

September 25, 2012

Thank you for allowing me to testify before this commission. I have come here today to urge you to completely overhaul the teacher evaluation system that was put in place last year. The APPR legislation is at best a deeply flawed system for teacher evaluation and, at worst, fosters inaccurate measures of student achievement. As a teacher of 22 years, a supervisor of teacher for 12 years and a mother of two elementary school children in New York City, APPR has failed in each of my capacities.

As a parent, I am concerned about the direction that instruction is taking in the classroom. I believe that the most effective teaching involves opportunities for student-centered learning and project based activities. I have seen the excitement that my children have when they are “experimenting” at home with science projects or when they are discovering geography by playing at “explorer” with an atlas in hand. However, fewer and fewer of those opportunities are being afforded to children in schools because teachers feel pressured to prepare students for standardized assessments. Instead, elementary students spend weeks learning how to bubble in answers on scan forms and practicing for assessments on computer programs. Schools are narrowing the curriculum to specifically address those subjects taught on tests.

Myriad articles and studies (references to which are appended to my testimony) attest to the lack of correlation between standardized testing and increased student achievement and the increase of cheating by districts where high stakes testing has been implemented. The gains that were originally claimed in Texas and in Washington, D.C. under the auspices of Michelle Rhee were as a result debunked. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the skills most valued by employers today include communication, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking. They are the very same skills required for good citizenship. Well-designed project based learning activities help students to develop all of those skills but standardized tests are not designed to measure them. In a *New York Times* article in January of this year, Michael Winerip noted that “Teachers with high value-added ratings may indeed have long-term positive impacts on students. But it is also possible that teachers who are excellent at project-based education have an even stronger long term impact and we would never know it because their results cannot be teased out of a million pieces of data.” Rather than increasing the importance of assessments that rely on pure quantitative data, we need to develop assessments that allow a qualitative assessment of student achievement. This will encourage teachers to develop learning opportunities geared to the development of the skills required to succeed in college and careers. As good citizens, too, students need to problem solve and think creatively not simply choose among four choices for the correct answer.

I have always guided my own instructional practices with two simple but powerful mantras: “less is more” and “if you do good instruction, the test scores will take care of themselves”. As a supervisor, I strive to impress those same ideals upon the teachers I work with. It hasn’t always been an easy task but over the past ten years I have won the trust of my teachers. I have devoted

department meetings to the pursuit of professional development opportunities and sharing of best practices. Together we have learned and implemented instructional improvements centered on the principles of Understanding by Design and the Common Core. I visit classrooms frequently – often at the invitation of teachers seeking feedback on a lesson that they are trying out and I meet with teachers individually on a bi-weekly basis to review the lessons that they are implementing and the work that their students produce. Over the past ten years there *has* been a shift in instruction in the two departments that I supervise. Teachers *have* integrated more project based learning and opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways. And, our test scores have improved. But, for the first time in many years, the teachers I work with are worried that they need to do more to “prep” students for the tests. Our mantras are being drowned out by the newspaper articles on teacher ratings and test scores and the abundant test prep materials that are sent by publishers on a daily basis. I am worried that the meaningful work that we have done on behalf of our students is about to be lost.

While I strongly believe that teachers and principals should be held accountable for the education of their students, I do not want the means of evaluation to be built on the backs of our children. I believe that by refocusing some of the current reform efforts, a great deal more can be accomplished to truly benefit students rather than simply kowtow to political goals.

The mission statement of this Commission states that it will “explore best practices and models from other states and nations that could be implemented in New York”. I suggest that you begin closer to home by identifying those schools and school districts in New York State that are functioning successfully and allowing them the opportunity to continue to do so. One of the bases of the local oversight of education was to enable districts to address the needs of their specific communities. As long as they are doing so successfully, districts should be allowed to continue to do so. Instead of requiring all districts to follow the same system for teacher evaluation, individual districts should be allowed to submit a body of evidence to the SED to demonstrate their success. Surely exemplary test scores, high graduation rates and college acceptance rates would attest to success in preparation for college and career readiness. Those districts could then be exempted from the APPR legislation and SED could direct its efforts more specifically on helping the districts in need of reform.

Base reform on sound, research based methods of instruction. Allow those who work in public schools as successful teachers and administrators – and there are many of us – to be the biggest voice in the reform efforts rather than cast as the hindrance to them. Listen to parents, like myself, who say that they don’t want their children to take any more tests or have valuable instructional time squandered on test preparation. Do what it says on the first page of this committee’s website and “put children first” by encouraging innovative instruction and supporting assessments that measure more than simple recall. Finally, and most importantly, allow the reform of public education to remain in the hands of the public.