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Submitted by:

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Nan Berke, Co-chair, Legislation Committee

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Dear Members of the New York Education Reform Commission,

The current wave of education reform in the U.S. and here in New York aims to make every student ready for college and a career. And we certainly owe it to all children to aspire to a public education system that can meet such objectives and more, such as readiness for democratic citizenship. But we don't believe the State's current approach matches our collective aspirations.

What does it mean to be prepared for college today and to be prepared for the challenges of the 21st century? And what sort of teaching and learning does this require? If we are serious about transforming education here in New York, and serious about moving the next generations forward into the 21st century, we must be both clear and correct in our vision of what must be done to accomplish our goals.

Already there exists a clear and growing consensus -- at least a consensus among our nation's top colleges and universities, among experts from various disciplines, and among the world's top education performers -- that in this century higher order thinking skills are "the new average" (Fullan 2010), and that equally critical to success now are an array of non-cognitive skills and character dispositions that can also be developed in school.

21st century success in college and beyond now demands:

- **Higher order cognitive skills**, such as critical thinking, complex non-standard problem-solving, interdisciplinary thinking, knowledge application, effective oral and written communication, technological fluency, creativity, and inventiveness;
- **Interpersonal skills**, including collaboration, leadership, cultural sensitivity, emotional and social intelligence, and tolerance for diversity; as well as
- **A variety of character traits and dispositions**, such as adaptability, empathy, engagement, entrepreneurialism, integrity, life-long learning, motivation, perseverance, resilience, responsibility, self-discipline, and self-initiative.

To meet students' needs for such a diverse set of skills, and to match the reality that informational content is now digitally accessible to all, classroom teaching and learning must be transformed in ways that we have yet to envision. Still, already we know that teachers must be "high-level knowledge workers" as well as "agents of innovation" (Schliescher 2012), and that they must possess the very same skills and dispositions the new era demands of their students because, "One cannot give what one does not have" (Barber & Mourshed 2007).

The federal Race to the Top initiatives that New York has agreed to implement not only continue but intensify a reliance on standardized test-based accountability to drive such transformational educational change. Yet, we know the higher order cognitive, as well as non-cognitive skills and dispositions needed for success in the 21st century are the very ones that are “least subject to standardized testing” (Blinder 2009). And we now have evidence that non-cognitive skills contribute to cognitive outcomes; that cognitive skills alone play a more modest role in both individual and national economic success than has been previously claimed; that “world class” achievement” must include measures of both; and that an overemphasis on standardized test scores at the expense of the non-cognitive effects of schools can create “far-reaching damage” (Levin 2012).

According to the National Research Council, decades of high-stakes test-based accountability have thus far failed to raise student achievement and may even be contributing to higher dropout rates in the U.S. And this is no surprise to many. The idea that standardized test achievement equates with broad learning of any lasting impact – economic, social, civic, or otherwise – has never been established. Nor is there empirical evidence that a national curriculum is the silver bullet to cure longstanding disparities in U.S. achievement. In fact, a just published Brookings study concludes the new “Common Core” standards will have little effect on student learning (Loveless 2012).

Of course, there are appropriate uses for standardized assessments – especially ones that help teachers to make formative decisions about pedagogy – but that is not how this tool is being used in U.S. education today. Meanwhile, “No high-performing nation in the world evaluates teachers by the test scores of their students,” and the U.S. states and cities that have done so for years are not models for New York to emulate (Ravitch 2012). Indeed, according to leading U.S. mathematician John Ewing, by focusing on the narrow band of cognitive skills represented on standardized tests, “One can dramatically increase test scores while at the same time actually *decreasing* student learning;” and, if we now base teacher evaluations on such data “we are not raising our expectations of teachers, we are lowering them.” Sociologist Aaron Pallas concurs, noting that teacher evaluations based on standardized test content should be considered less, not more, rigorous.

Thus, as you reflect on various approaches and strategies for New York public education, we urge you to find alternative perspective in existing and proven approaches to reform that can propel us all forward. For this we hope you are willing to look beyond the U.S. to what others have done to overcome achievement gaps and to raise the bar for all students, and to what they are now doing to elevate teaching and learning to meet the new challenges of the 21st century. We also urge you to look inward at schools throughout New York City and State that are beginning to transform their classrooms by using the “right drivers” to motivate and inspire both teachers and students (Fullan 2010).

Sincerely,

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