



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Commissioner of Education
President of the University of the State of New York
89 Washington Avenue, Room 111
Albany, New York 12234

E-mail: commissioner@mail.nysed.gov
Twitter: @JohnKingNYSED
Tel: (518) 474-5844
Fax: (518) 473-4909

Good morning and thank you all for being here. I especially want to thank the Wagner School for hosting us and Secretary Duncan for traveling from Washington, DC this morning to join us and for his warm introduction.

New York State has reached an important turning point in our work to ensure an excellent education for every student. We're poised to lead the country. It's within our grasp – and together we have the potential to make a difference for every single child in this state.

I became an educator for a very simple reason: I know that school can be the difference between hope and despair for a child and especially a child at risk – whether it's from poverty, disability or a difficult family situation.

I know that an amazing teacher can save lives because one of my elementary school teachers at P.S. 276 in Brooklyn saved mine. His name was Mr. Osterweil.

My mother died when I was 8. At the time, my father was suffering from undiagnosed Alzheimer's disease. It was just the two of us in my house. Over the next four years, he declined rapidly and then he passed away when I was 12.

During those years, life outside of school was scary and unpredictable – but in Mr. Osterweil's classroom I was safe, I was nurtured, and I was challenged. We read the New York Times every morning; we did a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In Mr. Osterweil's classroom, the world beyond Canarsie was opened up to me. We worked hard in Mr. Osterweil's class and we discovered the joy of learning.

As a teacher, principal and policymaker, my goal is and has always been to give every student what Mr. Osterweil gave me – a classroom where they feel supported and inspired and challenged.

That's all I want for New York's children. We all want that -- but sometimes politics gets in the way. I have always tried to separate the politics of education from the substance of the issue.

I try to focus on instruction – to look only at evidence, at practice, and at what students know and are able to do. I try to focus on outcomes for students and to leave ideology and politics aside.

These days, however, New York politics seems to be all about education and it's hard to find any agreement on facts -- let alone policy. And it's also hard to see where everyone stands.

Some Republicans and business leaders support high standards while others don't. Some Democrats and civil rights leaders support student-focused evaluations for teachers and principals and some don't.

Some folks align with unions while others keep their distance. Some demand accountability while others fight it. And often, those with the most to gain are not in the fight at all.

Sometimes, these debates focus on real issues and there are honest disagreements that can lead to productive compromise. But sometimes the conversation devolves into extraordinarily personal attacks, which should have no place in open civic discourse.

Civility and respect should be the price of admission in public debate. Its opposite is not only inappropriate but it has the disheartening effect of turning off the people we serve-- the students, the parents, and the taxpayers of New York. Their voices matter.

We represent their interests – not our own – and when the noise level rises, healthy engagement declines and the likelihood of achieving consensus drops.

I saw that happen last fall in a series of public forums across the state. People were angry and frustrated. There was a great deal of misinformation and people felt they weren't being heard.

I saw it happen again this winter where the state teachers union voiced the anxiety and frustration of their members over evaluation and accountability. At times, the union leadership even appeared to oppose higher standards for teaching and learning – even though they had agreed to raise standards and worked with us to secure funding for that work.

It culminated last weekend – not only in a “no-confidence” vote for me by NYSUT delegates – but also the election defeat of NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi, who lost his reelection as union president. While we have had our differences, I respect President Iannuzzi. He was a dedicated and hard-working teacher and union leader and I salute him for his service. I also look forward to working with his successor.

Some principals and some superintendents have also called for a course correction and it's played out in the State Capitol where long-time legislative supporters of education reform decided the transition to higher standards was moving too quickly.

And I saw it over the last few weeks where a small but meaningful percentage of parents and students opted out of the new state assessments that will measure whether our students are on track to being prepared for college and work.

In doing so, they made their voices heard even if they are now denying themselves and their teachers the opportunity to know how their children are performing against a common benchmark used throughout the state.

On a more local level, you can read the comments section in any newspaper article about testing or standards, and quite often someone will end up saying something harsh and inappropriate.

Partly – this is New York’s character. New Yorkers have deeply-held beliefs and we’re willing to stand up for them – and even fight for them. It’s one of the things that makes us great.

But that doesn’t justify the kind of degrading rhetoric that increasingly fills our newspapers and airwaves. Every confrontation does not need to end with one side declaring victory and the other side retreating in defeat.

We can achieve shared victories -- and that’s especially true in public education, where there should be more acknowledgment of the facts and common aspirations – because there really is only one thing that counts – and that is student outcomes.

No matter where we stand on the policy or political spectrum – our job is to get results in the classroom and graduate every student ready for the next step – whether it’s post-secondary education or work.

We can differ on how to get there -- what works best -- and the pace of change – but the goal is beyond debate: to prepare our children for the future.

So today, I’m going to try -- not to add to the noise – but to turn the page and talk about how New York can move forward and affirm our place as a national leader in public education. There are three basic issues on which we should be able to agree.

The first is that – for all of our progress – New York State is not yet where it needs to be:

Without question, New York State has many excellent districts and schools. From high school graduation rates to Advance Placement exams to college enrollment, our students are learning more and doing better than they were ten years ago or even four years ago. We should all take pride in our progress - BUT we can and must do better:

- One in four New York State students does not graduate high school. That’s below the national average.
- Only about a third of the students who begin high school as freshmen graduate four years later ready for college-level work.
- More than 50 percent of those who enroll in state community colleges need remedial education. Here in the city it’s over 80 percent. Huge numbers never finish.
- And needless to say, all of these facts are worse – often much worse - for low-income students, students of color, English Language Learners, and students with special needs.

New York, of course, isn’t alone. Whether you look at the NAEP national assessment, the PISA international assessment, state assessments or graduation rates, the conclusion is the same. America needs to get better, faster or too many young people will face fewer opportunities in a global economy.

The second area of agreement should be in favor of high standards. Nobody can honestly argue that we are better off keeping standards low and deluding ourselves and our children into thinking they are ready for college and work when we know they aren’t.

Employers will tell you that many students coming out of high school struggle to communicate effectively. College professors will tell you that many incoming freshmen can't write a simple essay in which they make an argument and defend it with evidence.

To meet this challenge, the New York State Board of Regents adopted the Common Core standards in 2010 – standards developed by asking college professors, employers, and accomplished teachers what students need for success in college, careers, and life. Since then, we have committed nearly \$500 million dollars in Race to the Top funds spent in districts to help launch Common Core and to improve instruction.

- We put teacher trainers in every region of the state and in all the large school districts training thousands of teachers.
- We created free voluntary curriculum that's been downloaded more than 6.2 million times.
- And we put instructional videos on our website showing how higher standards work in the classroom.

Countless teachers have bravely and creatively stepped up -- adopting new curricula, developing new lesson plans and redesigning instruction to promote critical thinking and problem-solving rather than rote memorization.

Whether in the local papers or on our website, EngageNY.org, or on websites like the ones run by both national teacher unions, there are constant stories about teachers successfully making the transition.

It's a huge change and no one thought for a moment it would be easy – but the truth is that it is well underway in classrooms all across the state. I have seen the progress firsthand in the over 60 schools I have visited around the state since September. From a math teacher in Cooperstown challenging students to solve real world problems by subtracting mixed numbers to a classroom in Harlem where students were discussing evidence for common themes in Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry and Watsons Go to Birmingham, the Common Core is enriching instruction in classrooms all across the state every day.

Of course, in a system as decentralized as ours, the road to change will always be bumpier for some than for others. We have 700 school districts in New York and there is no question that implementation has been uneven—but that's no reason to stop. We teach our children to meet failure and challenge with renewed effort. Adults must do the same.

The third issue that unites us is accountability for student results. We can debate the best way to hold ourselves accountable. Time will tell whether the current mix of measures – from state tests and Regents exams to graduation rates and student portfolios – provide the best indicators of college and career readiness.

But the idea that we don't really need accountability is unacceptable. It's an abdication of responsibility. We've been hired to educate the children of New York – all the children of New York – no matter how poor or how challenged or how difficult their home life.

Every single child deserves an effective education and the parents and taxpayers who hired us have a right to know whether we are getting the job done. And -- if New York is not getting it done -- then I am accountable. We are all accountable.

That's the bargain at the heart of public education. Parents trust us with their children and the people of the state give us billions and billions of dollars each year -- and what they ask in return is that we deliver results -- and prove it.

And that gets to two issues that are really at the heart of all the drama here in New York in recent months: the first is testing and the second is evaluation.

Many New York parents have expressed frustration with testing and I understand where they are coming from. Testing is not teaching. Testing is not the point of education. Testing does not make our children smarter. It just tells us where we are so we can get better.

Unfortunately, the facts around testing seem to get lost. First of all, the new Common Core tests are a much better reflection of the skills students will need for college and career success. They rely less on multiple choice and require students to write more. They ask students to critically analyze challenging texts and to apply their math skills to real world problems. They are better tests.

Second, New York State has not added any new tests since adopting the Common Core standards. In fact, we have made every effort to simultaneously improve our tests and reduce testing time.

Today, the total testing time for those state tests accounts for less than one percent of the instructional time in the school year. I want to say that again: since New York State adopted the Common Core in 2010, we have not added any new tests -- and total testing time accounts for less than one percent of class time each year.

We also discourage test prep, which takes time away from learning. The best preparation for testing is good teaching so let me say here and now -- as loudly and clearly as possible -- stop doing rote standardized test prep. It doesn't help children or schools and I salute the legislature and the Governor for putting a cap on test prep into law.

We have also discouraged local school districts from layering on additional testing. Now, some local tests provide useful information throughout the school year to inform instruction and guide efforts to help struggling students.

But principals and superintendents have to justify these local tests to parents -- or eliminate them. Our goal is the minimum amount of testing needed to inform effective decision-making.

And that gets to the second issue around accountability. Some teachers and principals are pushing back on evaluation, even though New York has barely begun to implement the evaluation process that our districts and our unions all agreed to support. Moreover, no teachers or principals have faced any consequences so far.

The evaluation system has three parts: 20 percent relies on the state test or comparable measures; another 20 percent relies on local tests. The other 60 percent of a teacher's

evaluation relies on classroom observation and other factors like feedback from parents and students.

Again – 60% has nothing to do with test scores – so anyone who says that evaluation is all about test scores is wrong. They're misinforming people to stir up anxiety and fear among teachers and parents – and that's having a negative effect on students.

Right now – as we speak -- we have only one year of test results that measure the new standards. We have not identified any new schools for intervention. Not a single teacher or principal has faced any negative consequences in connection with the new standards. No one has been fired through the process created under the new evaluation law.

And there won't be negative consequences under the new evaluation law until new results come in next year. More than likely, districts would not take action until the summer of 2015 – which is five full years after the Common Core standards were adopted.

Moreover, last year, just one percent of educators in the entire state were found ineffective – which is the bottom of four categories under our new evaluation system – and they have to be ineffective two years in a row to be at risk of dismissal. In the meantime, they develop a plan to improve – and hopefully they will.

The bottom line is that less one percent of teachers could face dismissal proceedings from our evaluation system over the next year. So -- anyone who says evaluation is all about firing teachers is deliberately misrepresenting the facts. For the vast majority of teachers – 99 percent – these early evaluations will only help them get better – and that helps our students improve.

Now – the work of raising standards for teaching and learning is work we launched together. Not just the state – but the districts, the unions, the teachers, the legislature, the governor – all with the support of the federal government. Everyone has had a voice in this. It's been open, transparent – and we have all known about it for years.

But for this to actually work and to make a difference in the lives of students, local education leaders must implement these changes – thoughtfully, consistently and fairly.

Local leaders set budgets and priorities. They dedicate time and money to professional development. They choose curriculum. They track results and they manage school schedules to allow for planning and collaboration and create a culture of continuous improvement. Several talented local superintendents are here with us today representing the 700 district leaders across this state charged with delivering on the promise of the Common Core.

The state can help with funding, provide guidance and highlight best practices. We can offer flexibility when it is in the best interests of students. And we can seek relief from Washington and we have. We thank Secretary Duncan for giving New York the flexibility to do this right.

Now, there's been a lot of talk about rushed implementation of Common Core. Some people say it is unfair to hold ourselves accountable for meeting new standards when teachers are still getting comfortable with new curricula and lesson plans.

Some have proposed a delay of two or three years – with no consequences for teachers or principals when students aren't making progress. The Board of Regents established a workgroup that looked at Common Core implementation, made recommendations for adjustments, and proposed that rather than delay student-focused evaluations yet again we should create additional mechanisms to ensure fairness.

Similarly, the Governor appointed a commission to consider the issue and they came back with their recommendation. Despite some anecdotal evidence of poor implementation in some places, the commission said that New York must stay on schedule and stay on track toward higher standards.

But they listened – and they continue to listen -- and we will continue to talk with the Board of Regents, the Governor, the legislature -- and teachers and administrators -- about how to do this fairly and thoughtfully.

But we're not going backwards. We're not retreating. New York is moving forward with a common belief in the power of great teachers to make a difference in the lives of children and an urgent commitment to do everything in our power to put an effective teacher in every classroom.

And that requires real and authentic accountability that recognizes, celebrates and honors our best teachers and lifts and strengthens the entire field. Nothing else we do is more important.

So I hope that all of us – administrators, educators, parents and unions – can lay down our swords – soften the rhetoric – put aside the politics -- and come together for our children. It is time to rebuild the trust and mutual respect required to collaborate at scale on something as complex as raising standards for teaching and learning.

It is time to stop stoking the fires of fear – and start expressing the confidence and optimism that common sense standards offer – both to our teachers and our students.

To our students – New York offers you the promise of an education that truly prepares you for college, work and life. Included in that promise is a commitment to tell you the truth about how well you are prepared and what you need to do to succeed.

For our teachers, we offer you a path to the respect and recognition that you rightly crave and justly deserve. Instead of feeling blamed for our educational shortcomings, we want teachers to feel empowered to fix them.

Recently Secretary Duncan called for a new era of teacher leadership in order to strengthen the teaching profession. New York will be the first state in the union to answer that call.

On Tuesday, I was in Greece, NY, a district using Race to the Top funds to develop a career ladder for teachers. Teacher leaders – master teachers selected jointly by the district and their union – split their time between classroom instruction and supporting and coaching their peers.

I was inspired and reassured listening to them describe the powerful conversations they are having with colleagues.

It affirmed for me what I have always known: That there is no educational challenge in New York that is beyond the reach of our educators, our schools, our parents and our students. But it will ask more of each of us.

Schools of education need to rethink how they train teachers. Elected officials must take greater responsibility for fully and equitably funding our schools and I am grateful to the governor and legislature for boosting education funding next year. Administrators need to use that money to give teachers the training and support they need.

The union leadership at the state and local level needs to continue to honor its commitment to accountability and reform. We can't do this without them – and we certainly can't do this in a climate of open hostility. It's got to end.

Teachers themselves need to embrace a system of accountability – instead of fearing it – because they have very little to fear and far more to gain.

And finally – we at the state level and our colleagues at the federal level need to own up to the unintended consequences of our policies – from narrowing of the curriculum to the overemphasis on testing.

We can and must minimize test prep and the stress that it places on students and teachers. I worked in schools where collaboration and trust were central to the school culture and where students had a rich, well-rounded curriculum. Testing was a diagnostic tool – not an end in itself. It didn't impede learning or overwhelm children. Teachers valued the feedback.

Still, I accept responsibility for state policies and the impact they have had – both positive and negative. I know implementation has not gone perfectly and there is more the state can do. Which is why today, I want to announce three initiatives to further support the transition:

- (1) The first is a \$16 million dollar grant program called Teaching is the Core. The goal is to reduce local testing by evaluating which ones are needed and which ones aren't. I don't want New York students spending one minute longer than necessary on testing.
- (2) The second is a plan to borrow classroom teachers from across the state to help us shape the state's curriculum and instruction supports around the Common Core. We want to find teachers who are doing it well so they can help their colleagues across New York make this transition. We'll pay their salaries for a year so that there is no cost to districts.
- (3) The third is really a challenge to local administrators and local union leaders to build time into school schedules for more collaboration and high-quality professional development. Student learning is our bottom line and that means professional development is not an optional luxury – it is essential.

This is a historic moment and an opportunity to lead the whole country. I have never been more confident because I know there are tens of thousands of smart and dedicated teachers across this state that share Mr. Osterweil's passion and commitment. They're devoted to their students and willing to do whatever it takes to help them get over the bar we have set for ourselves.

I know there are millions of parents across this state who want only the best for their children and who are willing to be good partners with their children's teachers in meeting those goals.

There are elected officials all across New York who don't want to take sides among adults fighting over reform. They just want to be on the side of children and what is best for them.

I also know that even my most ardent critics in the teachers union share the goal of providing the best education possible to every child in our state – and just because we don't agree on everything – does not make us enemies.

One of the gifts my mother gave me when I was little was that she taught me to look for the good in everyone. I hope that we can all see the good in each other and begin to move forward together – because the alternative is unthinkable.

Children have been waiting for too long for the education they desperately need, while the adults have become paralyzed by the politics of education. We can't get back a single day stolen from our children because we could not find common ground.

We all have to own that and accept responsibility for every missed opportunity and that means we have to resolve here and now not to let another day go by where we are arguing about process instead of delivering an effective education to children.

Not another day should go by when we are more concerned with making ourselves look good and making others look bad, because we all look bad and nothing good comes of it.

I know that this work is difficult for some. I know this is scary for some. But anything worthwhile is going to be difficult and scary sometimes. It's been difficult for me as well. I didn't seek or invite the antagonism and acrimony – but it's there and it's real and I don't dismiss it.

I just hope we're all a little bit stronger for it and a little bit chastened by the recent battles. I hope we're all a little bit humbler and a little bit more understanding of each other's point of view.

And hopefully, we're all a little bit smarter – and a little bit more able to find today's solutions to yesterday's battles.

We have a lot of work to do. Let's get to it.

Thank you.