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Testimony of Leonie Haimson of Class Size Matters before the NYC Council Education Committee, in favor of the resolution opposing the Governor’s proposal on receivership

I am here to testify in support of the resolution against the Governor’s proposal to expand state receivership of allegedly low-performing public schools. The state has no track record of improving schools in receivership. When the State Education Department took control of the Roosevelt school district in 2002, and ran it for over a decade, there was little or no improvement, as reported in a Newsday 2013 article:

Albany's intervention ends Monday, after 11 years and more than \$300 million in extra state spending. The period -- marked by limited scholastic progress and memorable mistakes by state officials and their appointees -- was the first and only time the state ever managed a local school system.

"I can tell you right off the bat that the state Education Department has no capabilities to run a school district," said Roger Tilles of Great Neck, who is Long Island's representative to the state Board of Regents. "We need other alternatives, if we're ever going to turn around other districts that are really not succeeding."¹

Moreover, the narrative of a “crisis” in failing schools that is being used to justify the expansion of state receivership is manufactured -- to encourage the hostile takeover of public schools.

As Michael Petrilli of the Thomas Fordham Institute, a big supporter of the Common Core standards just wrote:

Some education reformers and media outlets are already using the results of the new, tougher tests to brand schools as “failing” if most of their students don’t meet the higher standards. Note, for instance, the Daily News’s special report, “Fight for their Future,” which leads with the provocative headline “[New York City is rife with underperforming schools, including nearly two-thirds of students missing state standards.](#)” This line of attack closely resembles the talking points of Eva Moskowitz and Jeremiah Kettridge of Families for Excellent Schools, who both promote the notion that in New York, “800,000 kids can’t read or do math at grade level” and “143,000 kids are trapped in persistently failing schools.”

These statements are out of bounds, and reformers should say so. They validate the concerns some educators voiced all along: that we would use the results of the tougher tests to unfairly label more schools as failures.²

¹ John Hildebrand, “NYS takeover of Roosevelt schools failed, some say,” Newsday, June 29, 2013.

The results of the new Common Core exams are essentially unreliable. They were designed to find two thirds of students failing, and did so, not just in New York City but in the rest of the state as well. The reports by Families for Excellent Schools claiming a “crisis” of failing schools were put out by an organization that has received considerable funding from hedge funders and Wall Street financiers, as well as more than \$700,000 over the past two years from the Walton Foundation, an organization that has an aggressive privatization agenda.³ The unreliable figures and claims of an education crisis cited by this organization were echoed in a report from the Governor’s office that has been described as “sometimes indistinguishable from the eight reports on struggling schools F.E.S. has sent reporters since the summer.”⁴ Not surprisingly, Cuomo himself has received huge sums from some of the same pro-privatization hedge funders and financiers.⁵

Yet Carol Burris, award-winning principal in the Rockville Centre School District, has shown how unreliable these figures are, based on cut scores imposed by the state that purport to show which students will be college and career ready.⁶ For example, while only half of the students in her district were said to be proficient in ELA and Math based upon their state test scores in grades 3-8, 100% of them graduate with a Regents diploma and 85% with an advanced designation. Over 92% of these students not only go to college, but persist and are still there two years after their high school graduation.

Another such district is Oceanside, Long Island where 96 percent of students graduate with a Regents diploma, 58 percent with advanced distinction, and 92 percent go onto college (70 percent to four year colleges and 22 percent to a two year colleges). Yet more than two thirds of the district’s 8th graders were labelled as not making the standards in math, according to the state’s Common Core exams.⁷

When Michael Bloomberg was running for re-election in 2009, the state test scores purported to show that two-third of the city’s students had achieved grade standards in English, and 82 percent in math.⁸ Now the state says only about one third of them do. Clearly the cut scores were set for political reasons then and are just as politically motivated now. They were pre-ordained to fit the ideological goals of those who are intent on dismantling and privatizing our schools.

² Michael Petrilli, “Eva et al. flunk the fairness test,” March 17, 2015, <http://edexcellence.net/articles/eva-et-al-flunk-the-fairness-test>

³ Robert Lewis, “Who Is Behind the Pro-Charter Schools Group Fighting de Blasio?” WNYC, Thursday, March 06, 2014.

⁴ Eliza Shapiro, “Charter, union messaging creates New York echo chamber,” Mar. 3, 2015. For example, “Cuomo’s report, sent Feb. 26, cited 178 failing schools across the state, the same number F.E.S. used in a report sent Feb. 25.”

⁵ Juan Gonzalez, “Hedge fund executives give ‘til it hurts to politicians, especially Cuomo, to get more charter schools,” NY Daily News, March 11, 2015.

⁶ Valerie Strauss, “The scary way Common Core test ‘cut scores’ are selected,” Washington Post Answer Sheet, April 29, 2014.

⁷ <http://schools.newsday.com/long-island/test-scores/Math/grade-8/>

⁸ Jennifer Medina, “Standards Raised, More Students Fail Tests,” NY Times, July 28, 2010.

A few years ago, Rick Hess, a conservative commentator at the American Enterprise Institute, revealed the motives behind the Common Core exams in an eerily prescient column called the **Common Core Kool-aid**:

*First, politicians will actually embrace the Common Core assessments and then will use them to set cut scores that suggest huge numbers of suburban schools are failing. Then, parents and community members who previously liked their schools are going to believe the assessment results rather than their own lying eyes... Finally, newly convinced that their schools stink, parents and voters will embrace "reform." However, most of today's proffered remedies--including test-based teacher evaluation, efforts to move "effective" teachers to low-income schools, charter schooling, and school turnarounds--don't have a lot of fans in the suburbs or speak to the things that suburban parents are most concerned about....Common Core advocates now evince an eerie confidence that they can scare these voters into embracing the "reform" agenda.*⁹

When Gov. Cuomo was running for re-election, he acknowledged that the state test scores that children received were not fair, and thus he promised that they should not be put on their transcripts. He ran a campaign ad, in which he promised "not to use Common Core scores for at least five years, and then only if our children are ready."¹⁰

If these scores aren't ready to be used to judge students, they aren't adequate to judge our schools or deem them "failing" either. They are certainly not reliable enough to ask the State Education Department to take over our public schools – which has had NO record of success in doing so.

⁹ Rick Hess, "The Common Core Kool-Aid," Education Week, November 30, 2012.

¹⁰ Josefa Velasquez and Jessica Bakeman,, "In ad, Cuomo cites 5-year delay on using Common Core scores," Capital NY, Oct. 20, 2014