

2nd NYC Public Hearing for the New NY Education Reform Commission

October 16, 2012

Remarks of Chancellor Dennis M. Walcott

Introduction

Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with members of the Commission today. As a product of New York City public schools, and now a grandfather of a New York City public school student, I wake up every morning blessed with the awesome responsibility of leading the country's largest school system. I take seriously our charge to help shape the destiny of 1.1 million students by preparing them for success in college and careers. Educating one of every 50 public school students in the United States is no small feat. I want to discuss the proven, solution-oriented strategies that will lead to even greater progress with the continued support of the Governor and our partners in Albany – the benefits of mayoral control, the importance of investment in early childhood education, and the impact of charter schools. My Deputy Shael Suransky will also be testifying this afternoon on the support we need to prepare our students and teacher to meet the critical goal of college and career readiness.

Mayoral Control

Since 2002, under the Bloomberg Administration, the NYC Department of Education has implemented a bold education reform plan called Children First to prepare all students for success in the 21st Century. The goal is a simple one: to offer a high-quality education to every child in schools across the city. A signature achievement is that our graduation rate has steadily increased under the Administration to an all-time high of more than 65 percent in 2011.

One cornerstone of our reform is to empower principals – a great school starts with a great leader. We believe that principals are the primary agents of school-based reform. Through leadership programs, we have recruited, developed, and retained a cadre of strong school leaders dedicated to constructive change. To ensure they achieve, we continue to fight to create conditions for them to be effective – enabling them to act not only as managers and administrators, but as instructional leaders capable of driving innovation and improvement of teaching and learning at their schools.

The Mayor and I believe, and the research shows, that the most important factor in a student's success is a highly effective teacher in every classroom. In New York City, we have made teacher quality and support a priority. First, we must recruit, reward and retain the best teachers. That's why we've raised salaries and continue to propose ways to attract the best and brightest. We created in collaboration with the UFT a teacher effectiveness pilot that aligns with the new state law requiring a rating system with four performance levels: highly effective, effective, developing or ineffective. We've learned from this pilot that standards work.

Teachers can improve their skills with meaningful feedback and professional development. Today the pilot operates in 200 schools. It is time to bring this pilot to every teacher in every school through a citywide evaluation deal.

To ensure that as many students as possible have access to the best possible education, we have replaced 141 of our lowest-performing schools with better options and opened 590 new schools: 427 districts schools and 163 public charter schools. As a result, we've created more high-quality schools to serve children and families, particularly in high need neighborhoods. An MDRC study from 2012 found that these schools have helped students graduate, be better prepared for college, complete required Regents exams, and earn credits.

Despite the progress we have made, we have much more work to do. We recommend continued State support for mayoral control because we've have seen the evidence of what mayoral control can do to leverage systemic change. With mayoral control, schools will continue to expect greater empowerment and accountability for school leaders; we will maintain the responsibility to intervene in our struggling schools, and the capacity to create high-quality school choices for our students and families, including charter schools.

Early Childhood

Every child deserves access to a quality early childhood education. Research from across the country points to the importance of early education for setting children on a path towards college and career readiness. Children who attend full-day pre-k fare better than their peers attending no pre-k or half-day programs, particularly in low income areas. Pre-k works and the more the better.

Under the Bloomberg Administration, we have increased pre-k enrollment by nearly 50 percent. While the State does not allow us to use the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) grant for full-day services, we have ensured about 55 percent of our pre-k seats offer full day service by investing city resources and partnering with city agencies. We recently committed to add an additional 4,000 full-day seats for the 2013-14 school year, bringing that percentage to over 60 percent.

We must do more to increase the number of children entering kindergarten ready to succeed. We know that over 7,500 children entered kindergarten in NYC last year without participating in a pre-k program the previous year. The percentage of children coming to kindergarten without a pre-k experience is highest in some of our neediest communities. Moreover, at least 8,500 existing seats in high needs areas are still half-day. Half-day pre-k, rather than full-day, often presents a barrier to enrollment, especially for working families.

I ask that the State build on progress made towards expanding access to high-quality early childhood education by increasing flexibility and funding in the UPK grant. Specifically, we request the flexibility to use the UPK funds to offer full-day services and seek additional funding to serve as many families as possible. While historically, the NYC DOE had returned between \$25 and \$30 million in unused funds to the State, through increased enrollment and rigorous fiscal monitoring this year, there are minimal unused funds. If we continue at this rate of

success of enrolling more children, we will need an increase in the overall UPK allocation for 2013-14.

Charter Cap

As public schools, charter schools are an important part of our effort to create high-quality school options for our students and families. Currently we have 159 charter schools operating in all five boroughs of New York City, authorized by NYCDOE, SED, and SUNY.

Families have demonstrated a strong demand for our city's charter schools. Over 46,000 New York City students were in charter schools in 2011-12 and another 51,000 were on wait lists. New York City charter schools serve higher proportions of Black and Hispanic students and students on Free and Reduced Price Lunch than district schools. In our 2012-13 Progress Reports for elementary and middle schools released this month, nearly half of our charters (46 percent) earned an A.

As of today, there are 68 charters left to be approved under the New York State charter cap. The State Education Department (SED) is making Round II approvals this fall, which will decrease the cap further for the 2014 charter application cycle. We are currently tracking a pipeline upwards of 25 applicants to SUNY and SED for 2014 opening, including replications of successful schools in high demand. In addition, many other independent operators have reached out to the New York City Charter Center, SUNY and SED to open in 2014 and beyond. Based on this interest, we could exhaust the charter cap within two school years.

It is critical to sustain and continue the development of high-quality charter schools in New York City to serve our students, including some of our most high-need students. We therefore recommend that the charter cap be eliminated in New York State in order to offer students and families the choice of charter schools. At minimum, the charter cap should be increased this year so that successful charter school providers are encouraged to continue developing high-quality schools for New York State.

Closing

In closing, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about our progress and lay out our goals for the future. We have encouraged everyone in our City – parents, teachers, and the students themselves – to Expect Success. If we set high aspirations, we will meet them. It is our hope that you will strongly consider my testimony as you develop your recommendations for improving education in New York State. I look forward to your questions.