

**Stand With Spencerport Teachers
and the
Coalition for Justice in Education
Forum on NYS Testing, Grades 3-8**

June 19th, 2014

4:30 PM

Ogden Farmers' Library

269 Ogden Center Road

Spencerport, NY 14559

MEDIA PACKET

Thank you for coming today to cover this important topic.
The following packet contains all of the speeches you will hear today, as well as contact
information should you have any additional questions.

Introduction
Speaker 1: Emmy Thevanesan
Cosgrove Middle School ELA Teacher
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Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to Ogden Farmer’s Library today to stand with Spencerport.

On April 16, 2014, more than 60 Cosgrove Middle School teachers sent a letter and petition protesting the secrecy, quality and purpose of the NYS Grades 3-8 ELA and Math assessments to our leaders in Albany and the local media. We asserted our opinion that the ELA exams we had just administered were filled with developmentally inappropriate passages, that questions seemed to have multiple correct answers, and that the tasks themselves could not be completed within the time constraints allowed.

We also went so far as to say that many aspects of the exams seemed *purposefully* confusing and deceptive, and that they did not appear aligned to the Common Core Standards they proclaimed to assess.

Most importantly, we were dismayed by a new confidentiality agreement we were required to sign during scoring, prohibiting us from legally discussing the exams with anyone—not our administrators, not our fellow teachers, not parents and not the students in our classrooms.

In the last two months, over 5,500 parents, grandparents, teachers, principals, students, concerned citizens and taxpayers across New York State have voiced their agreement with this message by signing our petition at standwithspencerport.wordpress.com.

If you go to our website, you will find comments like these:

- The 'gag order' forced on teachers who are correcting the tests is completely at odds with the best practice of using data to inform instruction.
- Why is this even a debate? Let everyone see the assessments. The illogic of not releasing them is stunning.
- Why are Cuomo, King, and the for profit test companies afraid of transparency? What are they hiding? Only a matter of time and change in leadership before the truth is revealed.
- ...education is based on the mantra that "assessment drives instruction." Giving tests to third through eighth grade students that do not provide any data to drive instruction is educational malpractice.

The New York State Department of Education responded to this petition by stating that the assessments “are the best way to determine how all of our students are performing, as compared

with other students in their school, their district and across the state.” This response fails to address any of the concerns in our petition, which is one of the reasons why we have convened here today.

We have two main purposes in holding today’s forum.

First, we are sending the united message that the State Education Department’s current testing practices are not acceptable, and we will continue to advocate for our students by demanding change and accountability from Albany.

Second, we want to do everything in our power to make sure our message about these tests is clearly understood by all who advocate for and believe in public education as a cornerstone of our democracy. That is why we will be happy to answer any questions you have at the end of this forum.

This afternoon, you will hear from teachers at Cosgrove Middle School, a parent in our community, a university professor and a retired principal. In other words, you will hear the perspectives of people with credible experience in the fields of nurturing and educating young minds. We will be addressing the following concerns:

First, Marie Campanaro, a nationally board certified Spanish teacher, will speak about the true purpose of assessment, as compared to the state education department’s response that they are the best way to compare schools.

Robert Allen, a veteran English teacher and the department chair, will discuss the confidentiality agreement teachers were required to sign.

Matthew Amoroso, a veteran teacher and department chair, will also address the State Education Department’s history of releasing data to schools too late and in too ambiguous a form to be of curricular relevance.

Nicole Galbraith, a veteran ELA teacher, will speak about the excessive amount of time spent administering and scoring the tests, as well as the insufficient time students have to complete the exams.

You will also hear the perspective of Karen Costner, a parent of three children in the Spencerport schools, as well as the expertise of two members of the Coalition for Justice in Education, Dr. David Hursh and Principal Dan Drmacich.

Dr. Hursh is a professor at the University of Rochester’s Warner School of Education and the author of dozens of publications about the topics we will be discussing today. His most recent book is titled High Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning: The Real Crisis in Education. Just this spring, he also authored the article “A cautionary tale: Governor Cuomo and

the effort to destroy public education in New York.” He just recently spent nine weeks in Australia and New Zealand where he was invited to advise groups of teachers and administrators in the implementation of new standards. In a keynote address he delivered, he was asked to explain New York’s methods of adopting new standards as a warning on how to *not* go about the process.

In an era where we seem to care so much about international rankings, it is significant to note that other countries are looking at New York State’s current education reform movement as a model to avoid.

Dan Drmacich is a retired principal from the School Without Walls and is the chairman for the Coalition for Justice in Education. Throughout his career, Mr. Drmacich has led numerous workshops in New York State and across the nation on learner-centered curriculum, assessment and organization development.

Finally, Christine Purtell, a nationally board certified math teacher, will conclude with ways we believe the State Education Department can earn back the trust of parents and teachers, and then we will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Purpose of Assessment
Speaker 2: Marie Campanaro
Cosgrove Middle School Spanish Teacher
National Board Certified
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Good afternoon. My name is Marie Campanaro. My first nine years in the field of education was as a teacher of English Language Arts. I have been at Cosgrove as a Spanish teacher for the past 25 years. I am here to talk about the purpose of assessment.

Effective teaching cannot take place without assessments. Assessments are a critical piece of the learning experience for every student. They play a major role in how students learn, their motivation to learn, and how teachers teach.

As teachers, we rely on assessments to tell us what our students know and what they are able to do. We use our results to plan and guide instruction. We share results with students and their parents.

Students use their results to develop responsibility for their own learning. Teachers guide them in discovering how they learn and how they can adjust what they do to progress in their learning.

Assessments are also needed by other members of the educational community to demonstrate student achievement at a specific point in time in order to determine success or areas in need of improvement.

Research and experience show that student learning is best supported when:

- Instruction and assessment are based on clear learning goals
- Instruction and assessment are differentiated according to student learning needs
- Students are involved in the learning process, receiving timely feedback from these assessments
- Assessment information is used to make decisions that support further learning
- Parents are well informed about their child's learning, and work with the school to help plan and provide support
- Students, families and the general public have confidence in the system

The 2014 ELA and math assessments imposed upon New York State students do not fulfill any of the above goals nor supply any relevant information that is necessary to move forward with instruction. The use of assessments as a tool to compare student against student and district against district is perhaps the least significant use of all.

Test Security
Speaker 3: Robert Allen
Cosgrove Middle ELA Teacher
Department Chair
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My name is Rob Allen. For the past 10 years, I have been an ELA teacher, and for the past two, I have been the ELA department chair at Cosgrove Middle School.

It goes without saying that communication is vital to a successful education system. Every day, educators communicate with students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators in order to ensure our students' success. We communicate with students in our classrooms through our instruction to help them develop skills and learn new content, and we assess our students on their progress.

As educators, we use assessments in our classrooms as teaching tools, and we have meaningful conversations about these assessments with our students, using them to clarify misunderstandings and re-teach when necessary. This communication is the basis of sound instructional practice and is a vital part of authentic assessment.

However, for the past two years, teachers administering the exams were forced to sign a gag order preventing us from discussing specific passages or questions on these exams. The 2014 testing administration manual dictates, "You are not to discuss the test, show it to anyone, make any notes pertaining to the test content, or photocopy the materials, as the security of the test could be breached."

As for consequences, the manual notes that "Teachers and administrators who engage in inappropriate conduct with respect to administering and scoring State assessments may be subject to disciplinary actions in accordance with Sections 3020 and 3020-a of Education Law or to action against their certification pursuant to Part 83 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education." Incredulously, in attempting to use these assessments for educational purposes, teachers could lose their licenses or be subject to legal disciplinary action.

Forcing teachers to sign gag orders wasn't always standard practice in New York State. Between 2003 and 2011, the 3-8 Math and ELA exams were released in their entirety, and a database called DataMentor provided districts with specific feedback from the exams. However, for the last two years, the tests have been kept confidential, with the state only releasing a small percentage of questions and passages. It is relevant to note that a significant statewide drop in passing scores coincided with the tests becoming confidential; 77% of 3-8 students passed with a level 3 in 2009 while only 31% passed in 2013.

By forcing educators to sign this gag order, the State Education Department and the testing company Pearson accomplish three things:

- They insulate themselves from criticism over the quality and content of the exams. Teachers can say that the exams are poorly-written, or developmentally inappropriate, but without specific passages or questions to refer to, these criticisms carry no weight.
- They prevent the exams from serving any instructional purpose. If we can't speak to our students about the exams, they can learn nothing from them. If we can't speak to fellow teachers about the exams, we can't use the exams to improve or develop instructional materials.
- They have misled the public into believing that in 2013, 69% of New York State's 3rd through 8th grade students were not on the path to being "college and career" ready. Any instrument that produces such extreme results must be reviewed by those stakeholders whom its measurements directly impact.

Maintaining complete security of these state tests is not a matter of national security. In every public school across New York State, students take these exams. The moment that a nine year old reads the first sentence of the first reading passage, the security of the content is compromised. However, most students won't speak out publicly against these exams, and even if they did, would their complaints be taken seriously? They can't speak critically of the quality of the exams, nor would they be trusted as reliable critics. It's up to educators and parents to speak for them, but in being forced to sign gag orders, teachers were stripped of their ability to question the content of these tests.

In order for these exams to serve any educational purpose, they must be released so that educators can have conversations with their colleagues and their students to improve learning.

Timely and Relevant Data
Speaker 4: Matthew Amoroso
Cosgrove Middle School Math Teacher
Department Chair

Good afternoon. My name is Matt Amoroso. For the past 19 years, I have been a math teacher at Cosgrove Middle School. For the past 7 years, I have also been the department's teacher leader. However, my most important role is that of a father to three school-aged children. Next year, I will have daughters in Kindergarten, 4th grade and 6th grade.

For too many years, the State Education Department has administered assessments in early Spring, yet the scores generated from these assessments are withheld for several months.

Schools do not receive student scores until fall of the following year. Whether a student is considered passing—a level 3 or level 4—or failing—a level 2 or level 1—is determined by something called a cut score.

I'd like to briefly define what a cut score is. Each year the exams have been administered, the State Education Department goes through a lengthy, complicated process of assigning weight and value to each question. This becomes even more complicated when the testing company embeds field test questions in the exams that do not count at all. The result is a different raw score each year that serves as the cut point between passing and failing. The cut score is an ambiguous number that holds no relevance when compared to the scores from previous years. In 2013, the cut score for a Level 3 for 8th grade math was 293. The previous year it was 674.

The data that schools eventually receive merely consist of each student's raw score. Arbitrary numbers like 293 or 674 do not give any indication of a student's strengths or weaknesses, especially when these scores are not released with the test questions themselves. Without more information, this data is far too limited and ambiguous to justify the amount of instructional time spent administering and scoring the tests.

For authentic assessments, teachers determine what constitutes success *prior* to giving exams.

When the scoring benchmarks for an assessment are set *before* the exam is administered, the question is "How many students *will* meet the standard?"

When the benchmarks are set *after* the exam is administered, the question becomes, "How many students *should* meet the standard?"

This subtle difference is extremely significant, and it has allowed for rising and falling cut scores and passing rates for these exams over the course of the past ten years. Each year, after the tests have been administered, the State Education Department can decide how many students will pass or fail.

With the school year ending next week, we have no idea how our students did on tests they took earlier this year.

In a culture where *data* is upheld as the only answer to the complex problems our schools face, we will no longer tolerate testing practices that assess students in April and May yet leave schools completely uninformed until August or September.

For the tens of millions of taxpayer dollars spent, it should be as simple as this when it comes to giving a math or reading test:

- Give schools the tests and scoring materials.
- Have the teachers administer and score the exams.
- Immediately after scoring, the results should be clear, and teachers should be able to discuss their students' scores and how they impact classroom instruction and district curriculum.

The State Education Department should not be allowed to spend months determining, each particular year, who gets to pass and who will fail. Assessing the basic reading, writing and math skills of the children in our elementary and middle schools should not be this complicated or mysterious.

Testing and Time
Speaker 5: Nicole Galbraith
Cosgrove Middle School ELA Academic Intervention Services Teacher
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My name is Nicole Galbraith. I have been teaching in Spencerport for eleven years.

This year's ELA and Math tests were administered over the course of a combined six days. For the ELA exams, students answered over 50 multiple choice questions, read over a dozen passages, completed several paragraph-length responses, and wrote two full-length essays.

For the math exams, students completed two days of multiple-choice questions and a third day of extended response questions.

In addition to disrupting classroom instruction during these testing days, teachers were out for a combined five days for scoring. This significant loss of instructional time is not justified.

One of the reasons for an increased time spent on testing in the last two years is the addition of embedded Field Test questions. These are questions planted within the assessments to help Pearson, the company producing the exams, to research and develop questions for future exams. While students must take time to answer these questions, they do not count toward their scores. The company also asks districts to Field Test in June.

Field Test questions that are embedded within high stakes assessments are a distraction that can significantly influence a student's score and confidence as he navigates these already-lengthy tests. Since there are at least four different versions of the tests across the state containing different Field Test questions, each student's experience is different, preventing the results from being valid. For example, students from Spencerport who took the test labeled Form A may have encountered embedded Field Test questions that were significantly more confusing or distracting than students from Schenectady who encountered the embedded Field Test questions in Form B.

However, loss of instructional time is not the only issue that we have with these tests. In our previous communications to the State Education Department, we questioned why time limits were placed on tests that purportedly assess the new, more rigorous Common Core Standards.

The Common Core Standards teach skills that require deep reading and analysis. On the first day of the ELA exam, middle school students were given 90 minutes to read 7 lengthy passages and answer 42 questions requiring close reading and look-backs in the text. These requirements undermine the standards administrators, teachers and students have worked so hard to implement.

When a student cannot finish an exam, that assessment cannot be considered an accurate measurement of his or her skills.

The tests should be shortened from three days to two, and time limits placed on students should be removed.

A Parent's Perspective
Speaker 6: Karen Costner
Parent, Resident, Education Activist
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Hello everyone. I am a parent of three children in the Spencerport School District. They are all high honor roll students and are not afraid to take a tough test. Yet, I am one of over 43,000 parents in New York State that have opted their child out of the latest math state assessment. Our concerns continue to be discredited and marginalized by the so called education leaders in our state. We are ignored by Commissioner King and are called "drama" and "noise" by our Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. And I am here to tell you tonight why I am so "noisy."

Besides the points our previous speakers have made, there are also three main reasons why I, as a parent, have opted out my child and question the "test-centric" state we are in today.

1. You cannot test to standards when the standards haven't been tested.

The common core ELA and Math standards we all hear about were written by roughly 2 dozen people, none of whom taught elementary school, many are in the testing industry, none taught Special Ed, ESL or have early education specialties. There has been much concern brought about by educators, child life specialists, social workers and many more groups regarding the developmentally inappropriateness of the standards. In addition, the standards were never piloted before implementation, and were never held in an open forum with educators in our state to debate them. Yet these standards are copyrighted, owned and set in stone by two private companies in DC. Until the standards are debated, deemed appropriate and implemented thoughtfully and carefully with the ability to amend if necessary, my child should not be tested or assessed on this experiment of standards.

2. The state test is not a "true" assessment of my child's learned skills.

If you think about it, it shouldn't be that hard to write a math test for a 3rd grader. And you do not need a super-secret society to do so. You're not designing a bomb. The tests are now much more than an assessment, in fact, I argue they have little if anything to do with that at all. It's all about the data. Data makes you money, and data from education makes you tons of money. Data mining and big business have now infiltrated every aspect of education. The data points collected have increased to a frightening level, while privacy laws have been gutted. Data collection can now happen without parental approval. The profit from the sale of my child's data now takes precedence. And those who draw the pass/fail line on the tests have more of a political and

economic interest than the interest of the assessment itself. My child's time is being wasted, her privacy is at risk, and the teachers, who would benefit most from test data are left completely ignored. These tests serve no educational value to my child.

3. A test should not be a defining moment in a child's education

When I think of defining moments in education, I think of the classroom experience. I think of a student having an "aha" moment, with a teacher being able to reach a child. The teacher having the flexibility to teach to the child, not to the masses, not to a test. A teacher being able to set the bar at different levels in the class depending on the child, because children do not learn the same way and on the same timeline. The teacher creating an engaging classroom. A child might realize he's not the best at math but loves writing and is still a confident and eager student. But that is not the case anymore. It's all about the test, and for hours and hours and hours every year they will be reminded of that. And for many children who take the test, they see vague and ambiguous questions. They think they are stupid. They see themselves as failures. Failure should never be in the vocabulary of a 3rd grader. Many confidences are shattered and anxieties raised because of state testing, regardless of what happens in the classroom. The stakes are so high for a child, even at 8 years old, this is his defining moment.

Poorly written, high-stakes tests do not make or define a quality education.

If the reasons stated above make me a noisy drama mama, well, then, I will wear that title proudly. And I will continue to make more noise and bring more noisy parents on board. I will continue to create more drama until we bring education back into the classroom and hold accountability to where it truly belongs. Our noise has to be louder than the tainted money and political gain in Albany. And I urge parents who sit here and know what their child needs to excel in their sport but do not know the changes taking place in education to do their homework. Get educated and join me in making some noise.

Thank you.

Re-asserting Teaching as a Profession
Speaker 7: Dr. David Hursh
University of Rochester, Warner School of Education
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I want to begin by thanking the teachers and parents from Spencerport for taking this stand against the misuse of testing and for meaningful assessments. In working with them I have become aware of the extensive amount of research they have undertaken on the topic and their commitment to public education. I support everything that they have said.

As an educator for over four decades, I never imagined that K-12 education would change as much as it has—has entirely for the worse. I'm not sure the public fully realizes how extensive the changes have been. Before No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, most of the decisions regarding curriculum and assessment were under the control of school districts and the State Education Department. For example, in the 1990s, as a parent of children in the Rochester City School District, I worked with teachers and parents at my children's elementary school to develop a literacy curriculum that reflected the diversity of the student population and supported student success no matter their reading level.

However, beginning first with NCLB and now with RTTT, curricular and assessment decisions have largely been hijacked by the federal and state governments, wealthy foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and corporations such as Pearson. Bill Gates has spent, by one estimate, \$2.3 billion dollars supporting the development and implementation of the Common Core, essentially stifling reasonable discussion of its pros and cons. Further, the Gates Foundation does not act like philanthropists of the past who gave their money to, say, the Memorial Art Gallery to use how they wanted. The Gates Foundation uses their "gifts" to buy consent to their goals. Similarly, Pearson Inc. now dominates the testing and publishing industry. To give you a sense of their dominance, they make and administer the following tests: The National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Stanford Achievement Test, the Miller Analogy Test, the G.E.D., and have bid on the international PISA exam. In New York they created and administer EdTPA, the certification exam for teachers, the Common Core Exams in ELA and Math (awarded \$32.1 million from SED over five years), and with Gates, the PARCC exams (the Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers).

Education has been hijacked by wealthy philanthropists (of which Gates is the wealthiest one of many), by profit corporations, and by the federal government. In the process, teaching as a profession is being destroyed. The proper role of State Education Department and the Federal government is to provide oversight, fund research, and support educational improvement- NOT to micromanage teachers, schools, and districts. The current corporate led reforms marginalize

the teaching profession and deskill and discourage teachers. Such an approach can only destroy education.

In response, we need to reassert teaching as a profession. The teachers and parents here today are to be commended for standing up for teaching as a profession and for their schools and students. They do so at some risk. But, not doing so has a larger risk: that the skills and knowledge that teachers bring to the classroom will be ignored and eventually lost.

We hope that today marks the beginning of a wave of educators, families, and community members joining the effort to end seeking simple solutions to complex problems. We need to reassert that it is our job—not Bill Gates, not the Walton Family, not Pearson’s—to talk about what kinds of schools and communities we want and begin the serious task of creating them.

A Test-Prep, One-Size-Fits-All Environment
Speaker 8: Dan Drmacich
Retired Principal, School Without Walls
Coalition for Justice in Education
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What's going on here? Why all the fuss? Why are the Spencerport Teachers so frustrated that they would hold a public forum about their concerns? And, why do many teachers, parents and concerned citizens want to change what our government leaders have decided is best for our children?

Our government leaders, the Board of Regents, the NYS Legislature Education Committees, the Governor, U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan, and Commissioner King, are not education experts. In fact, there are few in the reform movement who have education degrees or extensive experience in public schools. They are, for the most part, unfamiliar with the empirical research on how children learn and what motivates them to become excited and engaged in learning. Furthermore, they appear to be ignorant about what best motivates teachers to be excited about their roles, and what would attract more individuals to be interested in becoming a teacher. They seem to have one focus: high test scores on corporate-created standardized, high-stakes tests! And, to further emphasize the political/corporate importance of these test scores, our leaders have made laws and policy that teachers will be evaluated through the improvement of student test scores!

This has become the universal objective of public education, despite the fact that this intensive factory-like, test-prep, one-size-fits-all environment,

- Narrows the curriculum, and focuses mainly on lower-level thinking skills that will be tested,
- Decreases the emphasis of student interest and need; like music, art, citizenship and character development,
- Decreases student interest & joy in the classroom; makes school more factory-like, un-motivating and boring for many students,
- Discriminates against those students who are Special needs, ELS, or non-standardized test oriented,
- Results in perversion and corruption of the learning process (cheating, test-prepping, and reducing students to commodities vs. unique individuals),
- Diminishes the attraction of the teaching profession to those who desire the use of more creativity and the use of professional judgment with standards, curriculum, assessments and even teaching techniques.

So, why is this happening?

Ignorance of the research is one answer, but, as many policy analysts will often say, “Follow the money!”

- Many of our corporate leaders see failure of the education system as an opportunity for profit. Think of it: There’s big public tax dollars available for anyone who can label a school or kids as “failures” and claim that they can do a better job for less money.
- Bill Gates and Microsoft, for example, have pumped billions of dollars into public education for what? Profits from more on-line education and data-collection through Microsoft!
- And our politicians are influenced by corporate lobbyists and their political contributions.

So, what can we do about this concerted effort to undermine public education?

- Write or call your local, state and federal legislators and Regents members to demand change,
- Join protests against high-stakes, standardized testing, opting children out of high-stakes, standardized tests,
- Read the research, and share with education and political leaders and your friends!

Christine Purtell
Speaker 9: Concluding Statements
Cosgrove Middle School Math Academic Intervention Services Teacher
National Board Certified
Christinepurtell@yahoo.com

Hello, my name is Christine Purtell, and I have been a NYS public school teacher for 18 years.

As Marie Campanaro discussed earlier, we believe that assessments are a critical piece of the learning experience for every student. We value assessments that provide us with information to help us improve our teaching and help our students understand the curriculum. Unfortunately, as you have heard today, the NYS assessments do not serve these purposes. In contrast to the true purpose of assessment, the NYS assessments do not provide teachers with any useful information to help us improve our teaching or help our students learn. This is a serious concern for us given the amount of time and energy required by our students to complete these assessments.

The State Education Department must earn back the trust of educators. We have not been tapped as resources in this assessment process, and our legitimate concerns have been ignored. In response to our petition, the SED stated that these assessments “are the best way to determine how all of our students are performing, as compared with other students in their school, their district and across the state.” We do not support this claim.

We would begin to support the state assessment process if the following concerns are addressed:

- The tests should be shortened significantly. Six days of testing is unnecessary.
- Field test questions should not be embedded within the assessments, as they confuse and distract students.
- The State Education Department needs to be transparent about how the cut scores are developed, so we can understand the meaning of each student’s score. More importantly, practicing classroom teachers must be actively involved in this process.
- The tests should be published in their entirety, and teachers must be allowed to discuss the tests with colleagues.
- Teachers must be given specific and relevant data in a timely manner, so the results can be used to improve instruction and district curriculum.

We are up against enormous and unprecedented challenges here in New York State, and we hope that parents, educators, administrators, and community members will join us in our efforts to encourage leaders in Albany to make decisions that will allow testing to be fair, transparent, and meaningful. Here are some ways you can help us to accomplish these goals:

- Sign our petition at standwithspencerport.wordpress.com

- Write, call and visit your local legislators. Ask questions about the topics we discussed here today
- Contact your representative on the Board of Regents
- Write and call Commissioner King and Governor Cuomo
- Attend your local school board meetings. Any resident is entitled to the privilege of the floor. Great change can be made when individual districts like ours unite in a message, encouraging more people to join us.
- Continue to educate yourself about these issues. Talk to your friends and family. Just because you may not have a child taking the tests in grades 3-8, does not mean you are insulated from these reforms. Strong public education is important to every citizen and every community.

Thank you for your support!

We invite you to ask questions relating to the New York State testing issues that we have discussed today.