

I am Adam Urbanski, President of the Rochester Teachers Association.

Welcome to Rochester. And a special welcome to Randi Weingarten, AFT President, who truly represents the strongest voice we have on behalf of teachers, students and public schools. We are grateful to you, Randi, for all you do, on this Commission and in so many other forums, to articulate the collective wisdom of teachers.

We are very fortunate here in Rochester because we have collaboration between labor and management, we believe in solution-driven responsible and responsive teacher unionism, we are jointly promoting project-based learning and performance-based assessments, and we all agree that we have a shared responsibility to dramatically improve student learning. We recognize that it's unreasonable to expect that our students could get their act together if the adults in their lives cannot do so first. And we know all too well that making our schools effective for all our students will be tough enough even if we all work together, and that we're dead in the water if we don't.

The Rochester City School District has a student enrollment of more than 33,600 students, 88% of whom receive free or reduced price lunch. This means that 9 out of ten of our students live in poverty. While we know well that poverty does not have a deterministic impact on learning, the concentration of poverty has a predictable and detrimental impact if we do nothing to address the impediments to learning that poverty invariably represents.

In order to ensure that our students get a good start in school, we want to offer pre-kindergarten and full day kindergarten to all children whose families would want it. And we want to do more for our students, like extended learning time, more health and social services, and more enrichment programs that would make the school more interesting for our students than the streets. But we need your help to achieve this.

Our school district, dependent on the city government for local funding, has not received an increase in local support in over 10 years. We have therefore become increasingly dependent on state aid to fund our schools. But given the State Aid cap that will limit growth in State aid, our fiscal problems are likely to get worse.

This is happening at the very time that there's a need for even greater resources as we begin the implementation of Common Core State Standards and the new teacher evaluation regimen (APPR). Both of these initiatives require a significant investment in professional development and tools for staff at a time when our district has diminished resources. Nonetheless, we were the first to collaboratively negotiate an agreement on APPR – one that is innovative, gives choices to teachers and adjusts the

criteria to the realities that exist for our students. And teachers here are also willing to have an open mind to Common Core Standards – if only they could get the requisite training, texts and time. We are still waiting for these tools.

Instead, schools are saddled with standardized tests that impede teaching and learning in our schools. This is at the expense of an immense loss of instructional time. And when teachers are forced to spend too much time on test prep and “teaching to the test,” the curriculum is narrowed, meaningful lessons are eliminated, and students lose out on a rich and full education.

Teachers are not opposed to assessing students. However the assessments should complement the curriculum, not drive it. And grading teachers need not be at the expense of degrading teaching.

We must restore a balance to public education by putting a premium on high-quality instruction informed by appropriate and useful assessments. We need a new system that is balanced and relies on authentic performance-based assessments that do not simply ask students what they know but rather to show what they are able to do with what they know.

Teachers are not opposed to accountability nor do they believe that we should ignore the results of teachers’ work. But we want it to be fair. Our opposition is to high stakes on high volume but low quality testing. It is time to let teachers do their job. I urge the commission to recommend a better and a balanced approach to State assessments. And I urge you to also recommend that teachers and schools be provided the needed resources and support to help all our students succeed.

And one final but important point. Rather than merely settling for “doing the wrong thing righter,” I would urge you to consider whether the current approach to fixing our educational system is indeed facing in the right direction. Competition, standardization and test-based accountability are the opposite of what the highest performing nations are doing with their educational systems. Instead, they emphasize collaboration, individualization and trust-based professionalism. We should learn from them and trust the collective wisdom of teachers to put us on the right course for real reforms that would truly benefit our schools and our students.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

