

Testimony for NY Education Reform Commission

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Narrative

In 1987, I entered my career as an educator, teaching social studies and health in my hometown. My first few years were focused on implementing the Regents Action Plan. Veteran teachers routinely told me not to fret as the State Education Department will usher in change about every five years and the stuff you teach today will come back into vogue in 15 to 20 years so don't ever throw anything away. Since then, I have worked through several major state and federal education initiatives. Given the amount of money NY State and the Federal Government spend on public education, it is understandable that both levels of government want to create systems to control and track public schools. In twenty-five years, I have learned one thing: those teachers were wrong in 1987; major changes are imposed on public education after every major election or on average every two years now. This pace has caused confusion and stress as educators, parents, and more importantly, students attempt to keep up.

I am not here today to tell you what is being asked of public schools is impossible, rather to assure you it is possible; however, we need to provide a clear vision of the ultimate outcome we seek for public schools. This vision needs to be clearly focused on students, grounded in the realities of our time, and supported by research. Based on the current change agendas for public education we must assume that the vision for schools is to graduate, within five years, 100% of our students who enter ninth grade. These graduate cohorts must be college and career ready. While this is a lofty goal, I believe it is achievable, but we must clearly understand the current state of public education in the Empire State.

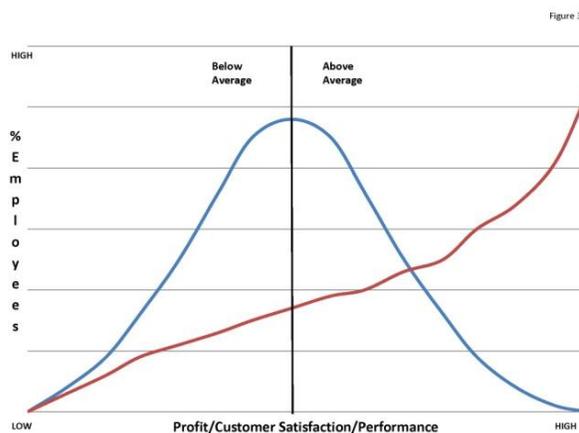
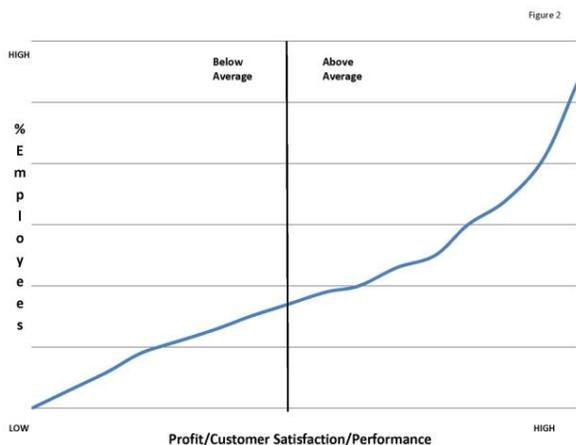
The Federal Government can't afford to fully fund IDEA or NCLB. The State Government can't afford to fulfill its obligation to the laws it created to address school aid after losing the CFE case. Lack of proper funding combined with the GEA and Tax Levy Cap has school districts across the state operating under structural deficits as their expenditures continue to outpace their revenue. Student enrollment continues to decline in nearly every school. School districts are adapting to these economic realities and all the while attempting to push forward with the Regents Reform Agenda and Race to the Top Initiatives to improve student achievement, teacher and leader effectiveness, and graduate 100% of our students at college and career ready standards. The work necessary to meet these improvements requires human and financial resources, both of which are scarce commodities.

The NY Education Reform Commission is the third such group meeting to focus on government and education reform since 2008. Based on what I have read about prior testimony from across the state, the needs expressed are consistent. We need meaningful mandate relief. We need to openly address the realities of school consolidation. We need to be open to new ways to improve student achievement. We need to control the cost of education for government and the local taxpayer.



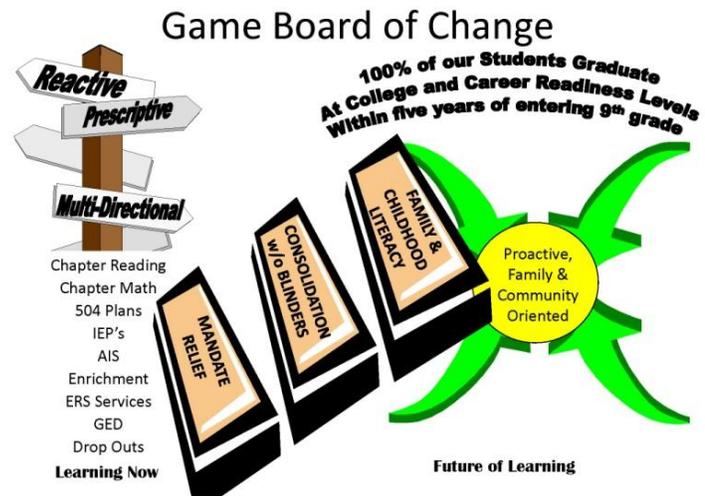
Many people state that we should run schools like a business and unbeknownst to them, many school boards and superintendents wish some of the employment rules private businesses operate under could replace the rules we must operate under. Politicians are demanding greater accountability from public schools and in some cases using statistics and rhetoric as a stick to poke at taxpayers until they swarm like bees on their local schools. While I admit, schools can do better; I must also point out the flawed logic in our measurement of accountability, the bell curve. Let's examine the bell curve as applied to

business, please refer to figure 1. What does the bell curve in figure 1 tell you as a CEO or board of directors about the profit generated, the customer satisfaction created, and the performance of your employees? How would you remedy that? What is your goal, to move the bell curve along the horizontal axis? Wouldn't your desired goal be the J Curve found in figure 2? What are some potential impacts to your business with this goal? Figure 3 is simply an overlay of the two curves to help stimulate your thinking around the possibilities of change because average is good enough, but good enough is the enemy of great.



I refer you to figure 4, our Game Board of Change, in this picture you see the vision for schools in NY State on the right and on the left you see the current state of schools in NY State. Now, it is time to focus on the key elements to move from our current state to our desired future state.

Let's begin our journey with the first hurdle in the way of reaching our goal, mandates. Meaningful mandate relief must occur in at least the following areas (most of which are sacred to one or more special interest groups):

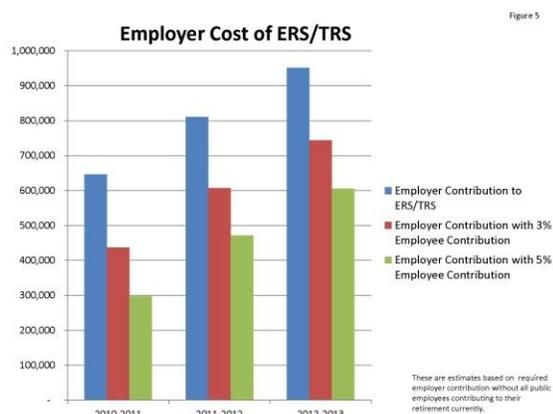


- Recommend that NY State amend all of its laws around special education to simply match the federal requirements rather than exceed them.
- Recommend Taylor Law and Triborough reform.
- Recommend the reform of Civil Service. (Created at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, has become cumbersome and antiquated much like the agrarian calendar).
- Recommend immediate pension relief to force all active employees to contribute to their retirement plan.
- Recommend changes to our current practices of government-required assessments for accountability.
- Recommend reform of Tenure Regulations and 3020a laws.
- Reduce the seat time requirement and provide greater flexibility in our current agrarian school calendar for more staff development time when students are not in session.
- Allow school districts to hire early childhood degree holders to teach UPK classrooms.

I will focus on only a few of these today.

You have heard numerous times about special education mandates on your travels across the state. I can't provide you with any new information so I will simply implore you to recommend that NY State amend all of its laws around special education to simply match the federal requirements rather than exceed them. This could save our school district approximately \$70,000 by reducing the number of students I need to send to outside placements and the number of special education teachers we need on staff. As an example, if the burden of proof in due process claims against districts were placed squarely on the shoulders of the complainant, it would save taxpayers significantly by reducing the number of frivolous claims.

Pension reform was touted as a major victory by our elected officials after the passage of our current state budget. It might save a great deal of money for some municipalities, but public schools, especially high needs districts, have borne the burden of the state's revenue shortfall by the imposition of the excise tax commonly known as the gap elimination adjustment. Our "preferred eligible lists" are large enough to minimize the



impact of Tier 6 on our budgets for years to come. We are desperately in need of pension reform that will require all lower tiers to once again start contributing to their retirement plans at a rate of 3% - 5%. This has the potential to save districts like Unadilla Valley \$200,000-\$350,000 in reduced employer contributions. See the Figure 5 for a graphic representation of this potential savings.

Combined these two areas of mandate relief have the potential to create savings ranging from \$270,000-\$420,000.

Research supports the state's shift to the common core, professional collaboration around student achievement and improving learning, as well as teacher and principal evaluation around student achievement and effective instruction. Leading education reformers like Robert Marzano, Rick Stiggins, Richard DuFour, Larry Lazotte, Dick Reeves, and Charlotte Danielson support the premise to the changes we are implementing at lightning speed in public schools across the state. To find ways for the state to save millions of dollars all we need to do is delve a little deeper into their research and focus on the realities of the changes we are implementing, specifically those around the new, unfunded APPR mandate. There are growing concerns with the amount of high stakes, standardized assessments we are administering to children for the sake of partisan politics and an assembly line model of accountability for learning. If our vision for the future of public education is a system that graduates 100% of our students college and career ready, then college and career readiness needs to become our sole accountability focus. The APPR process has required schools to develop a truly balanced assessment approach to determine if students are learning and to adjust instruction to guarantee they learn at high levels. We have implemented this at all grade levels and in all courses. We pay for all assessments and assessment development other than the end of year assessments that come from the state. Consider shifting the remaining 3 - 8 ELA and Mathematics assessments to districts as well. The State Education Department has access to every teacher's grade book, our teacher HEDI ratings, and our teachers SLO results. There is no doubt that we can extract data to show student growth in alignment with federal requirements. This way, the end of year student achievement data can be used by teachers and principals to prepare for summer school and/or fall interventions with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all students entering ninth grade will graduate within five years college and career ready as measured by the remaining high school assessments administered by the state, and even they can be fewer in number. The money saved by eliminating many of the current state assessments should be earmarked for high need school districts.

Our second hurdle is approaching the concept of consolidation while wearing blinders. Politicians and two commissions previous to your group convening have approached school consolidation as one way to save large sums of money. I am lucky to be part of a great team in a school district that is entering its 17th year of existence. Unadilla Valley Central School is the product of a very successful merger of two poor rural school districts, South New Berlin and New Berlin Central Schools. Like Marshall, "We are UV!"

There are some realities of school mergers that the public needs to hear. First, the tax rate per thousand on true value has remained stable, hovering around \$14 per thousand. Second, the merger resulted in higher salaries, better employee benefits, and more staff due to the leveling up concept that has been historically applied to contract negotiations after mergers in NY State. Third, we have students on school buses for over an hour each way to and from school. Finally, and most importantly, students have access to academic programs and extracurricular activities that they would otherwise not have. Oh, and all the while our free and reduced lunch rate has risen to between 65% and 68% each year in recent history. Another merger would bring a windfall in merger incentive aid and the communities would once again wrestle with all of the aforementioned issues, including even longer bus rides for students and possibly higher free and reduced lunch rates.

School mergers might work for some districts under 1000 students but for rural areas this will likely not be the magic wand for property owners. We cannot approach meaningful consolidation while wearing blinders. We should promote the consolidation of services. In reality, municipalities and school districts provide similar services to meet state laws and regulations. How much money do state and county governments spend on services like: public health; social services; law enforcement; probation; mental health services; drug and alcohol counseling; fleet maintenance; transportation; and early childhood programs? Likewise, school districts must provide a registered nurse, connect more and more with families in their homes, provide a safe environment, act as a liaison between probation officers and students, provide counseling to meet the diverse needs of students to help keep them focused on learning, maintain and operate a transportation fleet, and focus on early childhood programs to close learning gaps. Many of these services overlap and if provided within the walls of the school will help keep all children in school and focused on learning at high levels. This would give all students a better shot at graduating high school at college and career ready levels. Working to consolidate services like these will save money for state and county governments as well as public schools.

The final hurdle to move from our current state to our desired state for public education is to move from a reactionary model of education to a proactive model. Public education has been a reactive institution, especially since the Elementary & Secondary Education Act and the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act became the law of the land. In America, we identify, sort, remediate, intervene, classify, and write plans to help children between the ages of 5 and 18 learn at high levels. These processes have been in place for decades, but, how successful have they been? In our nation, the dropout rate has been approximately 25% since the 1960s. The cost of identifying, sorting, remediating, intervening, classifying, and writing plans has spiraled out of control. Still, we are haunted by the bell curve and average results. The research supporting family based literacy and learning programs for families with children between ages 0 and 5 can no longer be ignored.

In his research through several "Abecedarian Preschool Projects," Dr. Craig Ramey has noted numerous benefits of early childhood learning programs, especially when combined with free or low cost health care and other services for low-income families. The effects for children from low income families are dramatic. Ramey in his contributing chapter of *Investing in Young Children: New Directions in Federal Preschool and Early Childhood Policy* edited by Ron Haskins and W. Steven Barnett, in 2010 states,

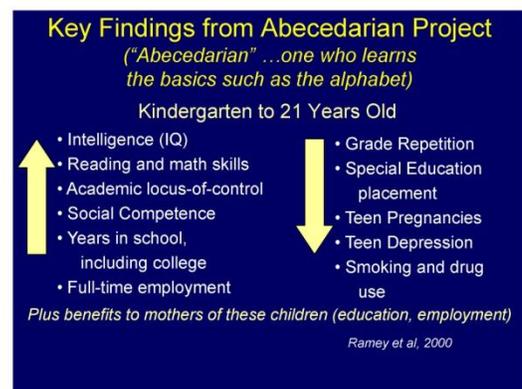
...providing a positive learning environment for young children and addressing the comprehensive service needs of young children and their families are essential to the school readiness of low-income, and indeed all children. Further, when children enter good schools in good health with age-appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional skills, they are far more likely to experience early and continued school success, as well as later positive outcomes as healthy adult citizens. Poverty rates are highest among children under 5 in our country; the 2008 rate of 21 percent is alarmingly high and consequential.

Rural, high needs districts have great difficulty putting together the type of programs our wealthier counterparts have established for school age children, not to mention we don't have the resources to create early childhood and family literacy and learning programs. In the Abecedarian Preschool Projects, researchers found that children coming from low-resource environments:

- Had delays of 1 to 2.5 years in overall academic and intellectual competence;
- Had a marked reduction in vocabulary as well as expressive and receptive language skills;
- Had fewer skills in interacting with “teachers” and peers in a learning environment; and
- Had a lack of supportive learning at home and over the summer, further increasing “the gap” over the first 4 years in school.

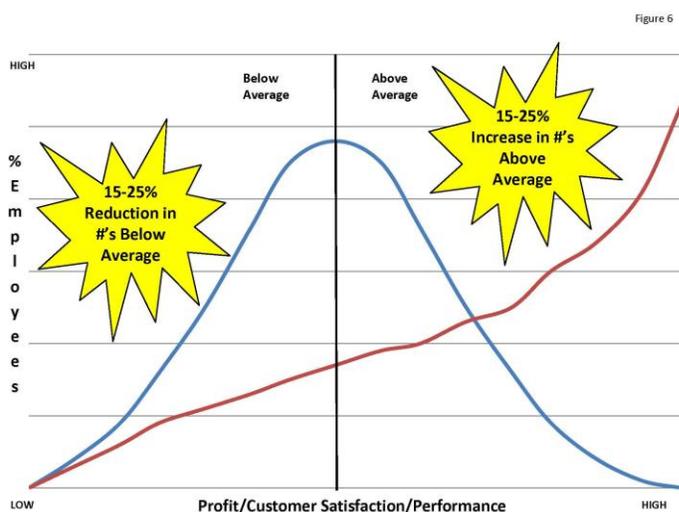
In the Abecedarian Preschool Program, children ages 0-5 and their families received: adequate nutrition; supportive social services; free primary health care; and an intensive preschool program (full day, 5 days/week, 50 weeks/year, 5 years) using the “Learninggames” Curriculum, which included cognitive/fine motor development, social/self skill development, gross motor development, language development, and was individually paced. The results speak for themselves:

- Substantial gains in IQ that were sustained over time (through college and/or career);
- Significant gains in verbal scaled scores as well as reading and mathematics achievement scores over time;
- Greater mother-child involvement over time;
- Nearly 50% of teen mothers re-enrolled and finished high school as well as went on for post secondary training;
- Over 25% reduction in grade level retentions by age 15;
- Over 35% reduction in special education placements by age 15; and
- Approximately 25% increase in the number of the children who worked in skilled jobs or enrolled in higher education programs after high school.



Public schools need to become hubs for programs like these if we are to begin to control the costs of retention, intervention, and special education that have been spiraling out of control for decades. On August 8, 2012 in testimony to this panel, Mr. Alan Hertel shared the work of economists who found that for every \$1 invested in early childhood programs and services there is a later return of \$17. We can surmise that

providing quality early childhood preschool programs and family services could be one of the keys to reducing the cost of public education. If Unadilla Valley Central School could experience a 25% decrease in retention rates and a 35% reduction in special education numbers, it might translate to a savings in our budget of \$300,000-\$400,000 annually within 10 years. This is based on a reduction in expenditures for intervention and special education services of 12%-15% as a result of creating a quality early childhood and family literacy program in conjunction with the consolidation of services mentioned earlier into our public schools. These programs should be funded for high needs schools, if not all schools to save money in the long term. They could be staffed by early childhood degree holders, housed in our school buildings, and served by the service providers that would work in our schools after the state completes a consolidation of services concept.



In conclusion, I would like to go back to the Bell and J Curves but this time applied to education reform. Meaningful mandate relief and consolidation of services into our public schools will create the infrastructure necessary to give public schools and municipalities some financial stability and flexibility in the midst of economic crisis. This will allow us to focus on real, long term educational reforms like early childhood and family literacy programs, which in turn save us resources by reducing the number of students in need of large amounts of special services to show growth and become proficient.

As seen in figure 6, movement toward the J Curve model for student achievement increases students performing at the proficient level while decreasing the number performing below that level. Those key resources would be time, staff, and money.

Dr. Craig T. Ramey holds the Georgetown University Distinguished Professorship in Health Studies and Psychiatry and is the Founding Director (along with his wife, Dr. Sharon Landesman Ramey) of the Georgetown University Center on Health and Education. Dr. Ramey's research has focused on the effects of the early experience on children's intellectual and social competence. In 1971, he developed the Abecedarian (ABC) Project, a widely cited study that has documented multiple real world and long-lasting benefits of early childhood education and health care for children in poverty. He has also studied the effects of early intervention for premature, low birth weight children, known as the Infant Health and Development Study. More recently, he has completed a 31 site study mandated by the U.S. Congress which is known as the Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project. Currently, Dr. Ramey collaborates on multi-site projects to prevent child neglect and is also engaged in conducting evaluations of many new initiatives throughout the United States to provide high quality early educational services to at risk children. Dr. Ramey has published 4 books and more than 250 scientific papers. A partial bibliography is available at:

<http://geary.ucd.ie/humandev/people/41.html?task=view> and <http://research.vtc.vt.edu/employees/craig-ramey/>