

**Testimony to the Senate Standing Committee on Education  
The Regents Reform Agenda: “Assessing our Progress”  
New York, New York  
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**Nancy K. Cauthen, Ph.D.**  
Public school parent, Manhattan’s District 6  
Parent member, Change the Stakes  
Principal, NKC Consulting

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Senator Flanagan and members of the Senate Committee on Education, thank you for holding this hearing and for this opportunity to testify. I appreciate that you are taking the time to seek public feedback about how the state’s rapidly evolving education policies are affecting students, families, teachers, schools and communities.

My name is Nancy Cauthen and I am a public school parent in Washington Heights, which is located in Manhattan’s District 6. I have two children, ages 16 and 12. I am also a member of [Change the Stakes](http://changethestakes.org) (changethestakes.org), which is a group of New York City parents and educators working together to raise awareness and reduce the harm caused by high stakes-testing. Professionally, I am a sociologist and have more than two decades of experience researching and writing about federal and state policies to promote family economic security and improve low-income children’s long-term chances for success. I currently work as a consultant to nonprofit organizations and foundations. So I speak to you as a parent, an education activist and a policy researcher.

## **OVERVIEW**

*"Every aspect of the Regents reform agenda is aimed at ensuring that more New York State students graduate college and career ready. We have adopted more rigorous Common Core standards and are aligning our assessments with those standards; we’re going to create data systems that provide parents and educators with information that’s more useful and more transparent; we’re going to ensure that classroom teachers and school leaders are better trained, thoughtfully evaluated, and better supported; and we’re going to help our lowest performing schools turn their performance around or replace them with innovative educational options. We are confident that these reforms will advance both equity and excellence."*

*~ Senior Deputy Commissioner John B. King, June 14, 2011<sup>1</sup>*

My testimony will make three main points:

- (1) Education officials at all levels of government have justified imposing costly, large-scale and unproven reforms based on an overly-simplistic and unsubstantiated narrative about a

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<sup>1</sup> New York State Department of Education. (2011). [Education Department Releases High School Graduation Rates; Overall Rate Improves Slightly, but Gaps in Achievement Persist and Too Few Schools Meet New Aspirational Performance Measure](#) [Press release].

crisis in American public education and high school graduates not being “college and career ready,” while ignoring the central role that poverty plays in academic achievement.

- (2) Although reasonable people can debate the pros and cons of having national education standards, we never had that debate in New York or across the nation. Instead, the push for Common Core was driven by a corporate vision of education that sees students only as future workers and public funds as a source of private enrichment. And it’s been sold to the public with deception and outright lies.
- (3) Upset about policies that are depriving our children of a well-rounded education while subjecting them to unnecessarily stressful high-stakes testing, parents across the city, state and nation have mobilized to have our voices heard. Yet our genuine, heart-felt concerns about our children’s education have been ignored or arrogantly dismissed.

## **THE FAUX NARRATIVE OF “CRISIS” IN U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION: “IT’S THE POVERTY, STUPID”**

Education reform at the federal, state and city levels is largely being driven by the assertion that U.S. students are falling behind internationally and not graduating from high school ready to succeed in college and in a global labor market. This argument – often stated as irrefutable fact – has been used to rationalize the nationwide imposition of the Common Core (CC), which has been sold as a set of high academic standards that will teach critical thinking and result in deep learning. We are told that the situation is dire and that our very economic future is at stake, which is in turn used to justify subjecting public school children to extensive standardized testing linked to high stakes for themselves, their teachers and their schools.

The problem is that every part of the narrative about “the crisis in U.S. public education” has been shown to be overly simplistic, lacking in evidence, ideologically suspect or just plain wrong. Below, I employ my critical thinking skills – which I acquired from a high-quality public education – to unpack three of the taken-as-fact claims upon which current education reforms are predicated.

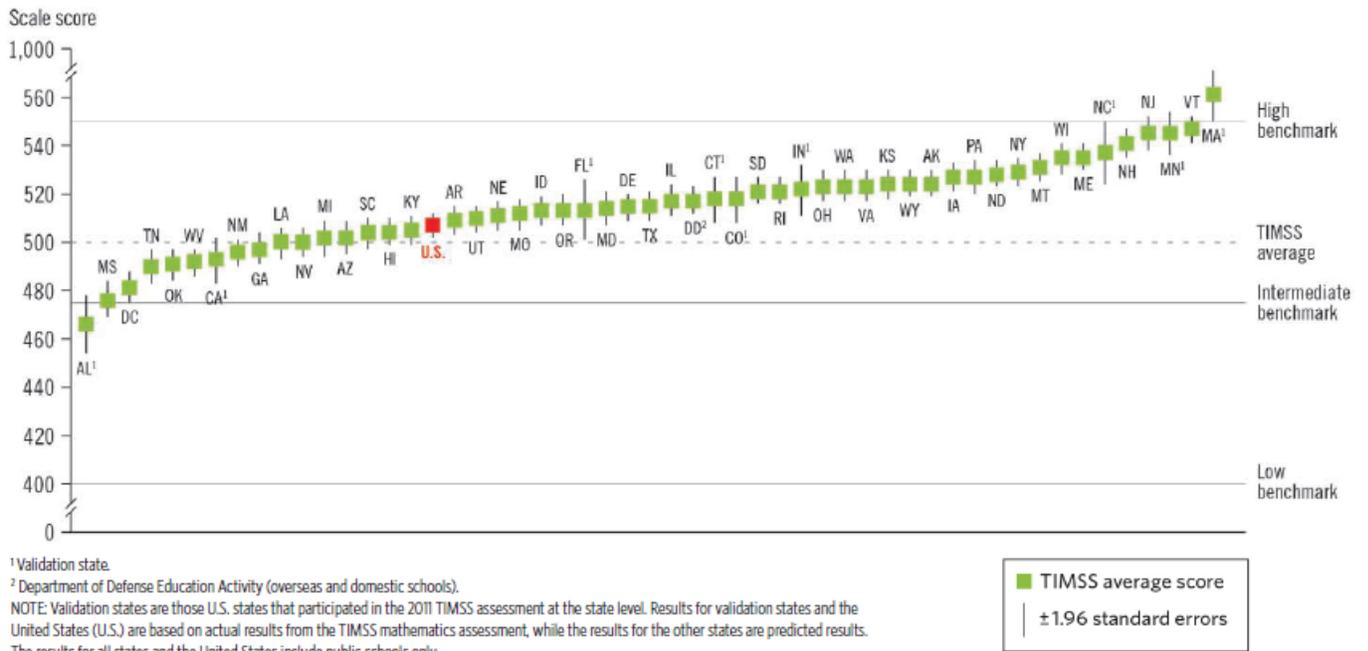
### **Claim #1: American Students are Falling Behind Internationally**

When disaggregated, international rankings of academic achievement repeatedly show that U.S. students from middle- and upper-income families perform quite well when compared to students from other countries. Another way to disaggregate U.S. performance data is by state. A recent analysis finds that Massachusetts trailed only four nations in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math performance.<sup>2</sup> These data indicate that the highest-performing American states are wealthy, racially and ethnically homogeneous and/or have relatively low levels of child poverty (see figure).

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<sup>2</sup> *U.S. States in a Global Context: Results From the 2011 NAEP-TIMSS Linking Study*. (2013). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2013460.pdf>

**Figure 1.** Average scores and confidence intervals in TIMSS eighth-grade mathematics, by state: 2011



<sup>1</sup> Validation state.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense Education Activity (overseas and domestic schools).

NOTE: Validation states are those U.S. states that participated in the 2011 TIMSS assessment at the state level. Results for validation states and the United States (U.S.) are based on actual results from the TIMSS mathematics assessment, while the results for the other states are predicted results. The results for all states and the United States include public schools only.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Mathematics Assessment; and International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), 2011.

Figure reprinted from: *U.S. States in a Global Context: Results From the 2011 NAEP-TIMSS Linking Study*. (2013). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2013460.pdf>

Far from falling behind as a nation, our most advantaged students continue to be quite competitive internationally. But due to near unprecedented levels of wealth and income inequality in this country, a growing portion of our nation’s children live in low-income families with few assets to fall back on in hard times. The U.S. now has the highest level of child poverty since 1960.

### **Claim #2: Education is the Antidote to Child Poverty**

The richest nation on Earth – and one that purports to value democracy and equality – should not allow children’s socioeconomic status to determine their life chances. Yet that’s exactly what we currently do. We refuse to acknowledge as a nation that high rates of poverty and wealth inequality are holding us back: socioeconomic status continues to be the primary predictor of academic achievement in the U.S..

Given the rhetoric of education officials, one would never know that the national “achievement gap” between black and white students has narrowed considerably over time while the income gap in academic performance has steadily increased.

*“New York has some of the highest performing schools and districts in the country, but today’s data makes clear that we have tremendous work to do to reduce the drop-out rate, close a stubbornly persistent racial achievement gap and ensure that more of our graduates are prepared for college and the workforce. This data underscores the urgency of our efforts*

to continue to raise standards, improve assessments, and support the highest quality teaching in all of our classrooms.”(emphasis mine)

~ Regents Chancellor Merryl H. Tisch, June 14, 2011<sup>3</sup>

A recent Stanford study found that the gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students has grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s and is now double the testing gap between blacks and whites (see figure).<sup>4</sup>

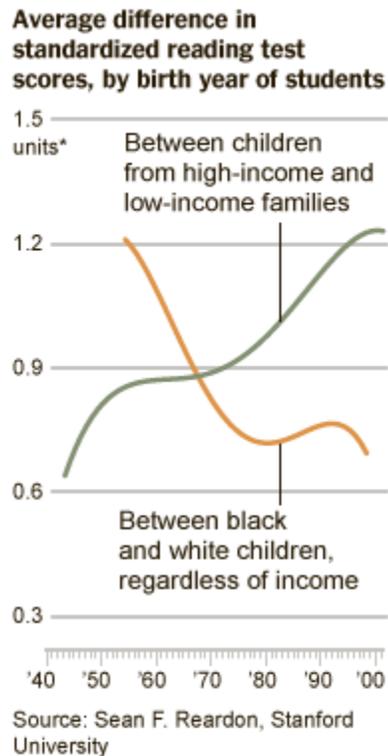


Figure reprinted from: Tavernise, S. “Education Gap Grows Between Rich and Poor, Studies Say,” *New York Times*, Feb 9, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/education/education-gap-grows-between-rich-and-poor-studies-show.html?\\_r=2&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/education/education-gap-grows-between-rich-and-poor-studies-show.html?_r=2&hp)

No one should be surprised that American students *on average* are not keeping up internationally. We will continue to fall farther behind until we address our nation’s growing wealth gap and child poverty rate.

Education reform *alone* will never solve the constellation of problems that can compromise the academic performance of low-income children. Not only do they enter kindergarten woefully behind their more affluent peers, low-income children confront a wide range of obstacles to doing well in school: inadequate nutrition; untreated medical, dental and vision problems; undiagnosed learning disabilities; and importantly, parents who are working multiple jobs, are

<sup>3</sup> New York State Department of Education (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Reardon, S.F. (2011). “The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations.” In R. Murnane & G. Duncan (Eds.), *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality and the Uncertain Life Chances of Low-Income Children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.

constantly stressed about making ends meet and who often don't have time to attend parent/teacher conferences or help their children with homework.

In short, many public school students overcome great odds just to make it to school each morning. Others don't overcome the odds and are chronically absent – chronic absenteeism among elementary school children is a serious problem.<sup>5</sup> Unless we deal with the day-to-day conditions of children's lives that interfere with their ability to being “present, engaged and accounted for,” any set of education reforms is destined to fail.

The sad truth is that we know what works to boost academic achievement among low-income kids, but policymakers continue to forge ahead with unproven reforms, ignoring decades of research. Proven strategies to improve school performance among our most vulnerable children include: increasing family income,<sup>6</sup> providing high-quality comprehensive early childhood programs from birth,<sup>7</sup> reducing class size (especially in the lower grades)<sup>8</sup> and sending children to schools that are integrated socioeconomically and racially/ethnically.<sup>9</sup>

### **Claim #3: American High School Graduates are Not College Ready**

Enter the phrase “NYS college readiness rates” into Google search and the top entries all carry the same message: despite incremental improvements in high school graduation rates across NYS, fewer than half of these graduates are prepared to do college-level work. The implication is that high schools are pushing students out the door who should not have been allowed to graduate. An underlying assumption here is that anyone who graduates from high school should be capable of doing “college-level work,” although what this actually means is rarely defined.

Predictions are that while most jobs in the future will require some type of post-secondary credential, most of them will *not* require a 4-year college degree but rather a professional certificate or associates degree.<sup>10</sup> To put the discourse about “college and career ready” into perspective, just under a third of Americans have a 4-year college degree. Even among young adults under 30, the percentage is roughly the same – just 30% of adults 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

ALL children should have access to a high-quality education that allows them to reach their full potential and aspirations. But to suddenly declare that the purpose of high school is to prepare *all* graduates to succeed at college-level work is a radical shift in expectations about what it means to be a high school graduate. “College and career ready” makes a nice slogan but obscures the

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<sup>5</sup> Chang, H. N. & Romero, M. (2008). [\*Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades\*](#). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University.

<sup>6</sup> Cauthen, N. K. (2002). [\*Policies that Improve Family Income Matter for Children\*](#). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University.

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., & White, B. A. (2009). “Cost-Effective Early Childhood Development Programs: A Synthesis of Evidence in the First Decade of Life.” *Encyclopedia of Education*.

<sup>8</sup> Konstantopoulos, S., & Chun, V. (2009). “[What Are the Long-Term Effects of Small Classes on the Achievement Gap? Evidence from the Lasting Benefits Study](#),” *American Journal of Education*.

<sup>9</sup> Kahlenberg, R. D., ed. (2011). *The Future of School Integration: Socioeconomic Diversity as an Education Reform Strategy*. New York, NY: The Century Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> Wheary, J. & Orozco, V. (2010). [\*Graduated Success: Sustainable Economic Opportunity Through One- and Two-Year Credentials\*](#). New York, NY: Dēmos.

fact that students need access to preparation for a wide variety of post-secondary paths – one size does not fit all.

The conversation about the need for post-high-school remediation focuses primarily on community college students. But there are actually some good-news reasons for this. A higher percentage of low-income students are enrolling in college than ever before, with most of the increases occurring at community colleges. Many of these students are the first in their families to attend college. In short, one reason that more community college students are struggling is that far more high school graduates are opting to pursue post-secondary education.<sup>11</sup>

Just as low-income students in K-12 confront a range of personal and familial challenges to succeeding in school, they also confront many obstacles as they pursue a college degree. The need for academic remediation is only one factor. Research indicates that financial barriers are the primary reason low-income students drop out of college.<sup>12</sup> Students have to work to pay their meet their expenses. Not surprisingly, the more students work, the more their academic performance suffers. Many community college students are parents or have other familial responsibilities.

To suggest that remediation is the only thing – or even the main thing – standing in the way of high school graduates succeeding in college is disingenuous. Such rhetoric cruelly plays on the hopes and fears of the most disadvantaged students and their families, while making high schools the scapegoat for all the obstacles low-income students face.

I completely support efforts to re-assess our approach to high school to find better ways to prepare students for a variety of post-high-school pathways. But there is no evidence that implementing a one-size-fits-all “college and career ready” approach to K-12 will prepare more high school graduates to succeed in college or the labor market.

## **COMMON CORE: HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS OR CORPORATE SNOW JOB?**

As a nation of immigrants with diverse backgrounds spread across a vast land, the American ideal of public education holds that it should facilitate social cohesion and reduce religious, ethnic, racial and socioeconomic conflict. By providing the space for people of varied backgrounds to come together and develop shared cultural understandings, public education at its best should prepare our children to be good citizens and enrich our democracy.

Nonetheless, the question of whether the U.S. should have a single set of educational standards for the entire nation has always been contentious and the U.S. Department of Education is actually prohibited from developing one. In the abstract, I personally support having at least a minimal set of consistent academic standards that the entire country should adhere to. This stance is consistent with the widely-held American value that all children, regardless of background or geography, should have access to a high-quality public education.

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<sup>11</sup> Orozco, V. & Cauthen, N. K. (2009). [\*Work Less, Study More & Succeed: How Financial Supports Can Improve Postsecondary Success\*](#). New York, NY: Dēmos.

<sup>12</sup> Orozco & Cauthen (2009).

Although reasonable people can debate the pros and cons of using national standards to raise the quality of public education, we haven't had that debate as a nation. Instead, from the perspective of most parents, Common Core came out of nowhere. Education officials, starting with those at the federal level, have provided dishonest descriptions about the origins, development and roll out of Common Core.

The official line from both federal and state education officials is that the Common Core standards were created by the states and voluntarily adopted by them. According to the official Common Core website:

*The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort that established a single set of clear educational standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts and mathematics that states voluntarily adopt.*<sup>13</sup>

This benign description omits the crucial fact that there are enormous federal financial incentives for states to adopt the Common Core – so much for “voluntary” participation. And far from being a “state-led effort,” Anthony Cody writes in *Education Week*,

*The Gates Foundation paid a couple of non-profit organizations, the National Governor's Association, and the Chief Council of State School Officers, to preside over and lend their names to the Common Core Process. These organizations in turn hired a small group of individuals to actually write the standards.*<sup>14</sup>

Who were these individuals? The official Common Core website tells us:

*The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts, to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce.*<sup>15</sup>

But this is contradicted by the actual list of individuals who developed the standards. Sandra Stotsky, a member of one of the Common Core validation committees, testified that:

*Eventually responding to the many charges of a lack of transparency, the names of the 24 members of the "Standards Development Work Group" [were revealed](#) in a July 1, 2009 news release. The vast majority, it appeared, work for testing companies. Not only did CCSSI give no rationale for the composition of this Work Group, it gave no rationale for the people it put on the two three-member teams in charge of writing the grade-level standards.*<sup>16</sup>

No active classroom teachers or early childhood experts were involved in the writing of the standards, which explains why so many of them, especially those for younger children, are so developmentally inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> That is a travesty.

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<sup>13</sup> “[Frequently Asked Questions](#).” (n.d.). Common Core State Standards Initiative website. [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

<sup>14</sup> [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/10/process\\_matters\\_in\\_a\\_democracy.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/10/process_matters_in_a_democracy.html)

<sup>15</sup> “[About the Standards](#).” (n.d.). Common Core State Standards Initiative website. [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Cody, A. (2013). “Process Matters in a Democracy: Common Core Fails the Test.” *Education Week*,

Teacher Blogs. [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/10/process\\_matters\\_in\\_a\\_democracy.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/10/process_matters_in_a_democracy.html)

<sup>17</sup> Cody (2013).

In short, the push for Common Core was driven by a corporate vision of education that sees students only as future workers and public education funds as a source of private enrichment. The development of the standards was financed largely by the Gates Foundation, written by a small group of people with ties to testing companies, “validated” by academics and consultants and then promoted to cash-strapped states with federal financial incentives.

As a parent and taxpayer, I’m furious that public education funds are being diverted out of classrooms and into the hands of corporations who are supplying states with mediocre Common Core materials for teachers and texts for children along with poorly-written standardized tests. The lack of transparency about the moneyed interests behind the Common Core has been appalling, but the outright deception is a serious violation of the public trust.

## **PARENTS HAVE BEEN IGNORED FOR FAR TOO LONG**

As policymakers, you may be focused on the latest round of reforms: the introduction of Common Core, the implementation of a new generation of standardized tests aligned to CC and the creation of an entirely new battery of tests to evaluate teachers. As many stakeholders have argued, it’s been too much, too fast with little evidence this enormous agenda will accomplish its stated goals.

But from the perspective of many parents, this is simply the latest phase in a decade-long national experiment with public school children. While I fully appreciate that much of this is federally driven, for the vast majority of parents, it really doesn’t matter where it’s coming from – we just know how it affects our kids and our families.

My 7<sup>th</sup> grader dreads going to school except to see his friends and comes home feeling exhausted and pressured. He knows his teachers are stressed and he doesn’t want to let them down, adding one more layer of pressure. He experiences school and homework alternately as boring and overwhelming. Once test prep begins, it only gets worse. No more interesting projects and very little homework in subjects other than English language arts and math. Winter and spring vacations are inevitably accompanied by “test prep packets.”

As you know, parents have a long list of concerns, many of which predated the most recent round of reforms. Large numbers of us have argued that:

- High-stakes testing has crowded out music, art, foreign language and even science to expand the time devoted to test prep.
- The tests themselves are poorly written, confusing and don’t measure critical thinking.
- Despite claims that the coming generation of Common Core aligned tests will be better, many of us believe it is a waste of resources to attempt to measure higher-order skills with one-size-fits-all standardized tests.
- In NYC, our children can be held back on the basis of poor test scores, despite having grades and classroom work that demonstrate their readiness to be promoted.

- Our bright, curious children have had the love of learning crushed out of them and hate to go to school because it's both boring and stressful.

Many of us got together collectively hoping our voices would be heard, yet we continued to be ignored. Over the past two years, those of us in NYC began to talk to parents on Long Island, in the Hudson Valley, in Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. Our voices finally became loud enough that state and city education officials acknowledged our existence.

The response to our heart-felt concerns about our children's educations?

- Officials denied that our concerns have merit.
- We were told the situation is so dire that these reforms couldn't wait.
- We were told we needed to endure this difficult but necessary transition.
- We were condescended to, with officials implying or even stating outright that we simply didn't understand what's in the best interests of our own children.

The arrogance has been breathtaking.

The bottom line is that these reforms have little credibility with parents, rank-and-file educators and experts. They are not based on research and there is no evidence they will work. They are the product of corporate interests and influence. They have been sold to the public based on a "crisis" that doesn't exist (or at least not the right crisis). We have been lied to and condescended to. And now we're really angry. We will remain angry until these corporate-backed policies are rescinded and until teachers – trained, experienced professionals – are put back in charge of educating our children.