



P.O. Box 538 NORTHPORT, NEW YORK 11768

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A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, A NEW OPPORTUNITY

By Gary D. Bixhorn & Charles T. Russo

Long Island educators tend to be a resilient and optimistic group. It's easy to feel this way when you work with children on a daily basis as they experience the joy of learning and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to become responsible citizens and productive young adults. Over the next few weeks, we'll greet the region's 29,000 enthusiastic incoming kindergartners who will become the graduating class of 2029. Although they will encounter a far different world upon graduation than we know today, we wholeheartedly embrace both their excitement and the challenge of preparing them for whatever the future holds.

We firmly believe that all of these children can learn, and we make every effort to create a learning environment in which this will occur. In order to do this, we have to remain optimistic and enthusiastic while promoting policies and practices that will allow our public schools to realize their full potential. Advocating such change is something the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association does on an ongoing basis. At the same time, we understand that change doesn't occur easily, and even when it does happen, it doesn't mean things will be better. In fact, for many of us, it would be easy to be cynical and just concede that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Fortunately, our work is so important, it doesn't allow us to take this easy way out.

One doesn't even have to look beyond the front page of the newspaper to find an example of this situation. Earlier this summer, Newsday reported that despite Washington's passage of a new law last December – the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was supposed to roll back federal overreach into state and local educational matters – the U.S. Department of Education has proposed regulations that usurp state authority. The federal government wants to classify high performing schools as "in need of improvement" based on the percentage of students they believe should take standardized tests. This is exactly the kind of thinking that was supposed to change with the new law, but will not if these regulations are implemented.

A similar situation has occurred at the state level. Although the Governor, the Legislature and the Board of Regents have agreed to temporarily set aside recent reform measures that resulted in increased standardized testing, and the use of test results for a variety of purposes for which they were not intended, schools are still required to negotiate plans now for the use of these tests at some future date. This costly and time-consuming requirement provides one more example of things staying the same despite the appearance of change.

If our schools are going to reach their full potential, we need to promote meaningful change. We need to close the resource and achievement gap between our wealthiest and poorest schools, we need to improve teacher preparation programs, we need to reform our teacher certification system to encourage the best and brightest to consider a teaching career, we need a funding system that makes sense, we need student assessments that are meaningful and useful, and we need accountability systems that work. We need real, thoughtful change, not change for the sake of change.

We need to assure that the class of 2029 is prepared to meet the challenges they will encounter. The only way that's going to happen is if all involved – educators, parents, school board members, and elected officials on the state and federal levels – are willing to join together to address the very real needs of our schools in a collaborative, deliberate and thoughtful manner. This is the perfect time to start. The public's fully engaged, the federal government is trying to reduce its level of involvement, and the state is taking a step back to look at what's been done over the past few years. Let's take advantage of this opportunity and make the changes that will make a difference. It's time to start.

Gary D. Bixhorn is executive director, and Charles T. Russo is president, of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association.
