

Comments on the Statewide Plan for Higher Education

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Statewide Plan for Higher Education. The quality of institutions of higher education in our State – individually and collectively – is of critical importance to everyone. Obviously, as mentioned in the report, it is critical to our State's economy and to the income potential of our residents. More importantly, the quality and accessibility of higher education in New York is critical to the health of our society and what I believe is a fundamental commitment to offer all citizens opportunities to fulfill their full potential. Anything less should be unacceptable to all citizens of the State.

Much of the plan is interesting, encouraging and impressive. If the plans are implemented and substantially attained, we will have even more reason to be proud of the colleges and universities in New York.

I am, however, deeply troubled by the sections dealing with college readiness and principal and teacher evaluations (Pages 19-22). Before I do, first a few words on who I am.

My name is Jack Bierwirth. I have served as superintendent of the Herricks Public Schools on Long Island since May 2001. I have been a superintendent since February 1980 and have served in Freeport, Sachem and Portland Oregon as well as Herricks.

I am co-chair of the assessment committee of the New York State Council of School Superintendents and one of three superintendents on the statewide APPR task force. During the time I served in Portland Oregon, the Pew Charitable Trust selected that district as one of a handful of districts pioneering proficiency-based education. What made that particularly interesting was that Pew also supported the work of the University of Oregon and David Conley to develop a proficiency-based admissions system and the university system and Portland to develop a seamless system of education K-16 based on proficiencies, not seat time or course credits.

To benchmark ourselves in Herricks with schools internationally and with the best private and independent schools, we talked our way into the 2006 PISA – along with the other New York districts – and piloted the CWRA with six boarding schools and one other New York district. Both initiatives were part of our effort to ensure that our graduates were as well prepared to take on and succeed at college level work as students anywhere.

Concerns about the adequacy of preparation of high school graduates as they enter New York State colleges are raised repeatedly in the plan – the cost of remediation; the diversion of resources, time and energy from other areas in need; the distortion of academic programs, etc. I believe that these are very real. In fact, they may

be understated in some cases as the starting levels for college academic programs may be lower than they should be in order to accommodate the students currently enrolled.

In light of this serious issue, an issue which undermines our institutions of higher education and which will sandbag any plan for the future, it is disturbing to see little attention paid to defining “college readiness” in a serious manner. On page 20, reference is made to “career and college metrics (e.g. students who graduate from high school with a 75 or greater on the English Language Arts Regents and an 80 or greater on a Math Regents)”.

There is no question in my mind and I would hope that there would not be in anyone else’s that a student graduating with less than a 75 on the English Regents or less than an 80 in Regents Algebra is not fully prepared for college level work. Clearly, they are not. But, if we are truly serious about helping our colleges and universities move forward, this is a grossly inadequate definition of college readiness. We can do better than this. It is embarrassing. Can we pretend to aspire to having the best K-12 education in the world and the best institutions of higher education if our thoughts on college readiness start and end with better than an 80 on Regents Algebra and better than a 75 on Regents English?

If we are serious about this, there are many excellent places to start. Excellent work has been done by many others elsewhere in the United States and around the world:

- The Association of American Universities asked David Conley and other researchers to bring together college professors from public and private institutions across the country to define the skills and knowledge required for first year college students (funded by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust).

There was remarkable consensus among the professors. The proficiencies they identified were clearly delineated in the report *Standards for Success*.

Parenthetically, I should note that a cross section of Herricks students who had just finished their first year in college agreed with the identified proficiencies.

- Numerous studies have shown that students who take at least one AP or IB course before high school graduation have a far greater chance of graduating from college. Two AP or IB courses raise the success rate even further. (Bill Johnson, Superintendent in Rockville Centre, has some of the best long term data on this in the country.)
- Ample evidence exists demonstrating that the cumulative rigor of a student’s high school program is a far better indicator of college preparedness than one grade in one course. For example, a student who

gets a 70 in Algebra in Grade 8 and then goes on to take four more years of higher level math – even, if for argument's sake, he or she never gets a grade higher than 70 in any of those courses – is far better prepared for college than a student who gets an 85 in Regents Algebra in Grade 12. Obviously, higher scores are better, but I do not know of a superintendent who would call a student who takes Regents Algebra as his or her terminal math course “college ready” in math.

As a member of the APPR task force, I can say with certainty whatever the new principal and teacher evaluation system does (or does not do) it will not define college readiness. An inadequate standard is inadequate even if it is taught by a great teacher. I find ironic that far more space in this plan is devoted to touting the value of the new teacher and principal evaluation system than in defining college readiness or even in outlining a plan of action to develop one. I would hope that this shortcoming would be addressed appropriately before the plan would be presented to the Regents or considered for approval.

We have some of the best K-12 educators and some of the best college educators in the United States working in New York. Many of us have worked together on some outstanding initiatives. For example, Herricks English teachers worked together with professors at Hofstra and Adelphi to grade papers written by both high school and college students. I can give many more examples that represent real substance and real efforts to define and implement real college readiness.

Let us define college readiness in terms which would make us proud and which would provide a strong foundation for an even greater system of higher education.

Respectfully submitted,

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