

Good afternoon. I am Allen Williams former member of the Rochester City School Board. As the Commission develops its recommendations to the Governor, I ask you to consider the story of Rochester's reform history. Our district has long considered itself a leader in education reform; for the last three decades we have been an early adopter of virtually every hot reform trend.

Selling change has never been the problem in Rochester, sustaining it has.

Rochester, like all of the Big 5 districts, faces a terrible dilemma that the Commission must keep foremost in your minds: the Rochester community is desperate for radical change for our students, but we lack the political power to take on the educational status quo. The result of this power gap has been decades of reform churn and the state's lowest graduation and achievement rates.

The taxpayer has paid dearly for this reform churn. When I joined the board in 2008 the district had a budget of \$634 million, 33,000 students and 5500 employees. The defenders and protectors of the status quo argue that Rochester's abysmal record of academic achievement is due to bad parents who spend their days in drug induced comas or prisons, poor students, excessive assessments and not enough money. In 2008 the Schott Foundation released their report in which Rochester had a 19% graduation rate for young black males. The third worst in the nation behind Detroit and Norfolk. A few weeks ago the Schott Foundation released an update from their original 2008 report. Rochester's graduation rate for black males is 9% the worst rate in the country. The current budget is \$706 million, 30,000 students and 5500 employees.

I can say unequivocally from my time on the school board, local school boards and administrations are no match for the powerful, well-funded special interests who have a vested interest in the status quo of our district.

If we are serious about reforming our urban school systems, about curbing this excessive spending, then we must insist that the state act as the main driver of education reform. Following are three examples of specific ways that NYS can support reform in the Big 5.

Teacher Evaluations

For decades, Rochester was touted as a model of teacher development and evaluation. But an audit conducted during my tenure on the board showed that the Rochester evaluation was a meaningless process that identified only 6 teachers in 10 years as ineffective, despite the growing data that too many of our students were not learning. The remaining 99.7% of teachers were deemed “effective” and moved through meaningless career development levels that were actually defined by time-served and not performance. The audit also revealed that we were granting tenure with little or no observation of new teachers. A staggering 65% of first year teachers were not evaluated in their first year. A few years back, our board rubberstamped tenure for a teacher who was convicted of using heroin at her elementary school.

For these reasons our community organized and demanded tougher evaluations last year that resulted in New York State’s new teacher evaluation law. You have heard a lot of testimony opposed to the new APPR organized by the teachers union. On behalf of the many parents, clergy and taxpayers of our coalition, I urge you to not retreat on evaluations, but instead to push for fidelity of implementation. Rochester’s enrollment has been steadily declining and will continue to do so. Layoffs are imminent and we must empower management to make decisions in the best interest of the student, not seniority of the adults. A rigorous APPR is critical to closing the achievement gap.

Funding Equity

During my time on the Board, Rochester was one of only a handful districts in the country that overhauled its traditional budgeting practices and adopted

student-based budgeting, where funding would be weighted for student need and would follow the child to the school of their parents' choice, creating for the first time, incentives for a school to attract and retain students, respond to parent concerns much in the same way that charters must. The budget plan would have also corrected long-standing inequity within the district that over-funded certain schools and under-funded others and given parents unprecedented power to "vote with their feet." After significant political pressure organized by special interests, our student-based budgeting program was abandoned before it was ever fully implemented.

You have heard a lot of testimony calling for funding equity, testimony largely scripted by special interests who want more funding and less accountability. I urge the Commission to consider a broader definition of equity than what you've heard. True funding equity can only be achieved when funding follows the child and when systems are forced to disclose actual costs. The traditional budgeting practices of school systems mask gross inequities within a district, inequities that districts would prefer to keep out of public view. A discussion of funding equity must also acknowledge that charters school students are not fully funded nor do they have access to pre-K funding.

Parent Involvement

Rochester has also long been an innovator in parent engagement. Our parents were among the first to win a seat at the school-based planning team table in the 1990s, the first to have parents participate in the tenure review and teacher evaluation process, the first to have a parent representative on the collective bargaining team. Like with most of the Rochester reforms though, these parent reforms have been neutralized or completely dismantled over the years.

We will never see the kind of fundamental change that Rochester's children need unless the system is compelled to respond to parents. Systems will never do this voluntarily.

- Create a Parent Ombudsman coordinated by an agency other than the local or state education agencies to systematically collect parent concerns and complaints. As Justice Brandeis famously said, "Sunlight is the best disinfectant" and we must be honest about why parents are dissatisfied and leaving our public systems if we are to improve them. We can no longer trust the local districts with listening to their customers, for decades they have proven themselves unable or unwilling to do so.
- For decades our parents have tried to exercise their Title I and shared decision-making rights to advocate for radical change to save their children. Their efforts have been in vain--systems understand that a poor parent's power is only symbolic. The Commission should recommend Parent Trigger law to give parents in persistently lowest achieving schools power to compel the change their children need, but that the system has been unwilling to make.

The only way out of this decline is true reform that shifts the balance of power from government to the public. Reform must rest on giving parents more educational choices, greater access to information and recourse when they are trapped in a failing school. In doing so, you will be enlisting them as true partners in the state's reform agenda.