

Jen Marraccino, Restore Education Funding

1. We are here on behalf of the Westchester/ East Putnam Region PTA and REF, Restore Education Funding. We represent over 50,000 parents in Westchester, East Putnam, Rockland, and others areas throughout the Hudson Valley, who believe that NY State needs to increase education funding and decrease the reliance on high-stakes standardized testing. We believe it is imperative to: 1. restore necessary funding to NYS public schools, and 2. relieve classes and school districts of the rising number of required standardized tests.

Our concerns are that high-stakes testing, in the form of the APPR, is increasing stress on children, taking class time away from teaching 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and depleting the already scarce resources of schools, forcing districts to spend money on testing and cut funding to other crucial programs. While we believe that assessments are important, and that retaining the best teachers and administrators is key, we also feel that some of the policies currently mandated by the State -- forced by the federal Race To the Top (RTTT) -- are not in the best interests of students and are causing harm to our school districts.

2. We are concerned that the State is rushing into across-the-board testing when a pilot program, akin to what Ct. is doing, would be preferable and would result in a more successful program as well as less wasting of funds. Currently, a tested game plan is not in place. In fact, the New York Times reported that the government-paid trainers, who are teaching principals about the new evaluation system, said that "they're figuring out the new evaluation system as they go." (Principals Protest Role of Testing in Evaluations, 11/27/11). Even Bill Gates, one of the most vocal proponents of high-stakes testing, pleaded just last month for states not to rush, stating: "we need to remember: A new teacher evaluation system is not automatically a good thing. If states and school districts feel pressured to rush out new systems, those systems could evaluate teachers unfairly and fail to help teachers improve. That would be a disaster. A flawed execution of a good idea could convince people it is a bad idea." We recommend slowing down and piloting the APPR.

3. We are concerned that the current NY State standardized tests created by the private company of Pearson do not accurately assess what a student has learned, are too long and do not offer information that helps inform learning and teaching. We believe that linking teacher's ratings to these summative tests is resulting in teachers spending more time both teaching to the test and teaching test prep. The loser is the student, as time spent teaching critical thinking and in-depth analysis has become less and less. The emphasis on testing, as parents throughout the State are reporting, is also causing children to lose their love of school and of learning. Consider this: which assessment is a better test of how well a student studying Shakespeare has learned and will promote more in-depth teaching and learning, a test asking the student to fill in bubbles about the plot of Richard the Third or one that asks the student to compare Richard to a world leader, past or present? Also consider that the State's standardized tests have increased from a 45-minute test being given in 2 grades, for 2 days to a 90-minute test, being given in 6 grades, for 3 days. And we are told that APPR will require even more testing than this. We ask that you consider

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shorter, better standardized tests created in collaboration with public-school educators, not created top-down from corporations. We also ask that you consider adding student portfolios and feedback as part of the student performance portion of teachers' evaluations.

4. The APPR is an unfunded mandate that districts can't afford. As you know, we have a 2-percent tax-levy cap in our State, which is already causing districts to cut fundamental programs and fire necessary staff. Economically disadvantaged school districts have already cut as much as they can bear, and have lost programs that actually help these challenged districts, such as afterschool programs, and they have laid off so many teachers that their classrooms are overflowing. There are concerns that districts like Yonkers are not meeting mandates in foreign language and special education. Even wealthy districts haven't been spared the one-two punch of unfunded mandates in combination with the tax-levy cap. Wealthier districts in Westchester were forced to cut programs that parents value and enrich student learning experiences. For example, Irvington was forced to cut both French and Spanish language programs in its middle school and Somers saw the elimination of 20 fte teaching positions. Adding the cost of APPR means even more cutting. No district can afford this. In a great many cases, the families we represent moved to their communities because of the quality of offerings and instruction at their schools. But when districts are forced to cut and then cut even more, losing programming and staffing, the quality of schools necessarily diminishes -- and this quality, being known for having "good schools," is what is central to so many of our communities. The Governor's Office has told us that APPR is a helpful tool for our schools, but please understand: it is a tool we simply cannot afford, and one that puts the quality of our local schools in jeopardy.

5. If APPR is to go forward either full force or as a pilot, we ask that the State fund it. At the very minimum, the State should pay for the grading and copying costs, which are daunting. Funding by the State would not solve our fundamental problems with APPR and its reliance on high-stakes testing, but at least it would help us avoid the tearing down of other critical programs and the laying off of valuable teachers, which would help maintain the quality of our school systems.

6. To aid in funding APPR, we specifically suggest considering re-allocating Lotto funds, which support education, to a 50-50 split, rather than the current state-take-40 -winner-take-60 system.

7. We are also extremely concerned with the mandate that in 2014/2015, school districts must use the PARCC computerized system for testing. PARCC administrators have not communicated to districts how the tests will be given, so schools cannot give exact figures on what the costs will be, but we do know that PARCC will require a tremendous investment in technology. Schools just don't have this money, as we have explained. If we must purchase this technology, we will be forced to cut and cut meaningful programs and valuable teachers. We ask that complete funding be provided by the State to implement PARCC assessments

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8. We are also concerned with the RTTT mandate that requires the longitudinal storage of data. Students' personal information, comprising test scores, financial information, attendance records, and disciplinary records, are to be stored by the Shared Learning Collaborative, which has outsourced the storage to Wireless Generation, a private corporation that is a subsidiary of News Corporation, which as you know is owned by Rupert Murdoch. We have read promises of privacy protections, but frankly, we are not mollified by this. Hackers and leakers are ubiquitous. And more important, the storage of data may well violate FERPA, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and its regulations. We ask that no student data be given to the Shared Learning Collaborative or to Wireless Generation unless a full legal analysis is completed by the State, and concludes that no law or regulation is violated by providing such data.

9. In conclusion, we ask for the following: 1. That NY pilot APPR before requiring all districts to use this system. 2. If APPR should move forward as either a pilot or across-the-board, we ask that the State fund all costs associated with it, and at a minimum, fund the grading and copying costs. 3. We ask that the State consider shorter, better standardized tests created in collaboration with public-school educators, not top-down from corporations. 4. If PARCC is mandated, we ask that all costs associated with it be funded. 5. No student data should be provided to the Shared Learning Collaborative or to Wireless Generation unless a full legal analysis is conducted and concludes that federal privacy rights are not violated. And 6., we ask that the State continue its efforts such as this hearing to listen to the voice of the parents and students. We feel that our opinions were not taken into consideration when many important decisions affecting our children were made over the past few years. We hope this changes moving forward and want you to know that we are here to contribute to future decisions impacting public education in NY State.

We thank you for this opportunity to speak and for your time.

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