

Evaluating teachers, tests

■ **NY panel hearing**
recommendations visits LI

■ **Critics take on method**
of gauging teacher progress

BY LAUREN R. HARRISON
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Carol Burris, principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre, was one of several educators objecting to the emphasis on testing and teacher evaluations at Long Island's first regional hearing of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's new Education Reform Commission yesterday.

"The obsession with test-based evaluation of students, schools and teachers is tearing the schools we love apart," said Burris in SUNY Old Westbury's student union building. "Something is very wrong when 9-year-olds sit for tests that are longer than the SAT and the Graduate Record Exam combined."

The more than 200 people at the nearly four-hour hearing, tasked with providing recommendations on such topics as early education and student achievement, clapped loudly in response to Burris' remarks.

"Schools operate as a team," Burris said. "The last thing you want to do is to incentivize

teachers not to want that high-risk student in their class."

In his only comment at the hearing, John King, commissioner of the New York State Education Department and president of the University of the State of New York, directly addressed Burris' remarks — saying his disagreement with her on "these issues is well-documented."

"The law provides a tremendous amount of local flexibility," King said. "I think it's unfair to characterize the law as one size fits all, which is not true."

Commissioner Michael Rebell asked Burris to submit in writing what kind of flexibility New York can give to local school districts and still meet the federal government's mandates.

Yesterday's hearing was the seventh of nine that the 20-member commission is having around the state. By December, it will submit a preliminary report to the governor's office and the commission will file its final report by September 2013, said commission chairman Dick Parsons.

Dick Iannuzzi, president of the New York State United Teachers union, who taught 34 years in Central Islip, said schools need to bring social, economic, nutritional and health care needs of students to the forefront.

"The school house is more

than just an academic setting," he said.

While some representatives from business groups heralded property tax caps as a success, Iannuzzi described the mandate as "an education failure," to much applause. "And doing so, it has hurt every school district in New York State, and has disproportionately hurt those that can least afford it," he said.

Nikhil Goyal, 17, of Woodbury, a senior at Syosset High School, was one of two students who addressed the commission. He bemoaned the testing culture — particularly taking a multiple-choice test in gym class — and "ludicrous formula" to gauge teacher performance.

"I'm not a number and a test score . . . I'm a student. I want to be taught to create, to think and explore," he said at the hearing. "What separates the great from the average in the world is not high grades and scores. It's curiosity. It's grit. It's passion. It's drive."

After the meeting, he said he applauded the commission's efforts to hear from the public, but criticized the fact that the event was held during the day without enough voices from parents, students and teachers. "Without significant representation of all the stakeholders," he said, "it's going to be a waste of everybody's time."

Most LI districts submit draft plans

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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More than 80 percent of Long Island's 124 public school districts have submitted draft plans to the state that will be used to evaluate thousands of teachers and principals — a response far above that of districts statewide.

An Education Department tally released this week shows that 101 districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties have submitted plans to the state agency so far.

In contrast, fewer than 55 percent of districts statewide have turned in plans, state education officials said. That leaves more than 310 districts that still owe plans, including New York City's school system, the state's largest.

Vincent Lyons, Suffolk County's director for the New York State United Teachers union, voiced satisfaction over evidence that the Island's districts have generated the highest percentage of evaluation plans in the state.

One common hang-up for districts, both on the Island and upstate, has been disputes between school boards and unions representing teachers and administrators that must sign off on evaluation plans.

"It was time-consuming; it was tiring," Lyons said. "But it was a cooperative effort, and we got the job done."

In Albany, meanwhile, preparations are under way for the planned December release of the state's initial job ratings, known as "growth" scores, for about 52,000 teachers in grades 4-8, including 7,000 teachers on the Island. The scores, which already were sent to districts, are based on

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students' improvement on standardized state tests.

State law bans release of teachers' names. Instead, Education Department officials said their plan is to release statistics showing numbers of teachers, in every district and school, who are assigned one of four ratings — highly effective, effective, developing and ineffective.

State scores will count for 20 percent of teachers' evaluations, with the remainder generated by districts themselves in compliance with the plans now being submitted to Albany. Teachers rated ineffective two years running risk possible job loss.

So far, the Education Department has approved 130 of the 378 plans submitted, including 41 plans from the Island. Districts failing to win approval by Jan. 17 risk losing part of their state financial aid.

Plainview-Old Bethpage is among 23 local districts that have not turned in evaluation plans. Lorna Lewis, the district's superintendent, said administrative and union leaders have essentially settled on a plan covering about 600 teachers, and are within a "hairsbreadth" of agreeing on a salary contract to replace one that expired in June 2011.

"When you have no money to offer, it's hard," said Lewis, who took over the district in August. She was superintendent in East Williston, which has submitted its plan to the state.



State Education Commissioner John King, center, defended teacher evaluations and student testing during the Education Reform Commission's regional meeting on Long Island yesterday.