Public Testimony of Ted Goerner for
Public Hearing on Common Core, its implementation, and Teacher Evaluation March 12, 2014

I would like to thank the Republicans for forcing this public hearing so that teachers at least have a chance of providing a more balanced view than that presented in the previous public hearing.

I would like to say that teachers are tired of being used as pawns and scapegoats by politicians, profiteers, and pundits.

This movement is being given momentum by the widespread belief that our public school system is failing. This is wrong on several counts. First of all, there is no one system. There are thousands. Secondly, the comparisons of our students to students in other countries are invalid due to the fact that in this country we teach every child up through the age of sixteen without the weeding processes that other countries employ.

Furthermore, to assert that Connecticut schools are failing is an insult. Simply look at the results of the NAEP test over the years to see that Connecticut consistently scores high compared to other states. This is in spite of having the biggest income gap in the country. If in fact some districts are failing, how is it possible that we still rank so high compared to other states? What does that say about the other districts in this state that are not failing? The answer is that the other districts must be exceptional. And rule number one in trying to fix things is “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

And yet, the high performing districts rarely receive any recognition from our governor or his secretary of education... Especially when this reform movement was initially being rolled out.

But then again, he was simply trying to “Race to the Top” in order for Connecticut to get its piece of the federal pie. We now have had two presidents in a row who have tried to tinker with education with education and only managed to make things worse.

I would like to say that I do not have an issue with the Common Core Standards. I am a believer in standards. I wish that teachers were allowed to maintain the standards that they have traditionally counted on. Examples would include behavior standards and grading standards. My concern is not the Common Core Standards it is their implementation.
Part of the Implementation in Connecticut is the SBAC test. I do not believe that the SBAC will have much validity. Because it is a computer based test, there is absolutely no way to control all of the variables. To compare scores earned by students taking the test on chromebooks or slow computers to scores earned by students taking the test on desktop computers with fast processors and bandwidth is invalid. To then make high stakes decisions based upon those scores is irresponsible.

If you haven’t tried taking the sample test yet for yourself on a chromebook, then I encourage you to try it and see how well you do.

I would also like to say that there is a danger in over standardization. There is a risk of driving away creative and passionate teachers, boring the living heck out of students, and creating a homogeneously educated populace with all of the same academic strengths and all of the same weaknesses. In a nation that values individuality, this should be more alarming.

I would like to see a full investigation into the true cost of the implementation of Common Core and Teacher evaluation. Towns across this state have spent a great deal of money not only on computer hardware, but on infrastructure, software, consultants, and administrative staff. The cost of all of this must run in the billions nationally, millions in this state, and hundreds of thousands for towns. The taxpayers need to be made aware.

I also take exception to the notion that schools should be used as a vehicle for correcting huge social problems. I am tired of hearing about the academic achievement gap as if it exists in isolation. The academic achievement gap is merely a reflection of the gaps that exist within our society. As long as we are a free capitalist society that allows people to earn and succeed at their own pace, and as long as we are a free society that allows people to move and settle where they want to, there will be sociopolitical and cultural differences in our geography.

And as long as schools are funded by local property taxes, there will be funding differences from one school district to another. We teachers teach the children who come to us. We do the best that we can with the students on our rosters. Just as the police do what they can to fight crime in their towns, we fight ignorance in ours. When police officers are held accountable for the crime rates in their neighborhoods, when politicians are held accountable for voter participation in theirs, when parents are held responsible for how highly their children value learning, then and only then it will be fair to hold teachers accountable for the test scores of their students.

I would like to conclude with a short response to Stefan Pryor’s testimony last week. He pointed out that 70% of students who arrive at community colleges in this state require some form of remediation. I agree with him that this is a problem. However, there are some powerful recent trends that help to explain this phenomenon. More students than ever are
graduating from our high schools partly because districts are being penalized for allowing students to drop out. And when those students do graduate, there are fewer jobs available to them than in years past. Is it surprising then that more students are applying to community college than ever before? In fact, enrollment in Connecticut state colleges and universities has risen 14% since 1993. Maybe a larger problem is the mass exodus of jobs from this state and country. Perhaps the governor should do more to improve the business climate in this state which ranks #50 out of 50 states in annual economic growth. Perhaps we should value the diversity of occupations that make for a strong society and stop using our schools as political red herrings and as laboratories for unproven social experiments.

Ted Goerner