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Testimony of Leonie Haimson, Class Size Matters

On the need to revamp the Common Core

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Miho Watabe; and I am giving this testimony on behalf of Leonie Haimson, Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a citywide advocacy group devoted to providing information on the benefits of smaller classes to parents and others nationwide.

As you will surely hear from many people today, the Common Core exams and cut scores are inherently faulty, unreliable and designed to show that the vast majority of students across the state are failing, when they are not. The NYS Education Department has not been able to design a consistent, reliable state exam in at least a decade. The Pineapple question, which we were the first to expose on the 2012 state exam, is only the most obvious of the ridiculous, ambiguous and often overly abstruse questions selected for these exams.¹ First we had years of purposeful test score inflation, and now we have had years of purposeful test score deflation. The cut scores were devised to align with a combined score of 1630 on the SAT, instead of the 1550 mark which the College Board itself has stated indicates college readiness.²

Why was the Common Core designed to show the vast majority of US students and schools as failing? As the conservative commentator, Rick Hess, has explained, it was designed to facilitate the imposition of the corporate reform agenda of charter schools, and test-based teacher evaluation; to which I would add, online learning and the outsourcing of education more generally into private hands:

“First, politicians will actually embrace the Common Core assessments and then will use them to set cut scores that suggest huge numbers of suburban schools are failing. Then, parents and community members who previously liked their schools are going to believe the assessment results rather than their

¹ <http://www.wnyc.org/story/301545-the-lessons-of-pineapplegate/>

² Carol Burris was the first to expose this; see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/29/the-scary-way-common-core-test-cut-scores-are-selected/>; see also <https://research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2012/7/researchreport-2011-5-sat-college-readiness-benchmark-secondary-performance.pdf>

*own lying eyes. (In the case of NCLB, these same folks believed their eyes rather than the state tests, and questioned the validity of the latter--but the presumption is that things will be different this time.) Finally, newly convinced that their schools stink, parents and voters will embrace "reform." However, most of today's proffered remedies--including test-based teacher evaluation, efforts to move "effective" teachers to low-income schools, charter schooling, and school turnarounds--don't have a lot of fans in the suburbs or speak to the things that suburban parents are most concerned about.*³

The Common Core standards themselves were developed in a secretive process by representatives drawn mostly from the big testing corporations, with only one classroom teacher on the math committee, and not a single teacher on ELA committee.⁴ And this lack of teaching experience shows.

Three aspects of the ELA Common Core are especially defective. As I'm sure you have heard, they are developmentally inappropriate for children in the early grades. In addition, the quotas for assigning informational text -- 50% in grades K-3 and 70% thereafter --are absurd, with absolutely no backing in research and potentially very harmful, requiring teachers to strip novels and plays from the curriculum. There are many studies to show that reading literature is critical for children's cognitive development, theory of mind and empathic abilities.⁵

Finally, I don't know of any English teacher who believes in the "close reading" strategies that the Common Core insists on, in which the teacher cannot provide any context or background knowledge for the material that is assigned, and the student is not allowed to relate the readings to his or her own experience. It is a technique that is designed to drain all life, relevance and interest from the experience of reading into something dry, purposeless and purely academic.⁶ If one tried hard to devise a method to destroy the love of reading in students, one could not do better than quotas for informational text and the "close reading" dogma.

We urge the Commission to take a good hard look at the Common Core's unnatural and unsupported informational text quotas and "close reading" strategies, and delete them.

³ http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2012/11/the_common_core_kool-aid.html

⁴ http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/11/common_core_standards_ten_colo.html

⁵ See for example, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/i-know-how-youre-feeling-i-read-chekhov/?ref=global-home&r=0>

⁶ For some trenchant critiques, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/02/18/does-common-cores-focus-on-close-reading-make-sense/> and <http://curmudgucation.blogspot.com/2014/01/close-reading-20.html> and http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2013/09/close_reading_is_close_to_a_con.html