

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(April 2015)*

Welcome back to this month's Under the Dome column where spring has finally sprung and students are back to school after a much need spring break.

In schools across New Jersey, students were faced with annual standardized testing, however, before they could start on their spring break. As many parents, students and teachers know, new standardized tests – known as Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) – were rolled out for students in grades 3 through 11. These new tests have garnered a lot of debate in schools, homes and in the State House among legislators who have been examining the way in which PARCC testing began and the potential use of the students' scores.

While it is critical to ensure that our public school students are well-equipped for higher education and the job market, citizens and organizations have expressed concerns with standardized testing which has become a central tool to evaluate the effectiveness of our schools and student performance. My office has received numerous letters from concerned constituents regarding PARCC testing and the treatment of parents who wish to exclude their children from these tests. Hearing the concerns of parents and school officials regarding PARCC has given me serious doubt over its place in New Jersey's education system in its current form. There have been complaints of school districts using enticements such as allowing students to opt out of final exams if they take the PARCC testing and requiring young students to verbally opt-out of the testing even when parents have already notified the schools of their choice. The chief complaint from concerned parents has been the practice of forcing some students to “sit and stare” if they are not taking the tests – in other words preventing silent reading or leaving the classroom if they choose to opt out.

The vast array of problems in our school districts caused by this seemingly unprepared statewide testing implementation is deeply troubling. As a result, several pieces of legislation have been introduced to allow parents to keep their children from testing; enact a three year moratorium on PARCC tests; prohibit testing of younger students; and provide information on testing to students. These bills are moving through the legislative process and are being closely analyzed

Meanwhile, a group of parents recently filed a petition before the State Board of Education (BOE) to adopt statewide, uniform regulations regarding the process for students to “opt-out” of standardized testing such as PARCC. Under the request, the group of parents are asking that the state BOE develops guidelines to provide an alternative learning environment for students “opting-out” of the test. They also are seeking to establish rules that prevent incentives or penalties for students in connection to whether or not they are taking the test.

Whether it's the legislative or regulatory process, I am closely monitoring and supporting efforts to address the concerns of parents, students and teachers. It is important that any student assessment testing puts the education and needs of our children first and appropriately prepare them for their academic or career paths.

In unrelated news, On March 23, 2015, Governor Christie signed into law my proposal-- Assembly Bill 2313 (A-2313) -- to make sure that our veteran support organizations have the financial resources necessary to continue to thrive in our communities. Under the law, New Jerseyans will be able to donate to veterans organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion and the Marine Corps League through their gross income tax returns.

These organizations provide a great support structure for active duty military personnel, veterans and military families. They often work with little funding to offer programs and a “home” for camaraderie for our soldiers. The extra financial support that residents will be able to give through income tax donations will be critical to helping furthering the services offered by our leading veterans’ organizations.

On that same day, the Governor also signed into law – Assembly Bill 3967 – know as the “New Jersey Tuition Equality for America’s Military (NJTEAM) Act” – to allow veterans all attending a public college or university in New Jersey to pay in-state tuition rates while they are stationed and living in New Jersey regardless of their state of residence. The law also applies to an active duty or discharged or released veteran as well as a veteran’s spouse or children.

Given the current high unemployment rate of veterans in New Jersey -- nearly one in 10 New Jersey veterans ages 18 to 64 were unemployed – it is important that veterans and active service military are able to get the education that they need in order to pursue civilian careers. Our state has some of the best institutions of higher education in the country. The NJTEAM Act will open the doors to these classrooms for out military members and families in order to help provide them with the keys to their future success.

Just a reminder that my office is currently running the 4th Annual *Princess Prom Project* to provide *Free* gowns to high school girls for their special night. This program ensures that the cost of a special dress does not keep our daughters from enjoying a great teenage memory. Since March, we have provided gowns for almost 40 young ladies to enjoy for some of the most memorable nights of their lives – the prom, quinceaneras and sweet sixteen events. More than 300 dresses have been donated to continue to grow our dress collection of all sizes. For more information on how to “shop” for a dress or donate a gown to the program, stop by my office located at 4621A Nottingham Way, Hamilton or call (609) 631-7501.

I look forward to seeing you back here Under the Dome.

Editor’s Note: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; www.WayneDeAngelo.org or Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo.