

The Empire State Supervisors and Administrators (“ESSAA”) had its monthly Stakeholder Meeting with Commissioner of Education, MaryEllen Elia and Executive Deputy Commissioner, Elizabeth Berlin on Monday, November 2, 2015.

Present at the meeting for ESSAA were: Bill Evans, ESSAA President; Albert (Skip) Voorneveld, ESSAA Executive Vice President; Michael McDermott, ESSAA Vice President, Scarsdale School District; Matthew Kravatz, ESSAA Member, Monroe Woodbury; David Wagner, ESSAA Liaison; and Michael A. Starvaggi, ESSAA Executive Director. Carol Conklin-Spillane ESSAA Executive Board Member, Tarrytown School District and Ryan Schoenfeld, ESSAA Vice President, Lockport School District, participated in the meeting by conference call.

The topics discussed were as follows:

President Obama’s Call for Testing Limits and Regents Mandate for Test Reduction

The Commissioner stated that she anticipated that the tests will become shorter now (in terms of number of questions if not actual allotted time), and even shorter again next year. She stated that the onset of computer testing will also make the testing more efficient.

We stated our recommendation to reconsider testing at grades 3 and 7 or 4 and 8 under the NAEP model. The Commissioner said that neither the current state administration nor the federal administration seem to be on board with such a restructuring. She also said that principals must see to it that test prep in their buildings is shortened and kept under control. She said that “the assessments are not the problem” since they are only 90 minutes per session in ELA and math. It is the prep time that drains the schools’ resources. We reminded the Commissioner that such inordinate prep time is a natural outgrowth of high stakes testing.

We also suggested that the Commissioner should look at SLO’s as a way to reduce state testing, by finding a way to simplify the SLO process to not add to over-assessment. We gave the perspective of some of our schools that have benchmark and growth assessment procedures in place and see SLO’s as having been added “on top of” these processes. We stated that our local procedures work well and that the new assessment procedures overburden our schools. The Commissioner said that NYSED is making progress approving district-requested assessments so that there does not have to be such duplication.

Commissioner Elia also pointed out that non-state assessment evaluation applies to 80% of teachers and principals and therefore the SLO process is a very important one. She specifically said that she is open to suggestions about an alternative to the SLO process for evaluating student performance for those teachers and principals.

Revising APPR

We addressed the unintended consequences of the high school principal growth formula which, by including non-mandatory Regents exams, essentially punishes principals whose districts do not offer those examinations. The Commissioner said that she will look at that issue, but feels that an expanded offering of Regents exams is something she does not want to discourage. However, she said that if the school is offering alternatives such as AP, IB, etc., these should be factored in as

well. The Commissioner asked us to send her suggestions on redesigning the metrics for high school principal growth scores.

Perhaps the key issue in the meeting dealt with decoupling student performance from principal and teacher evaluation. The Commissioner said that she was open “to look at it all,” but was very clear about her position. She believes that assessment should be a factor in evaluations but that the current structure (which she describes as 50%) is far too much. In fact, Commissioner Elia said that counting student growth for some portion of evaluation but less than 50% is “where she is,” and she asked “where are we?”

We were in agreement that low student test scores are part of the equation in assessing the overall performance of a teacher or principal, however the key is determining an appropriate weight to attribute to those scores in the evaluation process. Once again, the Commissioner was clear, stating that “we need to diffuse that and bring it down” and that 50% is “too much.”

We stated our position that the rubrics are an excellent tool and by far more valuable to evaluations than test scores and that research indicates that the connection between teacher effectiveness and test scores is 12% and principal effectiveness and test scores is 5% -- so the current weighting of 50% is completely out of proportion. The Commissioner agrees.

Dr. Ryan Schoenfeld, ESSAA Vice President from the Lockport School District has volunteered to put together a research-based position paper regarding the tenuous connection between assessments and teacher effectiveness and the even more tenuous connection between assessments and principal effectiveness. The paper will be shared with the Commissioner and with policymakers statewide. This represents a crucial opportunity to change one of the fundamental elements of APPR, a change which the Commissioner supports.

We suggested an APPR moratorium while these items were being addressed and the Commissioner stated a clear opposition to that concept. She said that, politically, once a moratorium was imposed it would be almost impossible to retract. She believes that the connection between student performance and teacher/principal evaluations must remain in effect. We suggested that one form of moratorium would be to temporarily suspend any Ineffective ratings from counting as consecutive Ineffective ratings for purposes of the punitive “expedited 3020-a and 3020-b” provisions of the APPR law. The Commissioner seemed to believe that this was still a moratorium and should be avoided.

ESSAA President, Bill Evans stated that many practitioners felt that the roll-out of Common Core testing was designed to undermine public education. The Commissioner said that she understood that the roll-out was fraught with “terrible communications,” and that the Education Department should have communicated that the new standards were going to naturally result in lower scores so as to manage expectations of parents and educators alike. She said that Tennessee did a much better job of communicating this message than New York and the transition was smoother as a result.

Commissioner Elia also restated that we have to re-examine the growth score model and assured us that the process of re-evaluation of the model is ongoing.

Finally, Skip Voorneveld volunteered to provide some insight into the problems caused by state regulations which do not require independent observers to be certificated administrators. ESSAA is developing recommendations in this area, including Japanese lesson study, learning walks and 3 minute walkthroughs. More information will follow on this topic.

Commissioner's Survey on Common Core Standards

The Commissioner asked for our cooperation in encouraging participation in the Department's Common Core Survey. We suggested that the most effective way to garner participation is to allow time for the survey to be completed as part of in-service credit. The Commissioner agreed and said that this was her recommendation all along. ESSAA will send a separate e-mail with details about participating in the survey.

Conclusion

ESSAA strives to provide our members with timely information about our interactions with educational policymakers in our state. We do this not only to inform you, but also to solicit your feedback so that we can bring your voice to Albany and deliver a clear message based on the thoughts and concerns of the actual practitioners who strive every day to deliver the best education possible to students statewide.

We meet regularly with the Commissioner, attend all Regents meetings and have a powerful lobbying presence as well. Therefore we encourage your responses to the items discussed above and any others issues of concern. We will use your feedback to set future agendas with policymakers.

Specifically, we have been invited to present suggestions regarding: redesigning the metrics for high school principal growth scores; the connection between assessments and teacher/principal effectiveness; alternatives to the SLO process for evaluating student performance for teachers and principals in non-state assessment grades; and independent observer qualifications.

Your feedback is essential. Please send your comments to us at ldorsey@essaa.org.