

Misguided Direction

An Opinion Piece

By Joey J. Cohen, Ed.D., Principal – Patchogue-Medford School District

The future of education is not just in jeopardy with the current political climate set forth by Governor Cuomo, Chancellor Tisch and former Commissioner King, it is decidedly bleak. I have spent nearly twenty years in education, currently as an elementary principal, holding several post-secondary degrees including a Doctorate in Educational Leadership with a dissertation that focused on strategies to support students with disabilities. As a current practitioner, living with the mandates that exist in today's classrooms, my experience and research in the field affords me greater perspective than the aforementioned policymakers responsible for the laws they so haphazardly implement. The flaws in education are not the result of the hardworking educators; it is the ignorant policymakers who are pushing the educational train directly toward derailment.

Governor Cuomo has succeeded in making public education, specifically teachers and principals, public enemy number one. As an educator and strong advocate for students, I am deeply troubled when I hear the Governor suggest that he cares about students, while teachers are only interested in protecting their jobs. The Governor's constant rhetoric is nothing more than a political smoking gun designed to incite the public by placing blame on someone other than himself or his political allies who are only interested in advancing their own agendas. The State's push for increased standardized assessments through partnerships with multimillion-dollar conglomerates such as Pearson provides no meaningful information to teachers, it only serves as a poorly constructed barometer to rank teachers, principals, schools and districts.

The reality is that the pressure of these high stakes exams continues to elevate student anxiety and withdrawal. A system predicated on punitive outcomes fosters fear and anxiety amongst administrators and teachers, which ultimately filters down to children. It is much like an anxious golfer who grips the club too tightly in an attempt to produce a better shot, yet the results fall far short of the intended goal. Teachers, administrators and students cannot operate in a culture of fear and expect optimal results. At the local level, we are left to address the emotional distress, and the unintended consequences of these high stakes exams, which actually takes additional time away from instruction in order to address the increased anxiety. I have witnessed students shut down and cry at the level of disproportional cognitive ability needed to succeed at these assessments considering their age. Students with disabilities and English Language Learners are at a particular disadvantage, and it is only due to caring teachers and administrators that these students still come to school motivated to learn. However, if the tide does not change soon, more students will turn their backs on education.

Since our schools across the state and nation are under such intense scrutiny to show better test results, some schools and districts have allowed standardized tests to hijack sound curriculum by placing too much emphasis on test preparation. The business of test making and creating instructional support materials aligned to the Common Core Exams has become a 1.7 billion dollar business with the two largest vendors being Pearson Education based in New York and McGraw-Hill Education, also in New York, (A., Ujifusa, Education Week, November 2012). With that kind of revenue, there is a great deal at stake, and one must question the rationale for subjecting students to these new reforms, as well as the continued emphasis on high stakes testing for all students in grades 3-8.

Governor Cuomo's 2015 Opportunity Agenda clearly delineates that he did not get what he wanted from the stranglehold he put on districts by threatening to withhold the Race to the Top funds some years ago, so he is upping the ante. The Governor's new proposal offers school funding at a 4.8% increase (1.1 billion dollars) if his reform agenda is accepted, in contrast to a sharply reduced 1.7% increase (377 million dollars) if it is not. His new proposal mandates 50% of a teacher's APPR composite score be based on Common Core Standardized Assessments and 50% based on teacher evaluations, thereby eliminating the previously agreed upon local assessment. The Governor and those at the State Education Department continue to live in denial by discounting district and school disproportionality related to language barriers, cognitive disabilities, parental support, poverty or any other factor when evaluating teachers and principals. Those charged with enacting the laws continue to purport that the tortoise can beat the hare merely because you want him to be faster. There continues to be little to no regard for cognitive, developmental, linguistic or physical ability when enacting ridiculous laws that expect all students to take the same assessments and meet with the same success.

While many of our students come to school with all the love and support from home necessary to promote learning, many of our students come with great need. Some come without any knowledge of the language, some come with cognitive disabilities, some come with physical disabilities, some come from poverty, and some come from single family homes or abusive relationships. When a student walks into one of our public schools they are provided with security, emotional support and each and every child is nurtured and guided by a teacher who cares for their social and academic growth beyond any and all extrinsic factors. That can never be measured in any standardized test!

Our policymakers suggest that educators were never held accountable, evaluated with integrity and/or provided with constructive feedback, which necessitated APPR. In my nearly twenty year career, I have always been evaluated or evaluated my staff using a combination of formal and informal observations leading to dialogue that fostered increased student outcomes and elevated professional growth. Unfortunately, under the current APPR system and the ever-changing proverbial finish line to determine student mastery results are difficult, if not impossible, to compare. This, combined with the detrimental practice of labeling teachers and principals, has led to a system of distrust that fosters both student and teacher anxiety instead of collaboration and growth.

Since APPR was founded, it eludes me that the only members of a school system that are held to the state mandated evaluations are teachers and principals. This premise assumes that principals and teachers are given carte blanche to make every decision related to school operations, budgeting and instruction. The fact of the matter is that many decisions are relegated to other stakeholders, which significantly influences student outcomes. The decisions that impact our schools are collective ones that begin with the State Education Department. But, let us only hold the principals and teachers responsible.

We need only look at the rollout of the Common Core as well as the NYS ELA and Math Modules to see where the problem began. Imagine the rating the former Commissioner, Chancellor Tisch or Governor Cuomo would have received based on the pathetic and dysfunctional rollout of these materials, all while ignoring the tremendous voice of concern from teachers, administrators, parents and students. Or perhaps we should evaluate them on the roughly 30% proficiency rate across the state. Instead of giving our former Commissioner a "developing" or "ineffective" rating, we promoted him to one of highest positions in the Department of Education. Talk about hypocrisy!

The reality is that the current and proposed APPR reform agenda is a flawed, completely misguided system that does not work. Top down reforms will continue to breed fear, distrust, anxiety and compliance, not ingenuity, which will do little or nothing to advance our schools. John Maxwell, author of 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, asserts that leaders transform change by forming meaningful relationships, building trust, having skill in the field, consider timing and morale, and the most critical component...having followers. Those responsible for contriving these misguided reforms have failed to listen to the people vested in improving our schools, namely teachers, administrators, parents and students, and subsequently, there are few, if any, followers.

Let us be silent no longer. Let us work together to change the laws and design a system that is founded on mutual collaboration from all the stakeholders leading to trust and professional growth, stemming from our collective wisdom, as practiced in the most successful professions and organizations.