

East Lyme Public Schools

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SUPERINTENDENT
James D. Lombardo, Ed. D.

February 10, 2014

Dear Governor Malloy, Commissioner Pryor, Members of the State Board, Education Chair Stillman, Esteemed Legislators, and Education Colleagues:

I have served as a Superintendent of Schools for 29 years in three states. I have been a lifelong Democrat, convinced that the Democratic Party had always supported educators and education much more than the Republican Party. I am saddened to find that I will now leave the profession I love after 43 years, convinced for the first time in my career that my state, nation and political party have adopted educational policy that is harmful to children.

Recently Governor Malloy and several legislators signed a letter "directing" the Commissioner of Education to make changes to the teacher evaluation requirements midway through the first year of partial implementation. In a follow-up phone conference with the Commissioner on Tuesday, we learned the real details of the so-called new "flexibility" in the system. From where I sit, the short-term changes do nothing more than reduce the rigor of the original requirements, while doing little either to correct the inherent flaws in a failed initiative or to relieve the cumbersome demands of the process.

Phony "flexibility"

While the original press releases suggested that the changes would reduce the annual evaluation load for principals to a third of teachers each year, the truth is that the system still requires that principals "evaluate" every certified staff member in their schools every year. The only change is that the required "formal" observation, a task that requires approximately six hours to complete, will be replaced by at least three "informal" observations for two-thirds of the teachers. So instead of evaluating a teacher based on a rigorous observation and exchange of ideas, the principal will be "evaluating" two-thirds of the staff based on three ten-minute "drop-in" visits. While common sense suggests that such a change will do little to help teachers, I can guarantee that any teacher who is "evaluated" and "scored" as "developing" or "needs improvement" would have just cause to contest any employment decision based on such limited and incomplete data.

In addition, the change does very little to reduce the cumbersome burden of the new requirements. A quick look at the numbers reveals the unreasonable supervisory demands of the system, even under the new, supposedly more "flexible" system. My high school principal, for example, will still have to evaluate 32 professional teachers each year. One-third will still require a goal-setting conference (one hour); one formal observation (six hours to review the lesson plan, meet with the teacher, observe the class, analyze the data,

meet with the teacher, write up the observation, rate the teacher, and enter all data into a complex new computer data base); three informal observations or “reviews of practice” (3 hours); a mid-year goal conference (one-hour); uploading of “artifacts” to justify the final rating of a teacher’s evaluation (three hours); writing up the actual evaluation (2-3 hours); and an end-of-year conference to review the evaluation (one hour). This 16 hour requirement for 14 teachers will take a total of 210 hours, or the equivalent of 35 six-hour school days. For the remaining 28 teachers, the evaluation system, even without the “formal observation,” will still require an estimated ten hours per teacher for a total of 280 hours or 46 six-hour school days. **Putting it all together, my principal will still spend at least 73 work days out of a 180-day school year doing nothing but observing and evaluating teachers. And these numbers don’t even consider the time required to analyze student data and parent survey results that comprise the other half of each teacher’s evaluation!**

As a superintendent, I have two choices to fulfill the mandate: to convince my Boards of Education and Finance to fund three more administrators for our schools; or to reduce my expectations for implementation of this system to a bare minimum, thereby, meeting the requirement of annual “evaluations” for all, but doing little to help teachers actually improve their abilities to help children learn.

Inherent Policy Flaws

The teacher evaluation system is only part of a deeply flawed public policy on which the U.S. Department of Education and 47 state governments, including Connecticut, have embarked. Adoption of the “common core” state standards, expensive and time-consuming student assessment systems, and cumbersome educator evaluation processes are intertwined in a new reform agenda that purports to set the U.S. on the path to better test scores and a more successful nation. A review of the underlying assumptions of these flawed public policies reveals a starkly different scenario.

First assumption: Low test scores indicate a failed school system and lead to a less successful United States; higher test scores will mean a more competitive America.

The truth: In the very first international test of mathematics in 1954, the United States scored tenth out of 11 developed nations. Since then we have scored near the bottom of the pack in every test of mathematics and science, and near the midpoint of tests in reading. Despite such poor test performance, during the same fifty year period, the U.S. has demonstrated incredible success in almost any measure of a nation’s economic and societal strength: incredible growth in gross domestic product; the vast majority of patents for innovative products and design; the most Nobel and literary prizes; the highest standard of living; and significant educational opportunity. Even our purported “failing” education system is the envy of the rest of the world as evidenced by the incredible demand by foreign students to enter our university system. Certainly, we have problems related to our inequitable distribution of wealth, but no research or common sense analysis can demonstrate a correlation between rankings on international tests of math and reading and the success of a people or nation.

Second assumption: A more rigorous standardized test will give us information that we need to make better high stakes decisions, such as student promotion, college entrance, and employee advancement and tenure.

The truth: No single test has or should be given the power to determine or predict with any reliability such important outcomes. Some of our most successful entrepreneurs dropped out of high school or college to become incredibly successful innovators. Likewise, some of our most talented citizens have been denied access to classes, programs, or opportunities, based on a single test result.

Third assumption: Judging a student or teacher based on a high stakes test will motivate the person to perform better. In other words, our teachers and students need such external motivation to perform.

The truth: As described in Daniel Pink's Drive, human beings are motivated to excel at higher level tasks more by the intrinsic reward of successfully completing the task than by the threat of punishment or the promise of an external reward. Research also demonstrates that threats actually deter people from performing highly complex tasks when the primary motivation is external.

Fourth assumption: A reform agenda can be accomplished by mandating a change, in spite of its impact on the climate of a work or learning environment.

The truth: Threats and promises of reward only motivate when the task is a lower level exercise. Michael Fullan's and Andy Hargreaves' extensive studies of successful change processes demonstrate the link between an organization's culture and the success of any educational reform effort. Forcing a change without regard to the culture of schools will bring compliance, but not true change. We are beginning to see the negative impact on our schools' culture promulgated by this most recent top down reform agenda. Teachers and administrators are frustrated with the enormity of an effort they neither respect nor believe will work.

Fifth assumption: The reform agenda is based on current and sound educational research.

The truth: Over the past 20 years, an enormous number of research studies have identified the quality of the teacher as the primary influence on children's learning. The research cites many examples of instructional practices that lead to improved teaching and, ultimately, improved student learning. These include such elements as classroom management techniques, effective lesson design, sound assessment practices, and opportunities for students to re-learn if they are unsuccessful the first time. Nowhere in that research can I find evidence that the imposition of a cumbersome and data-driven evaluation system leads to improved teaching and learning.

Final assumption: Despite the stress these changes are having on our schools, children will benefit from them.

The truth: The evidence, on the contrary, seems to suggest that students are already experiencing harm from this overly cumbersome reform agenda. I cite the following impact on our children:

- Seven to ten hours of testing in grades 3-8 and grade 10, plus many more hours of test preparation;
- Dozens of hours of lost contact with teachers for students, as teachers leave their classrooms for training, planning, and activities related to the common core, state tests, and teacher evaluation;
- The loss of thousands of dollars of educational resources as schools spend limited funding on computers to accommodate state tests; common core textbooks; and professional development aimed at learning the details of the elements of this reform initiative;
- The expenditure of millions of state education funds on education “consultants” and corporations to develop and manage the complex elements of the entire reform agenda;
- An increased focus on less engaging classroom activities aimed at boosting student test performance, rather than stimulating learning.

Time to Act:

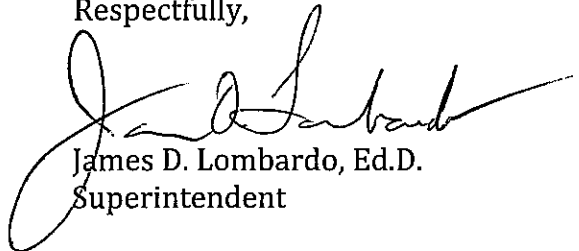
Don't get me wrong. While I am deeply critical of these reform efforts, I believe that many of those involved in pushing this agenda honestly believe they are right. The Commissioner is an honest and hard-working man who listens to our concerns and tries to respond to them. Governor Malloy truly sees education as the key to individual success and has significantly increased education spending in the midst of a difficult economy. Members of the legislature and the State Board of Education have recognized the significant learning gap in our state and have sought relief by following what they thought was a well-researched national reform program. The truth is, however, that the reform plan is not based on sound research, is wasting precious education time and money, and, in the end, will not bring the improvements sought.

The recent “flexibility” offered by the Governor and implemented by the Commissioner and his staff will seduce many into believing the system is now more reasonable to administer. Unfortunately, the technical “fix” offered by Governor Malloy and some of the same legislators and bureaucrats who voted for and initiated these failed policies will do nothing to address the real problem of these initiatives: they are simply wrong for education and for children.

In my career, I have had the opportunity to travel to many countries to study their educational systems. As I watch Connecticut and our nation waste millions of dollars making and implementing tests; lose hundreds of hours of precious instructional time preparing children for tests to ensure that our schools and teachers get good marks on their evaluations; and discourage dozens of our best and brightest educators who entered the profession to teach and now find themselves mired in bureaucratic paper-pushing to fulfill mandates they don't respect, I cannot help but recall the question a young Chinese principal

asked me during a seminar I attended in Beijing in 2004. As I finished my presentation on the U.S. "No Child Left Behind" initiative, he asked why America was moving toward a test-driven educational system while the Chinese were trying desperately to change theirs to mirror the creativity they thought we had in our system. As I watch what we are doing in Connecticut, I can't help but wonder the same. The CT reform agenda does not need to be fixed; it needs to be dismantled before it does any more harm.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James D. Lombardo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

James D. Lombardo, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Cf: Dr. Tim Hagen, EL BOE Chair
Dr. Joe Cirsuolo, CAPSS Executive Director