

Syosset Central School District

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Board of Education

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March 19, 2015

Senator Carl Marcellino
250 Townsend Square
Oyster Bay, NY 11771

Dear Senator Marcellino,

I am writing at the request of the Syosset Board of Education to express their concerns with and opposition to the education policy changes advanced by the Governor's 2015-16 Executive Budget proposal.

Syosset High School has been named as a gold medal school by U.S. News & World Report, ranking it 32nd in the state and 158th nationwide. The Washington Post placed it at 188th nationwide. The Daily Beast/Newsweek ranked it 46th in the US and 9th in the Northeast – one of only two in the top ten that did not have selective admissions criteria. We have Blue Ribbon elementary, middle and high schools, and even four New York State "Reward Schools." While our community has a number of advantages, this success was not inevitable, but rather the result of the hard and thoughtful work needed to capitalize on these favorable circumstances.

Over the last five months, the Board and Administration have made a point of engaging stakeholders from the community and staff in discussions around the new Common Core standards, the curriculum we've adopted in response, the assessments used to measure our progress, the State's accountability system, and (most recently) the Executive's proposed changes.

In broad strokes, we concluded that our Common Core-aligned curriculum has yielded positive results, but still needs refinement; we have reservations about the developmental appropriateness and authenticity of the assessments; we have deep skepticism about the effectiveness of the State's accountability system; and we are appalled by the Executive budget proposals.

After considering the discussions at these meetings and the feedback from corresponding public comment opportunities, the Board of Education unanimously adopted a resolution opposing the Executive Budget proposals generally, and test-based accountability systems specifically, and directed me to share their rationale with you. Both represent a very real threat to the excellent education Syosset offers.

This community has long had high expectations, and the District has achieved them through an effective combination of supervision (setting high standards and holding people accountable to them) and evaluation (a process of observation and feedback designed to refine and improve each educator's practice). The State has attempted to combine and reduce both processes into a single measure as though they were somehow additive and comparable. They are not.

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The Executive proposes to further expand the use of statistical measures of growth in test scores as though they might compensate for some perceived flaw in subjective evaluation. This is ill-advised. Rather than serve as some impartial anchor, these growth measures have instead amplified the volatility of the evaluation system. The State's methodology has been reworked every year since its creation, undermining confidence in its accuracy (the need for revisions implies weaknesses) and its comparability (since no two years were calculated alike). Even former Commissioner King cautioned "judiciousness" in using these scores.¹

In Syosset, the average teacher's State Growth Score varied by plus/minus five points (out of 20) from year to year. That would be the equivalent to a radar gun that might read anywhere between 45 and 75 while clocking a car doing 60. That margin of error would be unacceptable for issuing a mere traffic ticket, let alone for making employment decisions. Instead of inspiring confidence, this volatility has instead lent credibility to the American Statistical Association's admonition against using such systems for consequential evaluation judgements.² The ASA goes on to remind us that these systems can only measure correlation, not causation. Even our freshman research students would understand this distinction: just because sick people are disproportionately found in hospitals does not imply that hospitals cause illness. Meaningful evaluation must measure causes, not coincidences.

Although this test-based accountability system affects fewer than 20% of our teachers, the methodology used to evaluate the other 80% is just as problematic. That system requires making predictions in September of the scores each individual student will achieve the following June. If the students exceed those predictions, the goal is criticized as too modest; if the students fall short, the teacher is criticized as ineffective. Perhaps what truly deserves criticism is the very premise of the system itself.

We would have no opposition to an accountability and evaluation system that is predictable, transparent and fair. But because the current system is neither of the first two, then it cannot be the latter. It is hard to see how this challenge will be ameliorated by increasing reliance on the very aspects of the system that are the least stable and hardest to defend.

We have been able to compensate for the system's flaws because the weight given to these perplexing factors has been modest. Yet legislators are now considering more than doubling their impact. Given their inaccuracy and volatility, these factors hardly seem to have earned themselves a larger role. Legislators are also considering a preposterous proposal to undermine the one part of the new evaluation system that is working by shifting responsibility for classroom observation to individuals employed elsewhere. The cost implications are obvious, but the instructional benefit is not. Teacher evaluation is at its most useful when it is a collaboration with an administrator whose

¹ <http://usny.nysed.gov/docs/memo-scores-release.pdf>

² https://www.amstat.org/policy/pdfs/ASA_VAM_Statement.pdf

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knowledge of the students' needs and the repertoire of techniques a teacher is refining provides continuous feedback on lessons over time. An outside evaluator is disadvantaged in every meaningful aspect of evaluation, but offers no compensating benefits in exchange.

In any event, such a process seems beyond the State's capability to manage internally or externally. Consider the current state of affairs – personnel cuts have tripled the time it takes State Education Department staff to approve school construction projects, and its years-long backlog in payments to independent hearing officers resulted in an extreme shortage. This would be yet another hopelessly under-resourced state function; costly, duplicative, inaccurate and unproductive.

The Executive claims to have lost confidence in the evaluation system because it yields results deemed too favorable. Educators have lost confidence in the evaluation system because it seems so widely at odds with what is happening in classrooms. All should wish to work towards a system that inspires confidence from both policymakers and educators.

We are also troubled by the Executive's proposal to expand the number of charter schools. If this alternate education system is a needed path out of failing schools, why are students from even the highest performing districts not precluded? If just four of our students were to attend a charter school, Syosset would have to surrender to the charter local tax dollars equivalent to a teacher's annual salary – even though the other 21 students in the class would still remain.

A well-regarded national study (CREDO 2013), while often cited by charter supporters, nevertheless yields a troubling conclusion. Only 29% of charters performed "significantly better" than their local schools in math; the number drops to 25% in reading³ (p.22). It is hard to think of another area where the State seeks to expand a redundant service delivery mechanism with such long odds of success and such dramatic liability to the existing system. Syosset has not yet been impacted, but raising the cap increases the likelihood that we will, adding uncertainty to our financial future.

That uncertainty is compounded by the Executive's lack of a school revenue plan. Syosset has worked to make our budget process as transparent as possible with a community finance committee and a clearer presentation. Sadly, the State's budget process is moving in the opposite direction. Ordinarily, the school budget process is more open, requires more disclosure, and offers more citizen voice and vote than any other level or form of government. But all of that is undermined if the Executive Budget takes the very information districts need to construct those budgets and turns it into a bargaining chip.

Syosset's teachers and leaders have nothing to fear from fair and accurate evaluation systems. Quite the opposite – getting it right would highlight their skill. There may indeed be some future day when tests can play a constructive role. However, that would require tests worth teaching to, and the State's

³ <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

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current assessments fall well short of that goal. Until then, our outcomes have validated both our evaluations and our local control, and there is little to suggest our community would be better served by surrendering either to Albany.

We've heard from our parents: they want a rich and engaging curriculum, not defensive test prep.

We've heard from our staff: they deserve an evaluation system that rewards good teaching.

We've heard from our community: they want us to protect this institution.

Do not vote for a state budget that contains these misguided "reforms."

Please don't mistake the measured tone of this letter. We do not wish to be confrontational, just utterly emphatic. We cannot abide "reforms" that threaten our staff's livelihoods, our curriculum's richness or our future financial health. Our community has entrusted you with the power to hold these threats at bay. Now is the time to exercise it.

For the Board of Education,



Dr. Tom Rogers
Superintendent of Schools
Syosset Central School District

cc: Syosset Central School District Board of Education
Mary Beth Labate, Director, New York State Division of the Budget
Senator John J. Flanagan, Committee on Education Chair
Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, Committee on Education Chair
Senator Dean Skelos, Majority Leader
Assemblyman Carl E. Heastie, Speaker of the Assembly
Senator John DeFrancisco, Senate Finance Committee Chair
Assemblyman Herman D. Farrell, Assembly Ways and Means Chair