

2nd NYC Public Hearing for the New NY Education Reform Commission
October 16, 2012
Remarks of Chief Academic Officer Shael Polakow-Suransky

Introduction

Good afternoon. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak with members of the Commission today, and I appreciate your effort on behalf of the State to take a close look at what is best for students and how we can improve our public education system. In New York City, we have made tremendous progress over the last decade, but as a City and a State we still have significant room to grow in order to prepare all of our students for college and careers. Over the last two decades, as I have served as a New York City teacher, principal, and district administrator, I have learned that reforms change student outcomes only when they directly impact the classroom. In that spirit, I would like to share with you several items for your consideration: 1) the need for sufficient funding to support our goal of ensuring that all students are on track for college and career readiness, 2) the need for New York City and other high-need districts to be granted authority to certify teachers, and 3) the need to change State regulations to better meet the needs of 21st century classrooms.

Funding to Support College and Career Readiness

I want to first focus on college readiness. Over the last decade, we have succeeded in increasing the four-year high school graduation rate from 50 percent, where it had been stuck for decades, to more than 65 percent. With high schools recognizing that some students need more time, our five- and six-year graduation rates are even higher. This progress has opened the door to college and a brighter future for many thousands of young people, including a young man I met recently named Jason. His family was ecstatic when he graduated from high school. But Jason was not ready for college, and after a year of remedial coursework at CUNY he had dropped out of college and was collecting carts at a local grocery store. Our young people deserve better, and our shared future relies on it. We have an obligation to ensure that our students graduate high school with the ability to comprehend what they read, to write effectively to explain and persuade, and to solve complex, real-world math problems. These skills will set them up for success in college and careers and give them real choices as they leave high school.

New York State's decision in 2010 to adopt the Common Core standards created a higher bar for students and teachers. Implementing these higher standards will strengthen instruction and better prepare students to graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Similarly, the State's new teacher evaluation system paves the way for us to improve the effectiveness of teaching practice across New York City. Over the past two years, New York City has taken important steps to begin the implementation of these initiatives in our schools. Principals in every New York City school have begun using language from a research-based rubric to provide teachers with regular, formative feedback on their classroom practice. The 200 schools in our teacher effectiveness pilot are receiving intensive support for this work from "talent coaches" focused on teacher development. Last year every student in New York City participated in a Common Core-aligned unit of study, culminating in a rigorous performance task, in literacy and

math. This year, that work will deepen across our City as every teacher in the core content areas begins to make shifts toward the Common Core.

These initiatives present an opportunity to fundamentally change the quality of classroom instruction in our schools, but we are bound to fall short if we raise the standards without investing in the support that educators need to meet this challenge. Here are the key investments we need to make:

- *Curricular resources aligned to the Common Core*, including new books and other texts, along with software teaching materials and student-facing learning tools.
- *School-based coaches*.
 - Coaches will be needed to train teachers in the implementation of new Common Core-aligned curricula.
 - Talent coaches will be needed to support school leaders with providing useful feedback to and making decisions about teachers at all performance levels.
- *Local assessments*. Aligning our teacher evaluation system with the requirements of Education Law 3012c will require us to rate teachers in part based on their students' performance on assessments selected by the school district—which entails creating or purchasing, and then administering and scoring, rigorous local assessments in every grade level and subject area.
- *Per session funding* to pay teachers to grade new Common Core-aligned State reading, math, and science exams for grades 3-8, and high school Regents exams.

Altogether, this work will cost New York City several hundred million dollars above existing funding levels to fully implement. Race to the Top and other State grants will cover only a fraction of this cost over the next several years. Furthermore, State obligations to New York City and other high-need districts under the Contracts for Excellence, or C4E, agreement have not been fulfilled, leading to an additional shortfall for our neediest students. Without sufficient funding, there is a real risk that these reforms will not achieve the goal of improving our schools.

Beyond funding the transitions to the Common Core and a new teacher evaluation system, we urge the State to take additional steps to improve college and career readiness for its students by passing the New York Dream Act, which would make undocumented immigrants who have grown up in New York eligible for in-state tuition rates and government tuition aid. Roughly 200,000 New York City public school students are immigrants, and many do not have documentation. These students are being systematically denied access to educational opportunity. Knowing that college is economically viable would have a dramatic impact on these students' engagement in school now, making the Dream Act very important for college readiness.

Finally, more than 5,600 students in New York City schools are currently attending six-year programs known as early college high schools—meaning that when they graduate, they will receive not just a high school diploma but an associate's degree. Many of these students begin taking college coursework while they are still in high school. But the expense of these college credits, which are paid for by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) and partner organizations, is preventing us from expanding these opportunities to more students. Therefore, we strongly support changing the rules for the Tuition Assistance Program to make this funding

available to students in early college programs— without it counting against their cap once they graduate to the next level.

Teacher Certification

High-need school districts should be granted the authority to train and certify teachers. We know that teachers are the most important school-based factor affecting a child's academic success. As a former teacher and principal, I saw how a series of highly effective teachers could dramatically increase students' academic achievement. Learning programs embedded in schools are most effective at preparing new teachers to take on the challenges of the classroom. Most teacher development happens in schools, and our strongest schools have proven to be powerful engines of teacher growth. New York City's existing successful teacher residency program serves as an excellent example of the impact that intensive school-based experience can have on the skills of new teachers.

As we are working to implement widespread reforms to raise the level of instruction for all students and to improve the ways that special education services are delivered to our hundreds of thousands of students with disabilities, we are seeing too many novice teachers entering our schools without the training and skills they need to educate our students effectively. At the same time, we consistently face shortfalls in the number of high-quality candidates for teaching positions in our highest-need areas—like special education and science. Because traditional teacher preparation programs do not produce enough graduates in these areas, typically somewhere between a quarter and half of the teachers we hire in high-need areas must be sourced through alternative routes.

To ensure that incoming New York City teachers are prepared for success in our public schools and that their skills are aligned with the needs of our district, we urge the State to allow the DOE to train and certify our own teachers, rather than relying solely on existing programs at institutions of higher education. Our teacher residency program could easily be converted into a certification program that would generate a well-prepared supply of new teachers for New York City schools.

It is important to note that this program would supplement, and not replace, existing programs at institutions of higher education. Furthermore, the proposed pathway would not lead to a Master's of Arts in Teaching; rather, we propose that upon completion of our program, the Regents would award Initial certification, and that the program would also satisfy any degree requirements for Professional certification.

Online and Blended Learning

Finally, we believe that the State should work to remove legislative and policy barriers to allow more districts to create effective blended and online learning programs, which are key elements of 21st century instruction. In New York City's Innovation Zone, we have been working with more than 150 schools to use online and blended learning to better meet the needs, motivations, and strengths of every student. Online and blended learning has the potential to be a powerful tool in a range of settings.

New York State received a very low rating compared to other states on the Nation's Digital Learning Report Card, and we believe that State regulations should be modified to align

with the report's recommendations—in particular to allow for “anytime/anywhere” learning and credit-earning. Students should be able to earn credits for mastering skills, not just for completing a defined amount of “seat time.” Additionally, students should be allowed to enroll in an online course anytime during the year, not just at predetermined times.

Closing

In closing, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. It is our hope that you will strongly consider our suggestions as you develop your set of recommendations to improve education for students across New York State. I look forward to your questions.