Good afternoon Assembly members and thank you for offering the opportunity for us to provide today’s testimonies.

My name is Jim Polansky and I am the Superintendent of the Huntington Union Free School District. I am proud to lead a district of over 4,500 students, all of whom have individual gifts, talents, backgrounds, interests, needs and wants. We are proud to serve Ivy League-bound and community college-bound students (and everything in between); Intel semifinalists, finalists and winners; gifted writers and poets; accomplished historians and mathematicians; outstanding musicians and artists; skilled athletes who have received scholarships to Division I college programs; students with a range of special needs; many students for whom English is a new language; and students who come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds (including 35-40% who receive free or reduced price meals). We, as a district, are beyond proud of the progress these students make each and every year, and the teachers and administrators who play an instrumental role in helping this to happen.

You see, in Huntington, we view educating the whole child and every child as our primary responsibility. Again, this type of education is and has always been our focus, as I am sure it has been in every other district across Long Island and throughout New York State. I am and always have been fulfilled in terms of having selected the education profession, as it has allowed me to positively impact the lives and futures of many young people in ways that I could never have imagined twenty-five years ago. Again, I am sure that there are countless other educators who feel the same.

At this moment, however, I cannot say that I am proud to be an educator in New York State. While I am certain that we in Huntington continue to pursue a path that results in a high quality education for every child in our charge, education on the state level appears to be a political battleground where the focus on those talents and needs I mentioned earlier is buried or lost entirely. While everyone is entitled to their opinions on how to make things better, when education-related decisions are made in a politically charged manner, it is the children who will ultimately suffer. When resource allocation decisions are predicated on whether or not groups of adults, lawmakers or otherwise, will agree with each other, it is the children who will ultimately suffer. When laws and regulations are implemented in a manner that requires districts to make abrupt administrative or programmatic changes, it is the children who will ultimately suffer.

Now I can easily go on about the myriad proposed educational reform items attached to the Executive Budget proposal, but in the essence of time, I’d like to focus briefly on a few.

State aid - I play a key role in assembling a $100+ million budget that is educationally sound and also acceptable to our taxing residents. Transparency is an essential element of this process. Putting aside the fact that I am uncertain as to when or how it
became acceptable practice to link school aid to policy changes, I will reiterate that it has become infinitely more difficult to estimate revenues without a state aid run in hand. And I oversee a budget that includes only 13% of its revenue from state aid. I cannot imagine how districts that base the majority of their revenue estimates on state aid projections are progressing.

**Teacher Evaluations** – The governor has proposed a revised Annual Professional Performance Review program that would base 50% of an evaluation on standardized test scores and 50% on classroom observations. Put aside the fact that the 50% on test scores places tremendous emphasis on high-stakes exams and less emphasis on teaching and learning, and has led to parental upheaval throughout the state. Consider the fact, however, that the proposal suggests that 35 of the 50 points associated with classroom observations be assigned by independent observers. This is my fourth year in Huntington. I have had the privilege of working with and hiring talented administrators who have become well acquainted with their staff members professionally and who comprehensively understand their students. Additionally, we have been the beneficiary of several state “Strengthening Teacher and Leader Effectiveness” grants that have permitted us to put in place talented and respected teacher leaders and to institute supervisory practices that data show have made a positive impact and have actually earned the district ongoing acclaim. My question – will the newly proposed process take the majority of the responsibility for instructional supervision out of the hands of the people who are most qualified to engage in and who have demonstrated ongoing success with it? And, on a side note, who is going to pay for these independent evaluators?

I’ll state it in a slightly different way. Instructional supervision is an ongoing and often more of an informal process predicated on a trusting relationship between the evaluator and the evaluated. I simply cannot sink my teeth into a process that involves evaluators who are unfamiliar with our teaching staff, our children and our practices. To me, this sounds more like an “inspection” than a constructive process designed to improve instruction and increase student achievement.

**Merit Pay** – This one has me shaking my head as well. We promote and support excellence from our teachers on a daily basis. We value their ability to effectively teach and inspire our children to learn and grow academically and personally. To offer a $20,000 bonus to teachers deemed “highly effective” in an evaluation system that is unproven at best and, more likely, beyond flawed at worst has absolutely no “merit” at all. Furthermore, does this make sense in a system that should be promoting collaboration and collegiality among professionals?
I am sure that this is a long day for you and one of my objectives here was to give you a sense of what education is about in Huntington. I will remain proud of our students and the efforts we, as a district, put forth to support them. The most direct way to resolve many of the issues currently attached to the state’s educational climate is to change that climate to one that promotes that same sense of pride and support. Our kids and schools deserve nothing less.

Again, thank you for your time and for the opportunity.