors on sabbatical, tenure has no place in the K-12 public school system.

The “guaranteed” 6-8% step and lane increases that teachers have enjoyed to bring average teacher salaries in excess of six figures during this “great recession” have truly “disrespected” the “rest of us.”. Give-backs and contract concessions would have gone a long way to getting public support.

“It's the math” as Gina Raimondo, Rhode Island's State Treasurer has said. “

“We focused on the math, not politics,” Raimondo said on Jan. 5 after accepting the annual “Urban Innovator” award from the nonprofit [Manhattan](#) Institute for Policy Research in New York, which tries to foster individual responsibility and economic choice. “Very early on, that was the tagline -- this is about math, not politics.” Well, it’s the math in NYS also.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-10/gina-raimondo-math-convinces-rhode-island-of-america-s-prospects-with-debt.html>

Also worth mentioning, is that there is no true correlation between teaching degrees and teaching proficiency. From Prof. Marguerite Roza’s book "Educational Economics: Where Do School Funds Go?" (<http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/authors/14>) *The Masters Pay Bump: Why Ending It Shouldn’t Frighten Ed. Schools*

“Graduate programs need only provide their students with a master’s degree to make them eligible for increased pay; they don’t need to concern themselves with evidence of improved instruction.”

3) School choice would be another “think different” component.

The current education monopoly does not foster constructive evolution. We need the competition of school choice to empower parents to make choices for their children that they are committed to.

A NYT editorial 10/15/11 discusses what has happened in New Orleans when school choice was forced by circumstances. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/opinion/sunday/lessons-from-new-orleans.html?_r=2

“Before Hurricane Katrina, more than 60 percent of children in New Orleans attended a failing school. Now, only about 18 percent do. --- Many of the structural changes occurred because the hurricane essentially destroyed the old system, allowing the city to begin fresh. Charter schools, while a foundation of the system now, did not by themselves improve achievement. And finally, New Orleans has done the hard work of changing the school culture while embracing new instructional methods.”

Along with school choice should be the development of regional schools for academically and artistically gifted students, such as Stuyvesant, LaGuardia School of the Arts and the Bronx High School of Science in NYC.

4) Disruptive Innovation in the classroom such as “flipping” the classroom

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704101604576248713420747884.html?mod=ITP_review_0

“Why not have lectures at home and 'homework' at school—and let students learn at their own pace?” as Salman Kahn of Kahn Academy has asked. Online resources including lecture material from outstanding teachers can standardize and improve the quality of material delivered to the student. The Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation is supporting this “disruptive” instructional approach. This is true “individualized” learning.

The Economist (<http://www.economist.com/node/21529062>) reported on promising results in a CA school where the material is covered at home and the teacher then acts as “coach” in the classroom; tools are also available to the teacher to see who has covered what material and what difficulties each student had with the material.

Implementing this approach can liberate a good teacher to become even better.

The growing STEM course (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) emphasis would be very amenable to flipped coursework.

Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School, has focused on innovation and growth in his work. He proposes a “student centric” education model in place of the current teacher centric approach in his book, “Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns” – a flipped classroom would probably qualify.

5) Now, on to school funding

The education funding model, based on property values in Nassau County, in one word, stinks. The system is broken, broken, broken. I personally have experienced 20% property tax increases despite having protested annually with certified appraisals. My property tax travails illustrate an outlier property needing special attention. But currently there is a “garbage in, garbage out” assessment model that Nassau County’s Assessment Dept. uses that everyone I have spoken to

laments, but no one has the spine to correct, even when given irrefutable data. Having been churned through the assessment protest process repeatedly, I decided to bring the outlier issue to the attention of the alleged powers that be. I met with the County Executive and his staff as well as the Assessor and his staff – the response has been and continues to be sclerotic. I also met with the Nassau County Comptroller who used my improbable “Twilight Zone,” Kafka-esque experience in an Assessment Dept. audit. The Comptroller recognized the issue and shone a light on the problem. He, unfortunately, had no power to correct the errors and those who have the power, have no will or motivation to do the correction. Bottom line: still no action. And a continuing situation of inequitable property tax burden borne by those of us who are victimized by an inept system.

http://www.nassaucountyny.gov/agencies/Comptroller/Audits/documents/AssessmentFINALReport_10_3_11PDFVersion.pdf

School district funding should not be based on local property taxes – there should be more emphasis on a state-wide funding approach that would provide for more equity across districts. There should also be regional contract negotiations, which would prevent the current inflationary leap-frogging of salary contracts. Again, it's the math.

I hope my comments provide some inspiration for action - Thank you for your time.

Non-Union Jobs

If Apple CEO Steve Jobs had praised teachers unions as the backbone of public education in the U.S., it would have made the front pages. Instead, at an education conference in Austin, Texas, Mr. Jobs offered some constructive criticism of teachers unions and barely anyone noticed. Sounds like news to us.

"I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they've become unionized in the worst possible way," said Mr. Jobs during a Q-and-A session on technology in the classroom. "This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy."

The real crisis in public education, he noted, has nothing to do with the amount of technology in the classroom. It's the fact that union work rules prevent principals from firing the bad teachers and rewarding the good ones. **"Here's the problem," said Mr. Jobs, using a business analogy: "What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them, when they came in, they couldn't get rid of people they thought weren't any good in the first place? Or they couldn't pay people three times as much when they got three times as much work done?"**

Regular readers of these columns will find nothing particularly shocking in Mr. Jobs's broadside. Still, it's nice to hear such sentiments coming from a titan of industry, especially his.

The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report was released yesterday. The dismal results are what we've come to expect from an elementary and secondary public education system in the vice-grip of the National Education Association and its political acolytes. According to the NAEP survey, nearly 40% of high-school seniors scored below basic level on the math test, and fewer than a quarter of 12th graders rate proficient.

Except for high-skill immigrants, this would be Apple's future labor pool. Mr. Jobs is right to point the finger at the union stewards of public education. And fellow business leaders, who have as big a stake in this matter, would do well to lend him public support.

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Lessons From New Orleans

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http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/opinion/sunday/lessons-from-new-orleans.html?_r=3&pagewanted=all

Before Hurricane Katrina, more than 60 percent of children in New Orleans attended a failing school. Now, only about 18 percent do.

Five years ago, less than a quarter of the children in a special district set up by the state to manage the lowest performing schools scored at or above the “basic” level on state tests. Now, nearly half do.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan says the progress made by New Orleans’s school reform effort in the six years since Hurricane Katrina has been “stunning.” And there are many reasons for optimism about a system that is overwhelmingly made up of poor and minority students — just the sort of place where optimism is in short supply.

There are three important things to consider about the New Orleans experience: Many of the structural changes occurred because the hurricane essentially destroyed the old system, allowing the city to begin fresh. Charter schools, while a foundation of the system now, did not by themselves improve achievement. And finally, New Orleans has done the hard work of changing the school culture while embracing new instructional methods.

The city has put in place a system for steadily ratcheting up school performance requirements. It has also been helped by state education reforms passed in recent years. Louisiana, which has historically ranked near the bottom nationally in student performance, mandated teacher evaluations that take student achievement into account. It also created an innovative system that evaluates teacher preparation programs based on how their graduates go on to improve students’ work in important areas, including reading, math and science. By the time of the storm, the state and the city were fully intent on strengthening the teaching corps. With its schools empty, New Orleans took the extraordinary step of laying off the entire teaching force, requiring basic skills tests for those who wished to return to their jobs. By some estimates, only about 20 percent of the original force returned to work.

Meanwhile, schools that had been failing for years came under the control of the Recovery School District, a state entity that opted out of collective bargaining agreements with teachers’ unions. The district, which now oversees an overwhelming majority of the city’s schools, streamlined the central bureaucracy, and pushed money and policy authority down to the school building level. It also recruited new talent from around the country, making New Orleans a magnet for young school leaders.

Three-quarters of the city’s schools are charter schools, which are given broad latitude to attack educational problems as long as they meet rigorous state improvement criteria. Nationally, charter schools — which are publicly financed — are often accused of siphoning off scarce resources and taking the best students from traditional schools. That is less of an issue in New Orleans, where most schools are charters with open enrollment, and where school officials are monitoring to make sure schools stay open to all comers.

Charters around the country are often no better than traditional schools, and are frequently worse. In New Orleans, they appear to be better on average than charters elsewhere. They generally have a longer school day and a longer school year than most schools. They spend a great deal of time teaching study and time management skills, and plan each student’s development. None of these attributes are particular to charters, but they have helped turn the schools around.

New Orleans still has a long way to go to become a uniformly good school system. But by bringing in fresh ideas and strong instructional methods, it is showing that even a system with a long history of failure can improve.

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