

Perform or Reform: The Time for Education Transformation is Now

**Remarks for the Rockland Business Association General Membership Luncheon
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Good afternoon. I am here to speak about imagining the possibilities for education reform.

My goal today is to ask the business community to find ways to focus its attention on k-12 education. According to Governor Cuomo's "New York at a Crossroads" speech delivered on January 5 of this year, New York state ranks #1 in spending per student and ranks #34 in outcomes. The business community has said that the level of taxes is unacceptable in New York. In fact, New York is one of the two highest taxed states with those taxes heavily vested in the real property tax. Furthermore, 13 of the 16 highest tax counties are in New York when assessed by home values, one of which is Rockland County. The bulk of the real property taxes that you pay is to support your school districts. But there is seldom any involvement by the business community in the activities of school districts. And I ask why not?

It would be fascinating to bring the CEOs from the major employers in Rockland County together to carefully examine the 8 school districts and BOCES for an open discussion to determine what suggestions they had for improvement. It would seem to me that the CEOs would suggest that the employees should be given the right to quit and the CEOs would have the right to fire; however, that is not the way it works. The CEOs would discuss what they need to do to innovate to survive in this economy, but the schools would counter by talking about revenue cuts, mandates and union work rules. Eventually the CEOs would start to be impatient, look at their watches and wonder how long the meeting would last. Maybe one CEO would ask about charter schools and that they heard good things about them. That comment would probably be met with silence.

Increasingly we are learning that the students entering community colleges are ill equipped in basic math and science skills. It is essential that the business community enter the discussion about the future of our schools.

Now is the time to begin these discussions, create new relationships and develop partnerships and collaborations. Our schools are being hit fiscally, with major reductions forecasted from the state, the absence of another round of Federal stimulus money and locally a growing aversion to raising taxes.

It is clear that there has been little to no growth in overall student population. We are not attracting families to live here. We have little activity on the planning board level.

According to the American Community Survey 2005-2009, the Average Family Size is 3.19 nationally. If two are parents – you do the math... So, we now know that there are approximately 1.19 children per family. In the past, the data from the census indicated the average family produced 2.3 children. In Rockland County, the American Community Survey indicates the Average Family Size is 3.57 or 1.57 children. While higher than the average, we are still growing at a rate for lower than before. The results of years of creating a step system for increasing salaries PLUS negotiated raises for teachers has led to an unsustainable level of retirement costs when salaries are combined with healthcare benefits that are to be paid forever.

So if the outcomes are less than desirable, the cost is unsustainable, revenues are going to decline and the number of students is either flat or in isolated circumstances, a slight increase.....now is the time to have an honest discussion about where we are heading.

Albert Einstein - said ...the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Well that is the situation we find ourselves in with regard to our schools.

Now if you are sitting there nodding your head in agreement OR feeling your blood pressure rise in anger. Good!!! Hopefully you are not sitting there and not feeling anything. The various stakeholders in the education community should invite assistance from business leaders like never before. I pose it is the business community that is a critical stakeholder to say what are we going to do differently to achieve new results. We need to inspire or reignite passion in the education stakeholders to accept change. Internationally, we are feeling the pressure of global competition. In order to find new hope for America we need to reclaim our position as the number one educator of kids and not 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 30th in math among industrialized nations.

As long as the teachers union responds to these discussions through commercials that suggest they are under attack or school administrators who feel they are being singled out - they are missing the point and quite frankly opening themselves to criticism that they are not putting the interest of kids first. It is through the explorations or new approaches that we all benefit. While full of anxiety it is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

I am an unabashed fan of teachers. I had an absentee father. Teachers – k-12 played a critical role in keeping me in line. From my third grade teacher Mrs. Benjamin to my 7th grade math teacher Mr. Dallas to my 12th grade public speaking teacher Mrs. Gold.... quite frankly they kept me together and inspired me. Increasingly I find that there are still teachers that are willing to be the agents and driving force for change, but are held back by the education system. There are individual administrators who are phenomenal, but are held back by the same system and relentless state mandates

We have created a system that is run often as a monopoly. According to the NYS Department of Education, there are no charter schools in Rockland. Most kids do not have a choice about where they are going to school. Regardless of how their district performs - they are likely to go back the next year. I ask, who here in business is not open to competition? You may not always like it, but it helps you be more creative, cost efficient and produce a better product or service. That is why instead of a step system for teacher increases we need to find a way to tie those increases to merit performance. How do you, in the business community, give out raises...especially in a tight economy? Does everyone get one?

Yet as soon as we try to have this discussion it is quickly labeled as anti teacher or anti school administration; that is unfortunate. It should be labeled as pro student and everyone should be trying to re-think how to achieve better results. What we do in our schools is after all about the future of our country and for us in the Hudson Valley.

Look....when the state budget indicates that right here in Rockland the average loss in aid is going to be 13% per school district, the response could be “outrageous - we can’t afford it” but, while understandable it could be “I understand that the state does not have the money it once did”; therefore, how do we adjust how we pay for education?

The governor has said that 75% of the school districts have reserves capable of replacing the loss in funds. I think that is simplistic and meant to suggest that money has been squirreled away and what are the schools complaining about. To some degree he has a point. All of us use our savings to make up the differences when we are not making the same money we used to ...so why not schools? Maybe --- but while an option it should not be entirely funded by reserves. If we do, we will miss an opportunity to change our education system and schools should hold on to some of their reserves.

By the way....even with the proposed tax cap of 2%, school districts can still raise their taxes beyond the targeted 2% with the support of 60% of those voting during the new school budget vote. Most school budgets eventually pass with percentages far higher. If your community says we are ok with increasing its taxes to make up for the loss of revenues – you still can do this. However, if the business community seeks reform it is time to get involved. We need to find a new equilibrium.

But before we get there let’s explore a few options. And let’s set a ground rule. The mere fact that I mention an alternative does not mean I have committed a felony. Airing debate is how we create new ideas. I dare say this country was based upon creating new ways to look at things. Read about the prospects of having a country based upon the automobile in 1910 or landing a man on the moon in the early 1960’s. You were a nut to think that it could happen. Or imagine the creation of a modern typewriter that could send notes to anyone in the world and research anything and that almost every household would have one of these. Or that we would have tiny little hand held devices that would enable us to talk to anyone in the world and that we could even use these same devices to send notes and messages. Kids would have them. Adults would have them. Nonsense

Drapkin – aint’ ever going to happen....depending on your age this is Star Trek or Star Wars...yet today, it is the norm.

So I want to ignite a discussion that says that the current way that we educate our kids just may not be the most efficient and that we could do a better job? My desire is not born out of disrespect but that I have a 7th and 9 grader in an urban economically challenged school district and I want something better.

In Sullivan County in the late 90’s this heretical thinking led to the first tri district school merger in 45 years. How did it come about? Well the most important thing was the surveys of the kids who attended the three school districts and the determination that they overwhelmingly supported the change. Though adults feared it because if the school was good enough for me then it is good enough for my kids; and they feared it because because of the uncertainty it created. 10 years later the teachers and the students love the new district that was created.

So how do we get this discussion going?

Well we have to ask ourselves to challenge some of the givens. Not always to do away with them, but sometimes to lead us in entirely new directions that have never been thought of.

Does everyone here understand the step system? In addition to reading in the papers that teachers in your school district receive a negotiated percentage increase, they receive an ADDITIONAL annual increase based on the step system. If a contract is not negotiated teachers still receive an annual increase. Can we continue to afford this system? According to the 2006-2007 Contract Analysis conducted by the Negotiations Clearinghouse for Putnam, Westchester and Rockland Counties, the median annual salary for teachers in Rockland County was \$83,299....and I am fairly certain that this figure has increased over the last 4 school years due to contract and step increases.

How about the concept of a County-wide school district? A concept that is almost guaranteed to make people uncomfortable. But let me start by briefly comparing Westchester and Fairfax County Virginia. Both counties have very high median incomes; comparable populations and both are approximately the same square miles..... and yet Westchester has 47 school districts and Fairfax but 1. In looking at Rockland....we examined the number of administrative positions, which included the Superintendents, Deputy Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, Principals and Assistant Principals.....and we found that among the 8 school districts there were 174 positions at a total annual expense of almost \$28 million. This does not include the costs to support those employees e.g. computers. So we ask --- could there be one consolidated school board? Maybe create the position of Chancellor of Schools for Rockland County with one school board saving millions in administrative costs? Ok too radical could we combine certain functions and house them in BOCES and reduce costs significantly? Ok...still too radical...how about just combining back office and bookkeeping functions?

A recent study in Sullivan County showed that the eight school districts could combine just these functions within BOCES and reduce headcount from 45 to 19.

The integration of technology.....as one of my staff once said to me - if you are under the age of 40 you are looking for an app for everything. Perhaps this is a slight exaggeration, but not really. When you begin college many entering freshman are provided a laptop by the school or their parents purchase one. All notes in class are immediately taken into their computer. Their research and assignments are typically completed and submitted on line. We need a task force that would examine the use of technology within our schools and determine where it can reduce expenses and improve teaching. Unfortunately the imagination and training that may foster further integration of technology is lacking.

Here are a few more ideas: if every student had a Kindle or a Nook do we really need textbooks anymore? How about placing a console on the desk of each student and teacher and instead of having just the smart students answer the questions – all students have the opportunity to answer. A portion of each class session is dedicated to whether or not the entire class absorbed and understood the lesson. The teacher would ask let’s say 10 multiple choice questions and every student could answer on their console. The teacher would immediately know who understood the lesson by looking at their master console. This method of teaching would not necessarily be used to grade the student – it would be used to determine which students need additional assistance. Another method of providing additional education to the students --- the installation of TV monitors on every bus and the showing of materials from the History or Discovery Channel. Why is the time on the bus considered down time?

Let’s face it we are so far behind our kids when it comes to technology. I was standing in my kitchen and was listening to my daughter speak on the phone for hours. When I intervened I was stunned to find that she was not on the phone but using OOVOO where three kids were “talking” to each other, but instead of a phone they were on an audio screen with the image of each kid. Think of SKYPE. They were not only talking about the next homework assignment, but showing each other their ideas for how to present it. At the same time my son was on his X-Box playing NBA 2011, but he had a headset on where up to 15 kids in different locations throughout the county were playing the same game and talking to each other. Just imagine if it was the debate team or a group of kids talking about homework. We could provide bonus points to students who employ this use of technology. We must embrace and harness the power of technology that has become commonplace for our kids and not run away from it.

How many school districts in Rockland have what we call parent portal? Since my kids attend an economically challenged school district I assumed everyone did. Not true. Instead I found out we were one of the only ones. What is parent portal? In real time all grades and now disciplinary actions are posted to parents or guardians who access it with a password and they can ask their son or daughter how they did verbally and then check it immediately and react to their child’s performance. Every school should have this.

We haven't begun to imagine what the 21st century school could look like if created and a countywide school district should have at least one school completely rethought to integrate as much technology as possible and if not a countywide school district then a magnet school because that's how kids are thinking and learning, it's in their DNA. Let's find out what happens if we put it ours.

Want to find a good way to give merit raises let's do it for ideas. Let's open this discussion in this period of hopelessness and give bonuses to the teachers and administrators that have good ideas. Let's not punish them for saying something new. Too often they are threatened to tow the line.

Just how many days do our kids go to school? I believe the state mandates 180 days. Compared to other countries – this is clearly not enough for us to regain our place in the world. Snow days are given out - don't use them --- that's ok we will give you more time off. During the "Regents Week" testing, while some students are taking the exams others get to stay home. This also provides a burden on child care for many families who may be working as many as 2 or 3 jobs just to stay afloat. And while we are on the subject of Regents – why is it that we are the only state left giving Regents? It cannot be because it leads to us outperforming the 33 other states that are ahead of us. We create these bureaucracies and we can't get out of them.

Summer break...it is time to take some of it back. No longer should it be just for the students that failed to perform, but instead for a 2 or 3 week session it should allow students to select a subject that we can't get to during the year. I have met plenty of teachers that are willing to do this. I would provide merit pay to those teachers willing to do this.

Then there are things that we just can't afford to do. Two years ago, let's assume for the best of intentions, teachers were given a full day off to take a mammogram or prostate exam. I am sorry, we couldn't find the time during the summer to encourage these tests? Another day for pay had to be created? Do you know this led to five other municipal unions asking for the extra day with pay? The state legislation that provided this said there was no fiscal impact on the state. They were right; there was an impact on the school district. There was no way to put this into a new incentive for negotiated health related benefits? We are just not thinking economically.

Let's go back to competition. I have gotten to the point that I do not care anymore as to how, but that we must introduce some measure of competition. Charter schools fine...magnet schools...finethe technology school I just described fine. Let's have at it. Let's see what competition can bring.

You ask, fine Drapkin, but how do we pay for some of these items?

Governor Cuomo has recognized the competition issue and has commented in his state of State address:

The federal government's recent move to performance based grants, including the Race to the Top program, has resulted in reform. Therefore, I am proposing two competitive funds to incentivize management improvements. First, I will propose a \$250 million school performance fund for districts that proportionally increase performance in the classroom (e.g. improving grades of historically underperforming children). The second will be a \$250 million administrative efficiency fund for districts that can find demonstrative savings through efficiencies. These grants will complement the objectives of the Race to the Top program by stimulating innovation in the classroom as well as in the administrative office.

Measuring outcomes. It is not all about test scores. What are the true dropout rates? Graduation rates? What happens to the graduating class of our high schools each year? One year after graduation? Let's publish that. College is becoming increasingly important as we try to compete globally, but it is not the only successful outcome. We need some of our high school graduates to simply find jobs. For each student that fails to achieve some positive outcome we may find ourselves supporting them later. So what are we to do?

For too long I have heard educators and teachers say "if only the parents would do more." And they should...where possible. Well guess what; in some circumstances they can't, because they are holding down two jobs, it is expensive to live in the Hudson Valley, in some cases the family structure at home may not be conducive to helping whether it is substance abuse or that there is no one at home to help between 3:00-8:00 p.m. So it is time to create cadres of mentors or advocates. We need the existing workforce, college students and parents to take on helping high school students to succeed. We need high school students to help the middle school students to get through and we even need middle school students to help elementary school kids. In fact, everyone needs to help. Many kids find lunch hour a waste we need to coordinate a mentorship program. And here I would pay a teacher to help coordinate this, again; perhaps this may fall under a merit pay incentive.

I have tried this year to create such a program in my local high school to help just five middle school kids to transition to high school and then commit to see them through to graduation. They were kids who were identified as having potential but not support at home. What should we do just right them off? So I have recruited five parents who had kids who were doing well and were willing to do more. Then we worked to find five high school students to be mentors; we paired them based upon foreign language studies. We have had learning pains as we start this innovative approach. We will add five more students next year. Imagine if this was widespread. It could be a game changer. Imagine if businesses recruited volunteers to assume this very role?

Let's talk about Tenure. There I said it. Everyone better duck because lightning may come from the sky and strike us. Let me ask how many of you have job security so strong that after three years, it is almost impossible to fire you. If there must be a system to protect the teachers that we have come to love and get rid of those that are failing to

hold up their end of the bargain to educate our kids tenure is not it. It may come as a shock but some well intentioned people cannot teach. That the system seems to wish to protect them is unimaginable. We have an economy that has plenty of good teachers that could take the bad ones place. "The last hired will be the first fired." Based upon what? Our system sends a message that if you are good at what you do and unfortunately were recently hired, too bad. If kids were first we would keep the best but instead decisions are based on longevity. This is wrong.

Let me ask. How many of you would run your business based upon just keeping the employees that had been with you the longest. Would you want to factor in performance? Outcomes? Ingenuity? Who was the most creative in helping your business improve. Yet these are NOT the criteria we use.

Uniforms. What about adopting uniforms and saving parents money, ending glamour contests, the entire socio-economic status. We need to instill in kids that school is their job. Just like you in your business --- you set some standards for how your employees should dress.....well if performance improves --- maybe in school we could have "dress up" Friday. We need to inject both pride and passion. Let's try it. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't, but doing the same and hoping for a different result is...

We cannot be afraid of failure. We need to teach students in a portion of each class or at least in some classes that participation alone is good and not to be afraid to give the wrong answer. There is time enough on exams to penalize the failure to get it right. We need to let teachers and administrators be entrepreneurs. We need to celebrate and reward those that wish to innovate change. Remember I come at this discussion by saying I would not be here but for good teachers.

Therefore we need to recruit a few good agents for change. While there are many special interests, there are also good and enlightened union leaders, terrific administrators and politicians who know what is at stake and are willing to sacrifice for what is right. In fact with the same vigor that once was needed to protect teachers in the 50s we now need enlightened leadership to understand that reform is critical both for our children's future and to create a new set of leaders who will discover how to create a world here in the Hudson Valley where our children can thrive..

In closing, these remarks are not meant to be the blame game. If you have taken it that way then you have missed the point. If you don't like my ideas then raise the ante and do me one better but we can no longer remain pat. I agree that students need to take responsibility. Communities need to accept responsibility. And the business community must help lead the way to change.

Thank you.