

The Push-back against Standardized Testing: Has the Revolution Begun?

“Yes, it has,” said Don Sternberg on April 15, one day before the start of this year’s standardized tests in New York State. Dr. Sternberg, the principal of the Wantagh Elementary School who had been selected by SAANYS in 2009 as the New York State Elementary School Principal of the Year, didn’t hesitate for a second with his elaboration: “The most important people in the lives of children are starting to get wind of the fact that there’s something very evil being perpetrated on their children, and that’s excessive testing. More and more parents are becoming aware of what’s happening, of what’s being done to their children, and how their children are being used.”

Dr. Sternberg isn’t a recent convert to the push-back movement. In a letter to the parents of Wantagh Elementary students in early September, 2012, he warned them that, “One significant issue as we move into this new school year is that we will, at times, find it difficult if not impossible to teach authentic application of concepts and skills with an eye toward relevancy. What we will be teaching students is to be effective test-takers: a skill that does not necessarily translate into critical thinking . . . This will inevitably conflict with authentic educational practice – true teaching.”

Thirty-six parents of Wantagh Elementary School students have asked Dr. Sternberg to excuse their children from this new round of tests, although he has never counseled the parents of his 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders to opt out. “I’m not supporting that.

I'm a state employee. I am giving those tests. I have never said, 'Opt out' to one parent. I have never said that and I never would. It's probably illegal for me to say it. But there is a bubbling up here. There's a groundswell, a grassroots movement. There are people standing up, with courage, and saying, 'No, I don't want this for my kid.'"

At Herkimer Elementary School, in the Mohawk Valley, this year's award recipient for Elementary School Principal of the Year, Kathleen Carney, agrees with Dr. Sternberg about the beginning of the revolution: "I think the revolution has started, yes. I think that there are going to be some very strong educational units that will advocate for what is in the best interests of kids, and that's not these types of initiatives and mandates. I'll tell you, the feeling among educators that I hear is that they really want to have a coup and not do it. 'Let's just not do it.' But the fear is that your funding will be cut."

That's a legitimate fear. Steven E. Katz, Director of the Office of State Assessment, wrote a six-page memorandum to the superintendents of public schools in New York State last January and told them NYSED requires that all students in public and charter schools in Grades 3-8 take all state assessments administered for their grade level. Allowing some exceptions in which parental consent is required, the letter stipulates that, ". . . there is no provision in statute or regulation allowing parents to opt their children out of State tests. The failure to comply with the requirements provided above will have a negative impact on a school or school district's accountability, as all schools are required to have a 95% participation rate in State testing."

The unstated threat in that letter is the guarantee that Title I funds will be denied to schools where too many students opt out of the tests and make them fall below that specified 95% mark. "When you're in a district that is already at bare bones, it's kind of

hard to take that leap of faith and say, ‘We’re not going to do it,’” Kathleen Carney said. “We are a small, small school, and the funding that we get, compared to a similar school downstate, is inequitable. We’re in a school where we have almost 60% poverty, and we’re a high-needs district. The funding that we get and the programs that we have had to cut, over especially the past three years, are not in the best interests of our kids. That’s not helping us to create 21st century learners.”

Many administrators have described the spotty implementation of Common Core, the series of guidelines that offer conflicting information, and the entire standardized testing process as building a plane while it’s in the air, and they’re justifiably concerned that the plane’s passengers – our schoolchildren in New York State – are in imminent danger of crashing. For Mark Mambretti, this year’s Middle School Principal of the Year from East Aurora Middle School near Rochester, a better analogy would be, “It’s like we’re drinking from a fire hose. Every time we voice complaints or concerns, the response tends to be, ‘Water is good for you. Water is refreshing.’ And we say, ‘Yes, we know, but you can’t physically drink from a fire hose. There are certain limits to what we can do here.’”

East Aurora is a high-performing school with a rigorous evaluation system that has been working very well for them, and there are valid questions about why they should have to reinvent its high-functioning wheel. “By setting a common denominator,” Mark said, “it brings folks below the average up, but it brings folks above the average down. It doesn’t give us a full range of freedom, when we had a system that produced good results by all accounts. I’m not against testing. I am against over-testing, and I’m against testing that isn’t clear and whose purpose isn’t defined. I hope that the feedback from this round

of testing starts to send a message of, ‘If we’re going to do this, let’s do this in a responsible and smart way.’ That, I think, is more where the revolution part is.”

Michael Piccirillo, Superintendent of the Saratoga Springs School District, feels that educators should consider all of these issues from both sides: “One side is the implementation of RTTT (Race to the Top), APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review), Common Core, Data-driven instruction – from the implementation side, it was done in a rushed manner, in a manner that did not include all the materials and resources actually needed to deliver these things in an optimal way. On the other side, I think we certainly believe that Common Core – in the long-run, once it’s fully in place and everybody gets used to it – is actually a good thing for instructional learning.”

All that being said, one week before the tests started, the school board in Saratoga Springs joined a handful of other boards across the state in passing a resolution that asked NYSED to halt their over-reliance on standardized tests. A key passage in the resolution reads as follows: “The growing reliance on, and misalignment of, standardized testing is eroding student learning time, narrowing the curriculum, and jeopardizing the rich, meaningful education our students need and deserve.”

Superintendent Piccirillo enlarged on that: “We passed a resolution because we basically wanted it to be more publicly known that we feel using a single, standardized assessment as a way to gauge student progress is not in and of itself appropriate, or the best way to do it. In actuality, we’ve just developed our next set of five-year goals, called *Vision 2018*, and one of the outcomes within our goals is to have a parallel system of assessment. We recognize that the state assessment system is here and more than likely

will continue to be here. We live in New York State, and the Regents have been around a long time, so we know that's a reality.”

Nevertheless, school boards all across the state are starting to take a stand, and many have turned to their organization, The New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), for its advice. “This is the first time that we've seen this kind of push-back,” said Barbara Bradley, NYSSBA's Deputy Director of Communications and Research. “School districts were starting to get requests from parents about opting their kids out of the tests, and the boards had been calling us for advice. ‘What do we do? What's going on here? What are the consequences of this?’ So we asked the New York State Association of School Attorneys to write this piece for us. We put it out there so that school boards could have something as they got requests.”

Titled “How to Handle Test Opt-out Requests,” the article was written by two attorneys from the law firm of Hodgson Russ, LLP, and published in NYSSBA's magazine, *On Board*. Giving a brief history of the opt-out movement, NCLB's requirements, NYSED's position on student participation, and the consequences for refusing to take the tests, the article stops far short of direct recommendations. However, it does offer information under headings like “Educate the community” or “Meet with parents individually” that might be construed as instructional, albeit noncommittal.

“NYSSBA is acknowledging that school board members are sharing the concerns here,” Barbara Bradley said. “They have to respond to what's going on in their communities, and if their communities are saying more in regard to this testing, then they have to be sensitive and they have to respond. School board members are parents, too, and a lot of them have skin in the game, so to speak.”

In western New York, Mandy Sampson is a parent who certainly has skin in the game. She has a 4th grader in Fletcher Elementary and a 7th grader in Tonawanda Middle School, and neither of them took the first round of tests last year. “I was the first parent in our district to take a stand, so therefore they didn’t know what to do with me,” she explained. “So nothing really came of it last year. This year, it was a little different. There was a letter from the Department of Education that said we couldn’t opt out, and I said, ‘You want to make a bet? That’s my child. That’s not your child. I’m the one who gave birth to them, thank you very much. Do you want us to move out of this state? You’re chasing people out because you’re going to force their children to take this test? I don’t think so. I don’t care if the school gets money or not. To be honest with you, my kids’ well-being, and their mental stability, are way more important than a percentage rate. My children are not numbers. To me, they are real, live, breathing human beings, with feelings.’”

Mandy works in one of the Tonawanda school cafeterias, and said that halfway through the first test day, as she was cashing kids out, “A teacher came by to pay for her lunch. She burst into tears. ‘Why?’ she said. ‘Why do these special education kids have to take this test? They look at me as a teacher, as an adult, and they say, ‘I can’t do this.’ Of course they can’t.’ She was in tears. And I said, ‘You know what? This is where we need to take a stand.’ I told her to go to the website for Partnerships for Smarter Schools. ‘Please make a video,’ I told her. ‘They need to see the emotional side to this, and what it’s doing to our kids.’”

Dr. Walter Polka was one of the founding members of Partnerships for Smarter Schools. He was a curriculum coordinator in Williamsville, a superintendent in Lewiston-

Porter for thirteen years, and is currently a professor at Niagara University. In addition, Dr. Polka has presented at conferences in twenty-five countries and forty different states. About a year and a half ago, he and other educators in the Buffalo area decided to start a grassroots movement against standardized testing. “Through my work and research, I’ve come to understand that an important part of the American public school tradition is divergence. We accept everyone from our communities. They’re all different, and we recognize the individual differences of students,” he said. “This standardized approach – one size fits all – is just anathema to our value system in the American educational ethos.”

Partnerships for Smarter Schools helped to craft a resolution issued by the Niagara PTA that will be considered at the next state PTA convention in November. “We wanted to tell the powers-that-be in Albany that maybe they needed to take another look at this issue,” said Mary Beth Carroll, the region director for the Niagara PTA. The Niagara PTA covers a relatively small region, with about thirty-three units, but Mary Beth hopes that circulating their resolution now will help convince other regional PTAs to jump on board before the convention. “We’re hoping that once the state PTA has its name on it, then Albany will look more seriously at it, because then it’s 300,000 people statewide instead of a couple of thousand PTA members in the Niagara region.”

The resolution specifically asks NYSED to suspend its testing program until it can create a new one that doesn’t harm children and lower the quality of education. “We wanted everybody who is a stakeholder in this to have some input into the decisions that were being made,” Mary Beth said. “Now it’s being dictated by people who aren’t even in education. Not that parents know a lot about testing, but they do know about their kids,

and they're seeing the reactions in their kids – stomach aches, and throwing up, and headaches, and not wanting to go to school. If all they're doing in school is preparing for these tests, what happens to the creativity and the fun things that can help them learn and can help them like school?"

After the tests, Ann O'Brien, a 3rd grade teacher in West Sand Lake Elementary School, in the Averill Park Central School District, said, "Testing was brutal. It was just so difficult for them. The standards are asking us to make children close readers – go back and check their work; work for accuracy; read and analyze a text. They had absolutely not enough time to do that on this test. One teacher had eight kids who couldn't finish, and she had one child who broke out in hives all over her body, and another student who was crying hysterically. There's no way these children came out of this experience in any way feeling good. Every teacher was upset. I believe there's a rally at the Capitol on June 8th, and everybody said, 'Let me go. Get me there. This is insanity.'"

Okay, what's next? Have we reached a tipping point?

"Not yet," Don Sternberg said. "But I think that parents are looking at the children whose parents have opted them out. Is something bad going to happen to them in school? Are they going to be put into remediation because they didn't take the tests? Once they see that nothing will happen, they're going to say, 'Hey, wait a minute. I'm not happy with this either, so I'm going to opt out of this, too.'"

"I understand: they're trying something brand new on a massive scale," Mark Mambretti said, "and they expect a level of resistance to anything like that. I think we can salvage what's good about the system if there is some serious and meaningful dialogue

about what parts of the system are not working. That would be my hope. At some point, if the numbers come up where we see some serious resistance, then hopefully someone is paying attention to that. I think the way the system is currently set up, though, it's a very difficult system to change."

Dr. Polka believes the push-back is irreversible: "There will be a snowball effect. An important part of the American tradition is parent choice, and how we raise our children. So if you keep telling children they have to come to school and they have to take these tests, and parents see that their own children are physically sick and really stressed out over them, most of them are going to say, "What the hell is this all about? What are we doing?"

"They've exploded Pandora's box, and I think they know that," Kathleen Carney concluded. "I think that they'll make revisions. The reality is going to set in that something has to change, or the revolution will come."