



Rockville Centre Union Free School District  
**SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL**



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Thank you very much for this opportunity to provide testimony to the committee. My name is Carol Burris and I have been the principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre for more than twelve years. South Side can be found on nearly every national list of excellence and we were recently identified as a Reward School by the New York State Education Department.

Before I became principal, I was an assistant principal, and a middle and high school teacher. I was a school board member for ten years and a board president for four. I have taught doctoral student at Teachers College; I have co-authored two books on equity and closing the achievement gap, and I am presently writing a third book. Other than the obvious conclusion, that I am getting rather old, please take away from the above introduction that I have always cared deeply about schooling and equity, beyond the walls of the school that I lead. I have never shied away from change and challenge. Finally, know that there are many other dedicated educators on Long Island who are far more accomplished than I. On this island are some of the finest principals and teachers in the state, if not in the country. A remarkable 33% of all of the Reward Schools in the State of New York are in either Nassau or Suffolk County<sup>1</sup>. If Long Island were a state, we would be first in the nation.

You will find little support for the new state imposed measures to evaluate teacher and principal quality on Long Island. Long Island is where the principals' letter in opposition to APPR, the evaluation system, originated. That letter now bears the signature of 80% of all of Long Island's principals. They are among the 1,511 New York State principals and 5,552 teachers, parents, other administrators and school board members who have signed our letter to date<sup>2</sup>. We are saying with one voice that the evaluation of individual teachers using test scores will undermine collegiality, hurt our equity initiatives and adversely impact the student and teacher relationship. Unfortunately, while our concerns have been heard, they have not as yet been addressed.

We know that of all of the many factors that account for the variance in student scores, the teacher is the greatest in-school factor—she contributes more for example, to student test scores than does the principal or the school size. However, factors other than the teacher account for roughly 85-90% of the variation in students test scores. That means that teachers account for only 10-15% of the variance in scores<sup>3</sup>. Some researchers have argued that even that percentage is too high due to the conflation of teacher contribution with class size and peer effects. What that means is that the urban legend that three excellent teachers in a row will close the achievement gap is not grounded in research but rather in theory<sup>4</sup>. In fact, I would argue that due

to the unintended consequences of APPR, it is quite likely that it will cause the achievement gaps to widen.

The shortcomings of evaluating teachers by test scores were apparent in the recent report of the American Institute for Research (AIR), who developed the New York growth score model, which accounts for 20% of the evaluation. AIR, in its BETA report<sup>5</sup>, shows how as the percentage of students with disabilities and students of poverty in a class or school increases, the average teacher or principal growth score decreases. In short, the larger the share of such students, the more the teacher and principal are disadvantaged by the model. I predict that when the state results are made public, you will see a disproportionate number of teachers of students with serious learning disabilities and teachers in schools with high levels of poverty labeled ineffective on the score measure. And that label will be unfair – to the teachers, their principals, and their possible future students.

Likewise, in the model used this year, teachers whose classes had higher average prior achievement appear to be advantaged, while teachers whose classes had lower prior average achievement were disadvantaged. This phenomenon, known as peer effects (students of all ability levels do better when placed in classes with higher ability students), has been observed in the literature since the 1980s. There is no control for peer effects in the model. I believe that we will continue to see patterns of low scores for teachers of disadvantaged students. Over time, the students who need the best teachers and principals will see them leave their schools in order to escape the ‘ineffective’ label.

Perhaps the best critique of the model comes from AIR itself. They conclude “the model selected to estimate growth scores for New York State represents a first effort to produce fair and accurate estimates of individual teacher and principal effectiveness based on a limited set of data” (p. 35)<sup>6</sup>. Not “our best attempt’, not even a ‘good first attempt’, but rather a “first effort’ at fairness. And yet, across the state, teachers and principals have received scores – based on this model – telling them that they are ineffective in producing student learning growth.

During the first two weeks of September, we surveyed principals around the state to find out if the growth ratings they received for their teachers appeared to be an accurate reflection of their teachers’ skills. More than 500 principals responded.

73% of respondents said that the ineffective label assigned to some of their teachers was either not a very accurate or an inaccurate reflection of that teacher based on their observations and the performance of that teacher’s students. A majority said that the scores overall were not a very accurate reflection of teacher ability. Regarding APPR, 81% regarded it as a tool of limited or no value for the evaluation of teachers. Only 19% had a positive attitude toward APPR with minimal concerns. Over 81% described themselves as either reluctant participants or opposed to APPR.

In the comments section of the survey, several principals reported having excellent special education teachers labeled as ineffective. One principal wrote, “two excellent teachers who volunteer to take on my toughest students got an ineffective. Their hearts were broken. So was mine.” Another principal remarked, “The teachers who were identified as ineffective...have

been teaching for more than 15 years, and have cared for students in ways that no test can measure". Other principals remarked that teachers who received poor ratings were often praised by students and parents alike. Some principals stated that they would change their teacher's assignment next year and assign them less needy students so that they could protect these excellent teachers from the ineffective rating. The unintended consequences to students are beginning. How can an evaluation system in which the evaluators, the principals, have so little faith possibly be effective? Why would the state want to implement an evaluation system that creates a clear and strong incentive for principals to move their best teachers *away from* their neediest students?

### **Recommendations:**

- a) Allow districts to determine how to integrate student achievement measures into teacher and principal evaluation systems in a way that minimizes the unintended consequences for students. Growth scores which are unreliable and highly problematic should have no mandated place in teacher evaluation systems.
- b) Streamline and reform the 3020a dismissal process. If one of the goals of APPR is the dismissal of incompetent educators or those who harm the physical or psychological health of children, the 3020a process exists to address those concerns.
- c) Recognize that teachers are professionals. The assignment of number scores and rankings will do nothing to improve teaching and learning, which heavily relies on collegial practices. There is no evidence that assigning numbers to teachers improves their performance. Rubrics without numerical assignment are more than sufficient to inform practice.
- d) Keep evaluations private. Sharing evaluations with parents will result in misinformation, confusion and teacher humiliation. There is no research evidence to support this practice.

It is also time to learn the main lesson from our experience with No Child Left Behind and acknowledge that high-stakes testing as a lever for school reform has failed. It is time to redirect the millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars from multi-day, 3-8 testing, test security and shredding, APPR and the creation of student data systems back into the classrooms of New York that need the money the most.

University professors and school leaders across the state have expressed research-based objections to test driven reform, and parents are banding together to oppose excessive testing and the formation of national databases designed to hold detailed information about their children without their consent. Their concerns, like the principals' concerns, arise from an understanding of the unintended consequences to children and schools when high-stakes testing becomes the center of reform. The Niagara Regional PTA has approved an emergency resolution on high stakes testing to which they submitted for approval at the upcoming New York State PTA meeting later this fall<sup>7</sup>. Parent groups such as Class Size Matters, Save our Schools, and various Opt Out groups are growing in size and number<sup>8</sup>. Parents are clearly uniting against the expansion and proliferation of standardized tests, especially for young children, and the

centralization of personal student data. This movement will eventually force New York's lawmakers to reverse course. Let's not wait. Let's make these wise changes now.

### **Recommendations**

- a) Drastically reduce standardized testing in Grades 3 to 8. Not every child needs to sit for standardized exams every year. Grade level sampling can provide indicators of school and cohort performance. All state tests should be open after administration for public review.
- b) Eliminate the linking of high-stakes consequences such as teacher evaluation to standardized tests. Tests should exist to inform the educational program and to help parents and teachers gain understanding of individual student learning.
- c) Require parental consent prior to sending sensitive student data to national databases. We are now uploading sensitive student information such as attendance, student grades, socio-economic status and specific information regarding a student's disability into the state databases which will then be uploaded into national databases. Before I send a student's SAT score or transcript to a college I need permission. The same should be required for the above.
- d) Redirect the billions of taxpayer dollars that are being spent on high-stakes testing into the schools and classrooms that need it the most.

School spending matters. A recent report entitled *The Stealth Inequities of School Funding*<sup>9</sup> places New York number 4 in its ranking of the most inequitable states by childhood poverty. New York State has the 8<sup>th</sup> largest gap in funding between high- and low-poverty districts. Among the states in the Northeast, New York State is #1 in childhood poverty<sup>10</sup>.

Poverty matters. It does not seal the fate of a child, but if we are to overcome the disadvantages that it brings we must level the playing field by providing effective supports to poor students and the teachers who serve them.

Some of the best schools in the nation are here on Long Island. In these schools, students who receive free or reduced price lunch excel because there are ample support systems. And in many, though not all, of our schools, disadvantaged students attend schools that are not overwhelmed by high-needs students. We avoid many of the problems of concentrated poverty.

Here is an illustration. Below are graduation rates<sup>11</sup>, Regents diploma rates and Regents Diploma rates with Advanced Designation for economically disadvantaged students in Nassau County, grouped into categories based on school poverty rates. I compared these rates for poor students who attend high schools with poverty rates between 5 and 25% with those who attend schools with rates above 25%. I also determined the same rate for schools above 30%.

Below is the data:

% Economically disadvantaged	Graduation rate for low SES students	Advanced Designation diploma-low SES students	Regents Diploma-low SES students
5-25% (avg 12%)	89%	40%	80%
Above 25% (avg 38%)	75%	23%	66%
30% + (avg 45%)	67%	18%	60%

The average graduation rates, Regents diploma rates, and Regents diploma rates with Advanced Designation for low-SES students in high schools with a poverty level below 25% exceeds the rates for ALL New York students. There is a range of performance in each category, but the pattern is clear. Students of poverty who attend well-resourced schools that are not overwhelmed with high-needs students outperform their peers.

However in too many New York State schools, disadvantaged students attend schools that are racially and socio-economically isolated. According to the recent report of the Civil Rights Project<sup>12</sup>, New York is ranked first in the percentage of Latino and Black students who attend schools that are 90-100% minority. If we are serious about effective school reform, we must address segregated schooling. Separate is not, nor can it ever be, equal. Integrated schools are associated with higher graduation rates and higher achievement for minority students. Black students who attend integrated schools for at least five years earn 25% more than their counterparts who were educated in segregated settings<sup>13</sup>.

### Recommendations

- a) Create policies and incentives that promote voluntary inter-district transfers, including urban to suburban, designed to create diverse schools.
- b) Take a serious look at choice and test-in school policies in our cities. Latino and Black students comprise only 5% of the students at Stuyvesant High School where only 13% of all students receive free or reduced priced lunch. The diversity of Bronx Science is only slightly better. Yet at Fannie Lou Hammer High School in the Bronx, 100% of its students are Black or Latino and 91% receive free or reduced priced lunch. Choice and test-in policies, if not wisely designed, increase racial and socio-economic isolation<sup>14</sup>.
- c) Dedicate extraordinary resources to schools with extraordinary challenges created by poverty. Due to lack of funding, many of the support services on which schools have relied such as alternative programs, Child Protective Services and the PINS petition process have been weakened, overwhelmed and in the case of many alternative programs, eliminated. Meanwhile, budget cuts and the tax cap have reduced school-based social services across the state, impacting schools of low and high needs alike.

I understand that all of the above suggestions are not politically popular. It is far more popular to blame teachers, their tenure, their unions, and their principals. However, by ignoring the core

reasons—the 85% of the variance in student performance—you not only do not make things better, you risk making our schools worse as dollars flow to the wrong solutions. Achievement gaps do not arise spontaneously. Children learn when they have rich opportunities to learn; opportunity gaps lead inescapably to achievement gaps.

There are no silver bullets in education; if only there were. Throughout the history of schooling, there have been many people, who with an eye on profit or prestige, convince the public that silver bullets exist. We who work in schools are not foolish. We clearly see the profiteers who are lining up in the name of reform. We heard Rupert Murdoch when he gleefully announced that that public education is a \$500 billion sector waiting desperately to be transformed. We must ensure that our schools do not become the next ‘real estate bubble’ for profiteers.

I thank you for your service on this committee. I truly appreciate your visit to Long Island and this opportunity for Long Islanders to express our opinions and share our experience. Come visit our schools and speak with our teachers. We understand quality and we practice it. Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,



Carol Burris, Ed.D  
Principal of South Side High School

<sup>1</sup> For a complete list see: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/ESEADesignations.html>

<sup>2</sup> The letter and signatories can be found at [www.newyorkprincipals.org](http://www.newyorkprincipals.org)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Rothstein, R., Ladd, H. F., Ravitch, D., Baker, E. L., Barton, P. E., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Linn, R. L., Shavelson, R. J., & Shepard, L. A. (2010). *Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers*. Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved September 16, 2012, from <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp278/>,

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<sup>4</sup> See researcher Matt Di Carlo’s analysis of this claim at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/the-nonsense-behind-the-x-consecutive-teachers-argument/2011/03/29/AFIU345B\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/the-nonsense-behind-the-x-consecutive-teachers-argument/2011/03/29/AFIU345B_blog.html)

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<sup>5</sup> The report in its entirety can be found here: <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/nysed-2011-beta-growth-tech-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Report is posted here: <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/nysed-2011-beta-growth-tech-report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The Niagara Regional PTA resolution can be found here:  
<http://roundtheinkwell.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/ptaresolution2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> One of many articles on the growing Opt Out of testing movement can be found here:  
<http://www.schoolbook.org/2012/04/16/with-test-week-here-parents-consider-the-option-of-opting-out/>

<sup>9</sup> Read the full report here: <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/StealthInequities.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Find statistics on childhood poverty and New York State here <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-05.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Diploma data for all New York high schools and districts can be found here:  
<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/hsgrads/2012/June112012-schoolenrollmentanddiplomas.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> You can find that report here: <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/epluribus-9-24-12.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> See the report cited above for these and other examples of research on the positive effects of school integration.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/naacp-claims-discriminatory-admission-practices-city-elite-high-schools-article-1.1169240>

For a study of why choice policies increase segregation by class and race see  
<http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPsl-0803-260-EPRU.pdf>