

COMMACK UFSD

ADVOCACY PLATFORM

June 8, 2018



COMMACK LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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COMMACK LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY COMMITTEE

The Legislative Advocacy Committee is comprised of the Superintendent of Schools, Board of Education members, Commack residents, High School students, Commack staff, and members from the collective bargaining units. Interested community members were invited to apply to join the District's newly created Legislative Advocacy Committee.

The Legislative Advocacy Committee was established to assist the Board of Education in implementing solutions regarding legislative matters. The Committee centers its efforts on assessing the impact of existing and proposed State and Federal education legislation, promoting legislation that supports the District's mission, and communicating vital information to our residents. Further, the Committee is charged with effectively communicating Commack's needs to our local, State, and Federally elected representatives.

On March 6, 2018, the Committee traveled to Albany to communicate Commack's needs to our local and State-elected representatives. During the visit to Albany, the Committee met with elected officials to advocate for Commack. The Committee, led by the High School students, advocated on the following platforms: Foundation Aid, APPR, Charter Schools, Alternative Pathways to Graduation, and Eliminating Unnecessary Testing. High School students have been framing talking points based upon these platforms and will deliver our message directly to Legislators.

In June of 2018, new student members were welcomed into Committee. Our graduating student members will transition to Commack Resident Committee Members. On June 8, 2018, the Committee had a chance to experience many of the opportunities the District offers to the students of Commack. Following the tour, the Committee also had the opportunity to include our new student members in the important conversations on the following items: School Safety and State Support, Access and Opportunities, Multiple Pathways to Graduation, School Funding / Smart School Approval Process, Continued Testing Concerns, and the Senate Bill S8301.

Advocacy Platform
Commack Now - 2018 and Beyond

History: The Commack School District has a long standing history of providing an outstanding educational program for all students; an education designed to support students in accomplishing whatever they want to accomplish upon graduating from our schools. To that end, Commack has endeavored to provide the best possible general education, special education, and advanced programming available to all students.

To demonstrate this we provide some data points for consideration:

For Your Information (FYI)

Commack's Graduation and College Attendance Rates for ALL Students

1. Commack's Graduation Rate 99%
2. Commack's College Attendance Rate 98%
3. Commack's College Retention Rate 90%

Commack's New York State Master Teachers (9 Math and Science teachers)

- 552 Master Teachers in New York
- 9 Master Teachers in Commack (1.6% of all NY Master Teachers)
 - 600,000 Teachers in New York
 - 575 Teachers in Commack (0.096% of total in NY)

State Aid Calculations

Commack's Combined Wealth Ratio is 1.122 (the State Ave. is 1.0/LI Ave. 1.5)

- State Aid Average Per Pupil \$8,438+/- per pupil
- Commack's State Aid Average Per Pupil \$4,682 +/- per pupil (32.6 million/7,000+/- = \$4,657)

Preamble

In our efforts to keep perspective, the Commack Board of Education and I routinely visit schools talking to staff and students and visiting classrooms. These visits are designed with a purpose; to see best practices in action, and what we see on our visits is amazing. What we see each and every time leads us to say that Commack Schools have never been stronger; never provided a better education; and never had as many high-quality teachers and staff as we do right now -- all this despite the best efforts of the Governor, other policymakers, and the media to diminish public schools and public school teachers.

Over the last several years we have fought to stop the implementation of a developmentally inappropriate, year-in and year-out Common Core testing model for young children in grades three to eight going so far as to offer strident testimony to Senate and Assembly committees; and we have fought the implementation of poorly-designed Common Core standards and curriculum developed in such a way as to force schools to the middle; a middle designed by test makers and non-educators; and we have fought an ill-conceived, mandated APPR system, a mandate we have vociferously opposed from the outset – teacher evaluation must be locally controlled.

At this point, the anti-public school contingents have “created a fog” around the issues by continuously forwarding “solutions” to problems that do not exist in the vast majority of public schools. This “fog” leaves us fighting on numerous fronts.

Given the breadth of “reforms” and some recent developments, below are the positions of the Commack School District:

School Safety Advocacy Position

All students have a right to a safe and supportive school environment where they can develop into social-emotionally healthy individuals.

Background: The Commack School District works diligently to maintain a safe and social-emotionally healthy environment for all students. However, in light of the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, and the seemingly endless school shootings, the Commack School District must be proactive in its efforts to deter violence, protect our students and support their healthy development. Therefore, assessment, preparation and social-emotional support structures are essential.

Regarding security, Commack supports the concept of and has in the past contracted for a full security assessment conducted by an outside agency "based on the All Hazards Approach to emergency management." The security company that conducted the assessment indicated that they "fully endorse and utilize the recommendations of the New York State Homeland Security System for Schools, United States Department of Homeland Security, United States Department of Education, and the National Institute of Justice to develop (its) recommendations." Implementing the recommendations from this review came at a cost to local taxpayers. Further, this type of assessment must be completed regularly given the changing dynamics of security and the needs of our community.

In addition, effective school safety efforts need to address the developing and emergent social-emotional development and needs of students. Generally, this work is done daily through regular programming and daily supports. However, there are, unfortunately, students through no fault of their own, who present with more significant issues. The vast majority of students with emotional and/or behavior needs access social-emotional support services in school and this is an ever-growing population. At a recent presentation by the President of the School Psychologists Association, Dr. John Kelly, it was indicated that 1 in 5 students presents with "anxiety," these students need support. There is no doubt that schools are woefully understaffed to deal with this type of need, a need that if unaddressed may lead to other issues. We must bolster support for our students so we can address warning signs that may be presenting themselves, before it is too late. Lastly, many of our students now live in a constant state of hyper-awareness when it comes to their own security during the school day, resulting in increased stress and detracting from their ability to focus on their schoolwork and related activities. We must ensure that all students receive the support they need to cope with this new reality.

While the school community continues its efforts achieving safety and emotional support goals, the commitment from the State needs to be much more significant. School safety is a shared responsibility.

Requested Relief:

- **Additional Targeted Funding:** Provide additional funding, beyond Foundation and other current state aid categories, to support the Commack School District's safety and security needs. For example, targeted annual funds for the following; additional mental health professionals, school resource officers and semi-annual security reviews by trained professionals. In addition, provide one-time allocations for physical plant safety improvements such as "door hardening," egress improvements, security cameras, and facilities gating (where needed).
- Further, the Smart Schools bond initiative designed to support school improvements in technology and security measures was approved several years ago. However, said program languishes as districts wait years for plan approval. Therefore, the request is to immediately approve Smart School plans as these plans contain school safety measures.

Access & Opportunity: Multiple Pathways to Graduation

We want New York State to create a clear, concise and easy-to-understand pathway for special needs students to earn a legitimate high school diploma. While strides were made recently, the current path is still confusing, convoluted and untenable for special needs students.

- Students with disabilities make up 15% of the NYS student population and account for 30% of spending in NY schools.
- If they cannot pass the Regents Exams, they receive a CDOS Certificate, not a diploma, despite attending and completing 12+ years of school work.
- As a result, these students cannot attend college, trade school, join a union or the military without a diploma.
- Students with disabilities make up 15% of the NYS student population and account for 30% of spending in NY.
- Given this, why does NYS invest so heavily in educating these students just to hand them a certificate that is not recognized, thereby severely limiting their chances for successful, meaningful work post high school?
- This underscores the disconnect between the process and the result.

Commack's Position:

- The determination for a student receiving a high school diploma should be done at the local level with certain standardized guidelines and authority.
- This should be decided by the student's teachers and district superintendent.
- The US Department of Education can allow states to pilot alternative assessments under the Every Child Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind, in 2015.
- As such, we suggest that the requirements that currently grant CDOS credentials be allowed to grant CDOS Diplomas instead.
- Another approach would be to allow students to substitute projects for Regents exams, as piloted by 46 Performance Assessment Schools in New York City with great success.

Conclusion:

- Judging a student's abilities by their ability – or inability – to score well on state-mandated tests does not present a true picture of their capabilities.
- Therefore, alternative pathways to a legitimate NYS High School Diploma need to be created as soon as possible to ensure these students a fair chance to succeed beyond high school.

School Funding

Exemplary, high performance, middle class district squeezed by factors outside its control

Background: Commack School District has **delivered** for students – for middle class students – **against the odds**. It's an education story that New York should be proud of and should protect at all costs. While the school and community continue to pull up together, financial aid commitment from the state is an on-going challenge, putting **hard fought gains at risk**.

As detailed below, Commack is taking budget hits due to disproportionate and arbitrary treatment, as compared to Western Suffolk and Long Island peers, under the New York State aid system. (We do not have complete figures for other regions or the full state but likely the pattern would hold). Commack is running a **deficit of nearly \$1 million** for the school year strictly stemming from cost drivers that are largely out of our hands. The state may have various levers to redress this situation but we identified two specific actions.

Requested Relief:

- Raise the level (percentage) of Commack's foundation aid¹ increase **from .2% to 2%**²
- **Uncap** the currently capped **expense-driven aid** to as to allow correlation with actually incurred expenses

Mandated Expenses: At the arbitrary .2% foundation aid, Commack receives \$56,000, a negligible amount in light of the following **mandated expense increases**:

- TRS (Teachers Retirement) contribution increase: \$850,000
- Healthcare Plan increase of 8.68%: \$1,700,000

These two mandated increases by themselves introduce **\$2,550,000** of **unaccounted costs** in this year's budget. This does not factor other incremental cost items (total of **nearly \$1,000,000**) which the school district has managed to maintain at favorable rates.

Why Commack is Unique and Deserves Special Attention:

- Commack tax payers are stepping up as they have in the past, via additional school tax levy of 2% which brings in approximately \$2,000,000 (budget gap still of nearly \$1,000,000 due to the above mentioned expenses)
- Commack is a true middle class district and the implications are these:
 - There is **no tax upswing** from high value properties in the district
 - As opposed to other school districts that average out at middle class income levels, Commack students are almost universally from middle class families; yet, the school has consistently produced **high academic standing** in the midst of higher wealth school districts in Suffolk and nearby counties
 - The combination of Commack's true middle class position and its elevated academic profile has led to a consistently **growing representation** of families with

¹ There are two primary vehicles of state aid:

- Foundation aid which is non-expense driven and makes up roughly 70% of the overall aid
- Expense-driven aid which is tied to specific expenses, such as special services, but is capped currently

² Doing so increases the amount Commack receives from \$56,000 to \$560,000

- diverse backgrounds** in the district. An example of this is the increasing numbers of Asian families who have moved into the district in the last five years.
- For these positive trends to continue, Commack has to do its part in managing its budget judiciously but we cannot afford to be undercut by unaccounted costs outside our control. Without the state's help, we risk breaking the environment that has created such a positive growth story.

Foundation Aid Formula is Unfavorable to Commack:

- Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR) is a criteria known to be used by New York State to assess the need for aid. Commack has a CWR of 1.202 – the higher the CWR, the wealthier the district. New York State records reflect that, for example, Commack received the same foundational aid increase level (.2%) as a Western Suffolk school district with 3.233 CWR. This is one illustration of disproportionate treatment that begs adjustments to the state's aid formula framework.

Common Core Testing

We have long indicated our concern with the proliferation of mandated, high-stakes testing associated with Common Core standards and curriculum. While standardized testing may be illustrative in highlighting student growth, as well as areas for improvement in the curriculum, the current testing format accomplishes neither of these goals. The current testing does not allow for the tracking of student growth nor does it provide data that will drive instruction either for individual students or whole classrooms. Additionally, the current framework does not properly allow for teachers to implement and focus on a developmentally appropriate curriculum, particularly for younger students.

Given the manner in which some states, New York included, utilize the mandates set forth in Federal legislation, the following adjustments are strongly recommended for implementation:

1. For Younger Students (Grades 3 to 8):
 - a. Modify grade-level State tests to include more developmentally-appropriate expectations and aligned materials
 - b. The duration of the assessments should be developmentally appropriate for the age and grade level of the students being tested
 - c. Advocate with federal policy makers to reduce annual testing requirements (i.e., schools should not be required to test every year)
 - d. Request the state to share item analysis data from tests with schools to assist them in making educationally sound decisions about curriculum and instruction, as well as to better track student learning

2. Special Education Students:
 - a. Expand the qualification requirements to participate in “alternate assessments,” from 1% to 2% of students with disabilities
 - b. Test students at the appropriate grade level as opposed to chronological age
 - c. Exempt students based on IEP recommendations to forgo testing based on issues such as medically diagnosed anxiety, long term medical conditions and other criteria that preclude the need for summative testing

3. English Language Learners:
 - a. Extend the time from one- to two-years before testing English as a New Language (ENL) students to give them greater opportunity to acquire the English language

Teacher Evaluations (APPR)

Repeal 3012d Teacher/Principal Annual Professional Performance Review

We have long advocated that the teacher evaluation process should be left to local school districts only to be told that there is language in the Federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, now Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), requiring that New York mandate and govern a teacher evaluation process state-wide. Under the guise of NCLB, New York instituted 3012d APPR and mandated compliance through coercive actions including, but not limited to, threats of withholding state aid for failure to comply. However, at this time, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed HJR57* and the US Senate is considering, and will likely pass, SJR 25* each of which would “do away with regulations from the Obama administration regarding accountability under the Every Child Succeeds Act...” thus placing the authority for such with individual states. Therefore, with no Federal legal requirement binding New York to the 3012d APPR law, we are calling for the unconditional repeal of such returning the responsibility for teacher and principal evaluation to the local level.

School “Choice;” Charter Schools; School Voucher Programs

We vehemently oppose school choice/charter schools and/or school voucher programs. In that regard, specifically:

- We strongly oppose any school choice, charter or voucher program, particularly in school districts with a proven track-record of success – success that goes beyond test scores;
- We strongly oppose the reduction of funds to any public school in an effort to fund “choice” and/or charter schools and/or school voucher programs of any kind;”
- We strongly oppose any voucher program that would drain funding from public schools and make an already challenging financial picture even more challenging;
- We strongly oppose the concept that “choice” and/or charter schools do not have to meet the same requirements and are not subject to the same level of scrutiny as public schools;
- We strongly oppose the concept that “choice” and/or charter schools, etc. would not be required to maintain a demographically diverse student population that mirrors surrounding public schools.