



NYSSMA®

A State Unit of NAFME, National Association for Music Education

February 28, 2015

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

It is with a sense of duty that I am writing this letter to you. As the President of the largest Arts Education Association in New York, I feel it is my responsibility to address the reality that the education policies in place now and proposed for the near future are negatively impacting the music education of the students of New York State. I understand that no one has ever said that the education policies should harm the music education of the students, but unfortunately, that is the unintended consequence.

I am an advocate of the Common Core Standards! Unfortunately, the emphasis on these standards and the related testing regimen, along with a flawed teacher evaluation system, has led some schools and districts to limit access to music and arts education. This can be rectified with a few simple steps.

The State Education Department repeatedly has endorsed the idea of data driven instruction. I think this is a good idea! It would be a better idea if policies set by SED with the approval of the Chancellor and the Board of Regents, and on behalf of the Governor, were also based on the best data. In reality, many policies seem to be based on anything but the best information available. Many times I have heard representatives from SED say that too many students are not prepared for college or careers. However, when information about the statistics is presented, it is often incomplete or misleading. At one meeting I attended, it was stated that the information was based upon information procured from SUNY and CUNY. It is unfortunate that this was allowed to stand. SUNY and CUNY only represent a portion of the students who graduate. Many high school graduates from our state attend private colleges, some of which are the most rigorous in the nation. To not include their data, or at least acknowledge that it is omitted and therefore incomplete, seems at best misleading. Using limited data to guide education policy appears to be based upon a political agenda. The inclusion of all data, from all types of schools, would provide us with a more accurate picture of how to better prepare students for their future.

It has been made clear that the new testing regimen has no more tests than in previous years. While this is true, the current approach has forced test scores lower. Students are now being tested on processes that are new. This testing regimen should have been implemented in a more methodical manner. Had this been done, much of the outcry that has been experienced in recent years could have been avoided. However, it is no secret that the decisions were made as part of the Race to The Top application and the pursuit of federal money during the state budget crisis. Unfortunately, this was ultimately very shortsighted and has exacerbated the

*Dr. David A. Gaines, President, 23 Kenilworth Drive, East Northport, NY 11731-2536
(H)(F) (631) 239-1105 • (Cell) (631) 721-6166 • President@nysma.org • www.nysma.org*

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negative reaction from parents and experienced educators. Being dismissive of these stakeholders may only drive a bigger wedge into an already fractured system. In the future, including veteran educators and master classroom teachers in the development process of new policies would prove advantageous.

Returning to the idea of using data and research to drive educational reform, I feel the need to address the area of teacher evaluations. If flawed statistics show that too many students are not college and career ready, then one may conclude that teachers are not teaching appropriately. Since the data are not parsed in an objective manner, the statements are inaccurate. When testing regimens are altered during a student's educational career, it is unlikely he/she will be successful in the new format. When cut scores on state assessments are determined in a manner that can appear arbitrary to the average parent (or even the seasoned educational practitioner in the field), then the validity of all that follows needs to be questioned. Any evaluation system that uses questionable data as a basis for any percentage of a teacher or principal rating is at best suspect if not totally invalid. At 20%, this has caused many administrators to focus exclusively on math and ELA scores in an effort to raise evaluation ratings. This has caused many schools to limit access to music and arts education. To raise this to 50% will only mean more damage to the delivery of music and arts education. There is no research or other evidence to support that student test scores are a measure of teacher effectiveness. While it makes a good political sound bite, it is just not true. We should be measuring educators on metrics that are actually valid and reliable.

In my 27 years as an educator in New York State, I have always taken pride in the quality of our schools. New York State schools are some of the best in the country! It is time to stop vilifying the many people who are dedicated professionals and care deeply for the students in their charge. If you, the Board of Regents, and State Education Department want to effect change in the education of students then it is time to engage in a thoughtful dialogue. For this to occur, leaders need to put aside political agendas and begin the hard work that will actually benefit students. Research needs to be presented in a clear and concise manner with a full disclosure of all information. The NYSED has the ability to parse data as they see fit. Solutions should be targeted in a manner to address weak schools and districts that have systemic problems based upon measures that are understandable to all stakeholders. Schools, whether public, private, or charter, that show systemic success should be studied and replicated. The time is now to do what is right for *all* students in New York. NYSSMA stands ready to assist in any way we can for the benefit of all children.

Respectfully,

Dr. David A. Gaines

CC: Dr. Merryl Tisch, Chancellor
Members of the Board of Regents
Acting Commissioner Elizabeth R. Berlin

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