Dear Commission,

Thank you for allowing us to testify about matters greatly impacting our school district in Locust Valley and all other high performing schools in NYS. **Our committee, Citizens for Mandate Relief**, comprised of voters, educators, students, and taxpaying citizens from Locust Valley New York, **seeks reform in the area of academic mandate implementation** in order that we may protect the high educational standards of our schools and ease the burden on struggling taxpayers in our community.

Mr. Parsons, at the Newburgh hearing last month, you asked what went right with schools? We did.

Here is **a quick portrait of the Locust Valley School District**. We serve students in elementary, middle and high school. In May 2012 our high school was cited as one of the best high schools in the country by Newsweek, the Washington Post and U.S. News and World Report. (Newsweek ranked us 2nd on LI, 6th in the Sate, and 55th in the Nation; The Washington Post ranked us 5th on LI, 11th in the State, and 144th in the Nation; and U.S. News and World Report ranked us 4th on LI, 20th in the State, and 99th in the Nation.)

Given that the above three independent publications based their rankings predominantly on **college preparedness**, it is no surprise that we rated high. Almost 100% of our students graduate high school, and we have a 100% college acceptance rate. Approximately 82% of our students take an IB or AP Course; 50% take at least 3 college readying courses; and 20% earn full IB diplomas, which equal a full year of college. In 2012 the NYS Department of Education cited our school district as a Reward School -- we were the only K-12 district in Nassau County selected, and 1 of less than 10 in the State.

Our school district was one of the first schools to adopt the global, challenging, self-selective IB Program, which is only now being instituted by elite boarding schools. To ensure that all of our children, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, would have a fair chance of taking advantage of the IB program, we designed a Middle School curriculum that would equip all students with the academic skills to meet the challenges of IB.

Because your commission seeks to examine ways to efficiently improve the quality of education in NYS, it is important to point out two facts about our district: we were not always high performing, and we achieved high graduation and college acceptance rates despite having a substantial population of ELS and lower income students. How? **We made student success our mission**. We hired strong administrators, who then hired dedicated teachers. Together our teachers and administrators developed a challenging curriculum aimed at propelling students beyond mediocrity and grooming them for the rigors of higher education. In order

to ensure the success of all of our students, our science coordinator created measures to monitor student progress. If a student was found to be struggling, we immediately offered support. **Clearly, given our graduation and college acceptance rates, our strategy was a success.**

This leads us to the problem of having to deal with the many academic-related, unfunded mandates that, for us and for other high performing schools, are educationally and fiscally damaging. In all instances these mandates duplicate, at significant cost, our own evaluative measures, which, as we have stressed, have been successful. Although we carefully hired educated administrators and teachers to design, implement, and assess our challenging curriculum, now, in order to accommodate mandates under the 2% tax cap, we have had to fire valuable staff, which leaves us with larger class sizes. Moreover, our diminished staff must now spend hours away from classrooms and students in order to learn about testing our schools do not need. As a result, our students spend much of their time with substitutes – inefficient teacher replacements funded by the taxpayer. To ensure that our students do not perform poorly on remedial tests, thus hurting the reputations of their teachers, we have replaced challenging curriculum with basic mandated material. In the future, to accommodate even more mandates under the 2% tax cap, it is likely that we will have to eliminate academic support, enrichment, athletic, and art programs – the very elements that made our district great! The sad irony in this cannot be overlooked!

What about taxpayers? Faced with funding both unsustainable contributions to pension funds and school budgets, which are padded with mandates our schools do not need, taxpayers are stretched to the limit. Moreover, by every measure, increased mandates mean they are funding lower quality schools. There are real estate implications for NYS, too. It is unrealistic to presume that discerning Manhattan families looking to relocate to the suburbs, would select a state that prepares its students for basic proficiency over one that offers college mastery. We must not forget that, when it comes to attracting young Manhattan families, LI and Westchester compete directly with Connecticut.

Finally, we worry about the **teacher-hiring issues** at stake. Will curriculums founded on mediocrity and testing attract the best and brightest educators to our schools? Or will passionate, creative teachers seek schools outside the walls of the bland mandate compound?

We would next like to focus on the proposed **PARCC,** Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. After much analysis we determined that this mandate will be educationally and fiscally detrimental to our students and tax payers. PARCC will comprise 50% of our budget cap. We have estimated that it will cost approximately one million dollars to implement (buying, infrastructure, and maintenance costs), as it calls for a computer for every child at each grade level. What a boon for computer companies, and what a terrible blow to taxpayers! Moreover, PARCC's testing requirements are redundant for our students.

Testing will increase from 2 to 10 times per year, which, when combined with prep days and the number of days administrators are out of the building learning about the tests, will rob our students of precious teaching time. Again, due to the importance of the point, it is imperative that we stress, that to accommodate PARCC, along with APPR, RTI and Common Core within the 2% tax cap, we will have to eliminate the programs that have made our district great!

Logistically, PARCC is a nightmare. Imagine the infrastructure we will need to house an additional 200 computers! What about the costs involved with maintaining this vulnerable technological army?

We further object to PARCC because it is about using technology for the purpose of *testing*, when it is *teaching* that made our district great. Stephen Kindel, Technology Editor for Forbes, wrote presciently in 1984, "I think the best schools will eventually recognize a fact that has been apparent since Plato sat on Socrates' knee: *Education depends on the intimate contact between a good teacher – part performer, part dictator, part cajoler – and an inquiring student*.' He predicts, "In the end it is the poor who will be chained to the computer; the rich will get teachers." And so, we predict, that with the advent of PARCC, the disparity between the haves and have-nots will, invariably, widen.

In summary, insisting that high performing districts adopt PARCC is like the UTF mandating that Roger Federer take tennis lessons – at the taxpayers' expense!

SOLUTIONS:

We feel that **the heart of the problem is the blanket approach taken by NYS with regard to unfunded mandates**. **There is no current effort to distinguish between high and low performing districts.** Currently all schools must implement every single mandate and assume all the costs – regardless of whether the mandate and costs are, as in our case, detrimental.

Governor Andrew Cuomo, NYS Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, our State Senator Carl Marcellino, and Assemblyman Charles Lavine have all recently said, in one way or another, that the 2% tax cap must be partnered with meaningful mandate relief.

Our suggestion, which was recently echoed by Senator Marcellino, is for the **NYS Dept of Ed to draw up a list of academic criteria** to be distributed to every school superintendent prior to the start of each school year. **If a district meets or exceeds the criteria, it will be rewarded with relief from additional academic mandates.** This will impel under-performing schools to improve, and it will enhance the educational opportunities realized by higher performing schools.

You asked how is excellence replicated? The answer is simple, uncomplicated, and relatively inexpensive. **Examine success schools, such as**

ours. Look at their administrators. Look at their teachers. Examine their curriculum and evaluative procedures. **Replicate these measures in low performing schools.** Hold the teachers and administrators in these schools responsible for instituting successful change. Strong administrators and dedicated teachers can reform academic institutions, even in – especially in -- low income areas. **The state will never be able to overcome the problem of income disparity.** But it can hold administrators and teachers responsible for preparing the minds of low income students. In the end, it is only education that will provide low income students with a chance to climb out of poverty. If the state were to make educational excellence its mission, if it were to encourage school districts to hire strong administrators and dedicated teachers, who are committed to upholding excellence – not mediocrity -- our students would benefit, not testing companies.

If we in LV, with all of our hard won accomplishments, are not granted mandate relief, it is our epitaph you will have written with the implementation of state mandates, not a story of success.

We already wrote that story.

Don't take it away from us!