

April 6, 2014

Dear Mr. Mayor and other members of the Cambridge City Council:

As you review Item #2 on the City Manager's Agenda (related to the appropriation of Race to the Top Funds), we ask that you take the time during this Council meeting to discuss how our city's participation in Race to the Top is affecting the education our city offers via its public schools. **In particular, we ask that you discuss our Race to the Top participation in terms of the national and international print, television, and internet coverage of the recent resignation of one of Cambridge's most talented kindergarten teachers, Susan Sluyter.** Because of the widespread *and continuing* coverage of Ms. Sluyter's resignation, and her alarming description of what is happening in Cambridge Public Schools classrooms, we feel this event merits a discussion by the Cambridge City Council in the context of our participation in Race to the Top.

As reported in the *Washington Post* on March 26th, "Susan Sluyter is a veteran teacher of young children in the Cambridge Public Schools who has been connected to the district for nearly 20 years and teaching for more than 25 years. Last month she sent a resignation letter ("with deep love and a broken heart") explaining that she could no longer align her understanding of how young children learn best in safe, developmentally appropriate environments with the testing and data collection mandates imposed on teachers today." Ms. Sluyter wrote:

Each year, I have been required to spend more time attending classes and workshops to learn about new academic demands that smack of 1st and 2nd grade, instead of kindergarten and PreK. I have needed to schedule and attend more and more meetings about increasingly extreme behaviors and emotional needs of children in my classroom; I recognize many of these behaviors as children shouting out to the adults in their world, "I can't do this! Look at me! Know me! Help me! See me!" Each year I have had less and less time to teach the children I love in the way I know best—and in the way child development experts recommend. I reached the place last year where I began to feel I was part of a broken system that was causing damage to those very children I was there to serve.

The full text of her essay in the *Washington Post* is below our signature, and you can access the article at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/03/23/kindergarten-teacher-my-job-is-now-about-tests-and-data-not-children-i-quit/>

You can view Ms. Sluyter's appearance on the *Today Show* and a brief response from Superintendent Jeff Young at: <http://www.today.com/moms/teacher-quits-over-school-emphasis-standardized-tests-prep-2D79439972>

A sampling of other coverage, reaching as far as Indonesia, can be found at:

<http://newsbusters.org/blogs/kyle-drennen/2014/03/26/nbc-blames-bush-broken-system-education-no-mention-obama>

<http://www.businessinsider.co.id/susan-sluyters-resignation-letter-sums-up-common-core-concerns-2014-4/#.U0FzVMcoyB0>

<http://guardianlv.com/2014/03/veteran-teacher-susan-sluyter-quits-over-endless-student-assessments/>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2587599/Kindergarten-teacher-leaves-profession-nearly-30-years-conform-testing-requirements-mandated-No-Child-Left-Behind.html>

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/mass-kindergarten-teacher-standardized-testing-takes-joy-learning-article-1.1735739>

We thank you for considering this request for City Council discussion about our city's participation in the Race to the Top initiative and Ms. Sluyter's very public resignation, and for your service to our city.

Respectfully,

- Erica Pastor, KO Olá 2nd and 5th
- Nancy Shapiro, KO and CSUS
- Hayley Arnett, KO
- Nella LaRosa-Waters, Newly retired teacher
- David Albert, Parent of an 8th grader, Cambridge Street Upper School
- Abby Fechtman, KO 1st Olá & 4th
- Pia Cisternino, Haggerty and CRLS parent
- Belinda Watt, King Open, 5th & 2nd
- Rebecca Lavine, Cambridgeport
- Sarah Block, CRLS alumni class of 1983 and parent of 9th grader
- Ann Barnes, Graham & Parks 5th
- Antonia Foster, KO JK & 1
- Rhea Brubaker, KO 2nd & 5th
- Katy Downey, KO future 3rd grader
- Lori Taylor, MLK, K
- Anelyssa D'Abreu, KO Olá 1st, RAUS, 6th and 8th
- Maria Balinska, MLK
- Jane Chiang, MLK

By Susan Sluyter (Printed in the *Washington Post*, March 26, 2014)

When I first began teaching more than 25 years ago, hands-on exploration, investigation, joy and love of learning characterized the early childhood classroom. I'd describe our current period as a time of testing, data collection, competition and punishment. One would be hard put these days to find joy present in classrooms.

I think it started with No Child Left Behind years ago. Over the years I've seen this climate of data fascination seep into our schools and slowly change the ability for educators to teach creatively and respond to children's social and emotional needs. But this was happening in the upper grades mostly. Then it came to kindergarten and PreK, beginning a number of years ago

with a literacy initiative that would have had us spending the better part of each day teaching literacy skills through various prescribed techniques. "What about math, science, creative expression and play?" we asked. The kindergarten teachers fought back and kept this push for an overload of literacy instruction at bay for a number of years.

Next came additional mandated assessments. Four and five year olds are screened regularly each year for glaring gaps in their development that would warrant a closer look and securing additional supports (such as O.T, P.T, and Speech Therapy) quickly. Teachers were already assessing each child three times a year to understand their individual literacy development and growth. A few years ago, we were instructed to add periodic math assessments after each unit of study in math. Then last year we were told to include an additional math assessment on all Kindergarten students (which takes teachers out of the classroom with individual child testing, and intrudes on classroom teaching time.)

We were told we needed to have "Learning Objectives" for the children – posted in the classroom – for each math lesson. One list of objectives might read, "I can add two rolls of the dice together and find the sum. I can move my bear forward the correct number of spaces. I can split my number up to share hops between two bears." Teachers are to write these objectives out, post them for children to see, and read them to the class as expectations for what they should be able to do. Many of the Kindergarten and PreK children are unable to read those goals, and are not able to understand them as goals anyway. This task is supposed to enhance learning. I experience it as enhancing pressure on children. The message is, "You are supposed to know how to do this, even if you can't."

We are now expected to build in more math instruction time each day, with "math blocks" to mirror our "literacy blocks." This is kindergarten and PreK. These are 4, 5 and 6 year olds. Children this age do not learn well though blocks of single subject academics. We help them learn best when play is integrated with academics and theme-driven projects extend over time, weaving academics throughout.

Simultaneously, the literacy goals and objectives were changing as well. We found ourselves in professional development work being challenged to teach kindergartners to form persuasive arguments, and to find evidence in story texts to justify or back up a response they had to a story. What about teaching children to write and read through the joy of experiencing a story together, or writing about their lives and what is most important to them? When adults muck about too much in the process of learning to read and write, adding additional challenge and pressure too soon, many children begin to feel incompetent and frustrated. They don't understand. They feel stupid. Joy disappears.

There is a national push, related to the push for increased academics in Early Childhood classrooms, to cut play out of the kindergarten classroom. Many kindergartens across the country no longer have sand tables, block areas, drama areas and arts and crafts centers. This is a deeply ill-informed movement, as all early childhood experts continuously report that 4, 5 and 6 year olds learn largely through play. Play is essential to healthy development and deep foundational learning at the kindergarten level. We kindergarten teachers in Cambridge have found ourselves fighting to keep play alive in the kindergarten classroom.

Last year we heard that all kindergarten teachers across the state of Massachusetts were to adopt one of a couple of in-depth comprehensive assessments to perform with each kindergarten child three times a year. This requires much training and an enormous amount of a teacher's time to

carry out for each child. Cambridge adopted the Work Sampling System, which is arguably a fine tool for assessment, but it requires a teacher to leave the classroom and focus on assessment even more, and is in addition to other assessments already being done. The negative impact of this extensive and detailed assessment system is that teachers are forced to learn yet another new and complicated tool, and are required to spend significantly less time in the classroom during the three assessment periods, as they assess, document evidence to back up their observations, and report on each child. And it distracts teachers yet again from their teaching focus, fracturing their concentration on teaching goals, projects, units of study, and the flow of their classroom curriculum.

Then we became an "RTI School." RTI is a method of academic intervention used to provide early, systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. It seeks to prevent academic failure through early intervention, frequent assessment, and increasingly intensive instructional interventions for children who continue to have difficulty. This sounds good, but it also takes teachers out of the classroom more for assessment and intervention (which can sometimes be done in the context of the classroom, but sometimes not.) Again, teachers are being called on to divert their attention to another way of looking at and assessing the needs of their children, yet actually preventing teachers from having the necessary time to build relationships, get to know their children and work to build community, safety and structures that allow a teacher to meet the learning and emotional needs of each child in their classroom. Last year all teachers were required to participate in a statewide Teacher Assessment system that seeks to have each teacher document the evidence that they are performing according to teaching standards laid out by the state. We were given minimal training on how to maneuver within and negotiate through the new software, and were directed to develop SMART Goals for ourselves. We needed to start documenting our success in moving toward and accomplishing our goals. To document our success, we are required to upload many photos providing "evidence" that we are qualified and effective teachers.

Now, I believe there needs to be a system of accountability for teachers and administrators, but I have seen no evidence that this method (though it takes an enormous amount of teachers' time to fulfill the requirements) would actually show anything about the quality of a teacher's work within the classroom and with the children. I remember one Sunday evening when I received an email from the principal of my school letting me know that I was missing one particular document from my assessment site. The missing document was a photo of a math assessment recording sheet that I had somehow failed to post. If I could post it by 9 a.m. the following morning, I would receive "exemplary teacher" status. If I did not, I would get a label of "needs improvement." I remember at that moment thinking, "Seriously? It has come down to this sort of nonsense?"

Also, last year, all teachers in the state of Massachusetts were informed that over the next few years, everyone would need to take a 45-hour training in English Language Learner education strategies. It is called the Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) Training and is coupled with the RETELL Training. It is being mandated by the Justice Department and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. I was in the first mandated training group in Cambridge last spring. We were required to meet starting 15 minutes directly after school ended every Thursday for 3 hours from February to June.

Our instructor delivered a three-hour Power Point presentation in each class. If we were late we were docked points for each 5 minutes. Additionally, there were weekend online courses we had to take, including readings and course work that sometimes took five to seven hours. At the end

of the course, we were required to hand in four capstone projects and to pass the course. License renewal is now contingent on having this SEI Endorsement. Since this course was requiring so much time outside of our jobs, we petitioned to use some of our paid work time to complete some of the requirements. This, of course, took us away from our work with the children in the classroom, so it was not an easy thing to ask for. We were given no compensation for the amount of time spent in this course. Many teachers continue to undergo this training – which is so poorly put together that most teachers I know feel it is almost a complete waste of time, though the subject matter is important.

Kindergarten teachers have, this year, just found out that they will be required to administer a Kindergarten Entrance Assessment to each new incoming kindergarten student two times a year. This is another extremely time-consuming assessment, and is in addition to the other assessment tools previously mentioned. Teachers will need to perform this assessment at the very beginning of each year, and then again mid-year. This is for the purpose of early identification of learning issues that might be addressed immediately in kindergarten. It will require another substantial amount of a teacher's time and focus to learn how to use the tool, and to actually administer it.

This school year, the Cambridge Public Schools Math Department announced that the math curriculum that had been used for years, with extensive training and professional development for teachers, is being replaced by a new math curriculum that is being touted as "more aligned with the Common Core." This new math curriculum, called Singapore Math, is being brought into the system now, and the old TERC Investigations curriculum is being discarded. This is at a huge expense, and will require many hours of additional teacher time for training. Singapore Math is widely contested, with many having doubts about whether it is an improvement over the TERC curriculum. As with Common Core, there is little clear evidence of its worth and quality, and seems like another shot-in-the-dark effort to improve education. Who is making a lot of money from all these product sales? That is an important question.

All the above-mentioned initiatives and mandates have had the obvious effect of removing teachers from their classrooms for significant amounts of time and fracturing their concentration and ability to teach. There were many days last year when I felt I had hardly spent any time in the classroom. It was my assistant teacher with whom the children were more familiar. She was more in the role of classroom teacher. I was more in the role of data collector.

The negative impact of all of this on a classroom of young children (or children of any age) is substantial, and obvious to many classroom teachers. Teachers everywhere are seeing an increase in behavior problems that make classrooms and schools feel less safe, and learning less able to take place. Children are screaming out for help. They are under too much pressure and it is just no longer possible to meet the social and emotional needs of our youngest children. They are suffering because of this.

I have needed to schedule more SST (Student Support Team) meetings, to get help and support in addressing extreme behaviors in my 4, 5 and 6 year olds. Behaviors I frequently witnessed included tantrums, screaming obscenities, throwing objects, flailing, self-injury, and sadness and listlessness. Many of these behaviors, I believe, are at least in part due to the inappropriate and ill-informed pressures and expectations on our young children in our schools.

The overall effect of these federal and state sponsored programs is the corrosion of teacher moral, the demeaning of teacher authority, a move away from collaborating with teachers, and the creation of an overwhelming and developmentally inappropriate burden imposed on our children.