

Good evening. My name is Jennifer Gaffney and I am the K-12 Principal at Sackets Harbor Central School which is a small school of about ~450 students. I have been the principal at SHCS for the last nine years and have led my school community through the implementation of the Common Core, the new assessments, and teacher and principal evaluations.

I wish I could spend my time before you tonight sharing a profound and enlightening statement; maybe something new you have not already heard. However, I am sure that my stance will make for continued monotony on your listening tour for I am certain that, what I am about to share, you have heard time and time again.

It is my great hope that this Task Force truly listen to the stakeholders this time before our educational system becomes too damaged.

Let me make it clear that, from my perspective, the Common Core Learning Standards are not the enemy. Both the ELA and mathematics standards have forced educators to teach students how to develop a deeper understanding of content and to apply the content to open-ended problems. Raising the bar is and continues to be good for the children at SHCS and the children across NYS.

We ALL agree that the implementation of the new standards and of the 3-8 assessments were rushed and lacked appropriate stakeholder input. That is certainly ONE of the central problems associated with New Yorkers discontent with the state of our educational system.

However, I contend that educators, parents, and other stakeholders are more concerned with the absolute ridiculousness of NYS's educational priorities right now. For instance, the over-reliance on testing to not only gauge student learning but to evaluate teacher performance has been the heart of most of the frustration.

Students' learning and growth cannot be measured solely by these poorly constructed assessments. Further, do you realize that, as a result of school striving to meet the new standards, teachers are now teaching to

the test (more than ever before) and many of the other subject areas take a backseat. Subjects like social studies and science (not to mention handwriting, grammar, and character education) have been pushed aside in order to focus on a test that we still have not come to understand. The development of the “whole child” requires more than just emphasis on ELA and math.

Let me read you the SHCSD’s mission statement,

“The Sackets Harbor Central School Community is dedicated to educational excellence as we empower our students to embrace life's challenges with knowledge, character, and a commitment to learning as they become contributing citizens in the American democratic way of life.”

Producing skillful test-takers and robots does not fit within this mission.

In the remaining minutes I have left, I want to tell you how to begin to fix these problems:

1. Disconnect the assessments with teacher and principal evaluations. The original goals and objectives conceived by our governor and others proved to be completely ineffective (that would be the I on the HEDI chart). The scores teachers and principals receive provide NO opportunity to analyze students’ achievement or one’s own professional performance. They are essentially meaningless. I know that is not what was intended but that is what has happened. Return the responsibility for teacher and principal evaluations back to where it belongs - locally elected BOEs.
2. Fund our schools appropriately so that we are able to continue to support professional development. Research has proven that professional development has a substantial and

direct impact on student achievement. Though, in the era of the 2% tax cap, many schools have cut their PD resources.

3. Finally, I urge you to listen....really listen. Don't just conduct these meetings around the State to keep the constituents at bay. Those who choose to attend are devoted to education and want what's best for NYS children. We are the people on the front lines who see and experience the impact (both positive and negative) these changes have had on our staff and students.

a. Positive - Students are capable of much more than we might give them credit for, at times. CC has forced educators to raise the bar and some of questioned students' abilities. However, we have been amazed many times at what our kids are capable of achieving. Also, the rubric we have been forced to use to evaluate teacher performance. It has improved my practice and the practice of my teachers. This has been good for kids.

b. Negative - There are many more negatives, sadly. The morale in schools (including my own, at times) is depressing. Amazing teachers have become downtrodden and are anxious to reach retirement. The pool of candidates for vacancies has dwindled and we struggle to cover positions. The financial impact these changes have had and continue to have in a day and age when schools cannot raise revenue has been detrimental.