



TESTIMONY TO THE
NEW NY EDUCATION REFORM COMMISSION

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By
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I am honored to present ideas for education reform to this commission, and thank you for allowing me to do so.

The seriousness with which commission members have embraced their charge, the breadth of stakeholders from which input has been solicited, and the willingness shown to examine public education's most entrenched and serious challenges is inspiring and hopeful.

Academic performance indicators tell us what we need to know: New York's school children cannot, and should not, suffer through yet another series of watered-down, tinker-around-the-edges, happy-talk ideas with multi-year implementation plans.

The track-record of past reform attempts also tell us something we need to realize: we can't get the schools we need by slightly modifying the schools we have.

This Commission and this Governor can parlay Albany's new "get it done" attitude into enacting the truly transformative changes needed in public education. Simply pumping more money into the schools we have without real change, without an overhaul, for example, will just result in more expensive failures.

STRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM

Mayoral control

Approve of his actions or not, Mayor Bloomberg's unified control over New York City's schools has shown how mayoral control allows the quick institution of new policies, the streamlining of nightmarishly bureaucratic processes, and – maybe most important – it lets the public hold one leader accountable for the performance of its education system. Other cities across the nation have offered a very clear record of the success, and some of the challenges, of mayoral-control designs.

The state's "Big Five" city school districts and more than a dozen other cities have school-district boundaries that match city limits. This presents an opportunity to allow mayoral control in a variety of districts under the control of different political parties throughout the state.

Lieutenant Governor Robert Duffy expressed his support of such a policy when he was mayor here in Rochester, the state's third-largest city, and Assemblyman David Gantt has continued that advocacy.

The best solution, however, may not be to *mandate* mayoral control. Rather, simply pass state legislation that would *allow* mayoral control in cities with borders coterminous with their school districts. Each election cycle then will be an opportunity for a public referendum on whether the city prefers the diluted accountability structure of a school board or the direct accountability offered by mayoral control over the schools, and on how good a job the chosen option is doing.

The Need for Mayoral Control in New York State

In Spring 2010, President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, told a group of mayors and superintendent that, "at the end of my tenure, if only seven mayors are in control I think I will have failed." Across the nation and within New York State, inner cities are experiencing widespread academic failure, manifesting itself in underperformance on standardized state assessments and high dropout rates. Clearly, the county's Education Secretary believes that mayoral control is a policy that holds one of the keys to turning things around.

In New York, the data shows that Secretary Duncan is right. Graduation rates are a strong indicator of success, as they represent the final outcome of 12 or more years of an investment in students' learning.

Cohort Graduation Rates After 4 Years of High School

	2005	2007	2010	5-Yr Δ	3-Yr Δ
NYS Average	65.8%	69.3%	73.4%	7.6%	4.1%
Mayoral Control Districts	46.6%	52.9%	61.0%	14.4%	8.1%
NYC	46.5%	52.8%	61.0%	14.5%	8.2%
Yonkers	53.0%	57.3%	63.2%	10.2%	5.9%
Traditional School Districts	47.0%	45.4%	46.6%	-0.3%	1.2%
Buffalo	52.0%	45.1%	47.4%	-4.6%	2.3%
Rochester	39.0%	44.0%	46.1%	7.1%	2.1%
Syracuse	50.0%	48.5%	45.9%	-4.1%	-2.6%

- In comparing the 2010 graduation rates for students four years after they enter high school for New York's "Big 5" urban school districts, the mayoral control cities of Yonkers and New York City ranked first and second respectively. Both cities successfully graduated more than 60 percent of their students (63.2 percent in Yonkers; 61.0 percent in New York City), while the three districts governed by traditional boards of education were left behind, each graduating less than half of their students on time (47.4 percent in Buffalo; 46.1 percent in Rochester; 45.9 percent in Syracuse).
- In 2004-05, the combined average graduation rate for New York City and Yonkers (46.6 percent) was virtually indistinguishable from the average graduation rate of the other three

large urban school districts (47.0 percent average for Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse). In comparison to the statewide graduation rate of 65.8 percent, the performance gap for New York City and Yonkers was 19.2 points and the gap for the other three large urban traditional school districts was 18.8 points. Five years later, however, the mayoral control cities closed the gap against the statewide graduate rate to just 12.4 points while the traditional districts lagged behind by a significant 26.8 points.

- Graduation rates for the three large urban school districts governed by traditional boards of education (Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse) remained stagnant over the five-year period from 2005 and 2010, experiencing an average increase of just 0.3 percent, compared to the significant growth experienced by mayoral control cities of 14.4 percent.
- Over the past five years, both mayoral control cities were able to produce double digit increases in graduation rates, well outpacing the statewide improvement of 7.6 percentage points. New York City nearly doubled the statewide improvement rate with an increase of 14.4 percent. Yonkers outpaced the state improvement rate by 2.6 percentage points with a 10.2 increase. In contrast, Buffalo and Syracuse both experienced a decline of more than 4 percentage points.
- Over the three-year period from 2007 to 2010, the graduation rate for mayoral control cities improved by 8.1 points, nearly doubling the statewide improvement of 4.1 points. The large urban districts governed by traditional boards of education improved by a mere 1.2 points over the three-year period.

Student proficiency on state exams in English language arts and math also provide a point of analysis for the record of mayoral-control districts and traditional districts within New York State.

Proficiency Rates on Gr. 3-8 NYS Exams

	English Lang. Arts			Math		
	2005-06	2008-09	3-Yr Δ	2005-06	2008-09	3-Yr Δ
NYS Average	61.5%	77.4%	15.9%	65.9%	86.4%	20.5%
Mayoral Control Districts	50.6%	68.2%	17.6%	56.9%	81.6%	24.7%
NYC	50.6%	68.2%	17.6%	57.0%	81.8%	24.8%
Yonkers	50.2%	65.2%	15.0%	53.1%	73.8%	20.7%
Traditional School Districts	34.1%	54.7%	20.6%	30.7%	62.3%	31.6%
Buffalo	30.1%	54.6%	24.5%	28.6%	63.6%	35.0%
Rochester	38.5%	56.0%	17.5%	33.2%	63.4%	30.2%
Syracuse	34.0%	52.8%	18.8%	30.2%	58.3%	28.1%

- Despite significant progress on the part of the three traditional public school districts of the Big 5, the two mayoral control cities ranked 1 and 2 for percentage of students passing both the ELA and math state assessments.

- In math in the 2008-09 school year¹, 81.6 percent of students in Big Five mayoral control cities passed the assessment, a mere 4.8 percentage points behind the state average. The three traditional school districts in the Big 5 fell 19.3 percentage points short with an average of 62.3 percent students passing.
- Over the previous three years in the period analyzed here, the Big Five traditional school district cities increased the percent of students passing the ELA exams by 20 percentage points; however, that increase only brought them to a 54.7 percent pass rate. 68.2 percent of students in Yonkers and New York City passed the ELA exam in the 2008-09 school year.
- In math, there was a ten-percentage point gap between Yonkers, the lowest mayoral control city ranking with 73.8 percent students passing, and Buffalo, the highest ranking traditional school district city with 63.6 percent students passing.
- On the ELA assessment, a 9-percentage point gap separated the lowest mayoral control city, Yonkers with a 65.2 percent passing rate, and the highest ranking tradition school district city, Rochester with a passing rate of 56 percent.

Public Representation

Due to off-cycle election dates and lack of voter interest, the subsequent low voter turnout for school board elections allows for interest groups to significantly impact election outcomes. For example, in 2009, only 13 percent of eligible Rochester voters participated in the school board election. These elections are largely unregulated; each district runs and oversees its own elections.

When school board elections are held at odd times (sometimes in May when the school budget is also being voted on), mobilized constituencies can heavily affect election results. Typically, teachers and public school employees constitute a disproportionately large percentage of election voters; one researcher noted “elected officials would be well off if they merely attain the support of the constituent voters” i.e. public school employees, rather than clientele voters such as parents.²³

This political environment for a school board can foster conflicts in regard to whom the school board is accountable and responsive. A system of mayoral control largely avoids – or at least minimizes – such issues.

Increased Public Accountability

If a school board is ineffective, it could be difficult to determine who is accountable for school failure as there is rarely a single elected individual or group who can be held responsible for the outcomes of an entire school district. With a mayoral control governance system, one

¹ The last year before state assessment standards changed from the 2005-06 baseline used here.

² Wong, Kenneth K., Shen, Francis X., Anagnostopoulos, Dorothea, and Rutledge, Stacey. (2007) The Education Mayor: Improving America’s Schools. Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press: 20.

³ Taebel, D.A. (1977) The politics of School Board Elections. *Urban Education* 12, no.2: 153-66.

individual (the mayor) accepts and is held accountable for the entire school system. As demonstrated by mayoral elections in New York City and Washington, D.C., mayoral election results have the potential to be referendums on the direction of the school system.

After only 96 days as New York City schools chancellor, Cathie Black's approval rating sank to 17 percent and nearly half of the city's top education officials, including two deputy chancellors, had resigned.⁴ The mayoral control governance structure allowed Mayor Bloomberg to replace Ms. Black quickly, avoiding the loss of valuable time navigating the bureaucratic processes required when a school board replaces a superintendent. In the press conference, Mr. Bloomberg announced, "I take full responsibility for the fact that this has not worked out as either of us had hoped or expected."⁵ In this instance, accountability, responsibility, and action were located within the same position, the mayor. Mayor Bloomberg was able to quickly appoint Dennis Walcott as the new chancellor.

Leadership Turnover

A notable study by a team of Georgetown University researchers found, not surprisingly, a measurable positive relationship between consistent district leadership and student success. Particularly, "the longevity of the superintendent has a positive effect on the average academic achievement of students in the district. These positive effects appear to manifest themselves as early as two years in a superintendent's tenure."⁶ Thus, as each new superintendent works to make his or her own mark on the district, it will take two years for a school district to align itself with the agenda and programs of its new leadership and begin producing results. For long-term goals, this is a solid rate of progress. However, the Council of Great City Schools found that the average tenure of superintendents to be only 3.5 years.⁷ This indicates that the typical district leadership cycle is antithetic to steady, positive progress: a new superintendent is hired and implements an aggressive program to increase academic success; two years later, schools begin positively responding to the program. After as little as one year of positive growth, a new superintendent takes over, and the district faces two more years of re-organization before positive effects will be felt again. High superintendent turnover throws urban school districts into a cycle that achieves little progress.

This trend is evident in the superintendent turnover rates in New York State's "Big Five." In the past ten years, Rochester has seen five different superintendents, New York City four, and Buffalo, Yonkers, and Syracuse three. Mayoral turnover is lower, with Rochester being the only city to have had three different mayors in the past decade with the departure of Robert Duffy to the position of lieutenant governor; the remaining cities of the Big 5 have had only two mayors. A difference of at least one less leadership transition can significantly impact the progress of a school system, a fact strongly favoring mayoral control.

⁴ Gootman, Elissa and Barbaro, Michael. (2011). "Cathleen Black Is Out as City Schools Chancellor." *The New York Times* 7 April. <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/cathie-black-is-out-as-chancellor/>

⁵ Gootman and Barbaro (2011). "Cathleen Black Is Out as City Schools Chancellor."

⁶ Waters, J. Timothy and Robert J. Marzano (2006), "School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement." McREL

⁷ Waters and Marzano (2006).

Open Enrollment

The demand for charter schools – where applicants often vastly outnumber the slots available in admission lotteries – demonstrates the thirst parents have for choice within the public-school system. And charters’ growth, despite determined efforts by established interests to crush them, shows that empowering parents with choice can – when done right – drive up the quality of available educational options.

Magnet schools, specialty schools, and charter schools all offer evidence of the redeeming power open-enrollment practices have on the public-education system. It’s time to scrap the decades-old practice of having bureaucrats draw lines on a map to designate which students go to which schools, regardless of how crappy a school may be. Open enrollment among public schools eliminates many of the restrictions on access to high-quality education placed on families simply by the neighborhoods in which they can afford to live.

Types of Open Enrollment Policies

Open-enrollment programs allow parents to choose among multiple schools within their children’s district of resident (intradistrict choice) or among schools both in and outside the district lines (interdistrict choice) and may be created under state laws or policies adopted by local school districts. For interdistrict open enrollment programs, policies can be made mandatory or voluntary for participating districts receiving students. As of 2011, 48 states, including New York, have some form or multiple forms of open enrollment in place, including 23 intradistrict mandatory, 11 intradistrict voluntary, 21 interdistrict mandatory, and 30 interdistrict voluntary programs.

Unfortunately, New York’s voluntary interdistrict open enrollment law is one of the least effective in the nation due to the significant barriers it leaves in place for students wishing to exercise public school choice transfers to get a better education, including significant tuition costs that students from poverty can’t afford, screening of students by districts willing to enroll out-of-district students, and not providing any transportation funding to those transferring. Locally-created open enrollment programs also exist in Buffalo (mandatory intradistrict), Rochester (voluntary interdistrict), and New York City (mandatory high school intradistrict; voluntary intradistrict for K-8).

Make “Big Five” Have Mandatory Intradistrict Open Enrollment

The Big Five school districts should be required to implement intradistrict open-enrollment policies for all students and grade levels served. All families enrolling their children in public schools would select the schools in which they wish to enroll their children, and districts would be prohibited from having zoned schools where students are assigned based solely on residency.

Statewide Mandatory Interdistrict Open Enrollment

To significantly increase the number of choice options available for students in chronically failing schools located throughout the state, a statewide mandatory interdistrict open enrollment policy should be implemented.

While all students statewide could be made eligible, it makes sense to offer enrollment preference to low-income students and students attending failing schools. Under an interdistrict open-enrollment program, high-performing districts enrolling out-of-district students could receive, say, 75 percent of students' per-pupil aid, and have transportation funded by federal Title I Part A revenue intended for public school choice options.

As known from New York's current open enrollment law, how well or poorly the laws and regulations of an open enrollment program are written will have a direct effect on the extent to which families are truly empowered to partake of high-quality school options for their children. Failing in just one component – such as providing adequate transportation or making participation from high-achieving schools voluntary, for example – would have a detrimental impact on the opportunities made available for students.

Student-Based Funding

New York's public education funding laws, regulations, and formulas likely would confuse even Albert Einstein. And while Mr. Einstein did say: "The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax," I'm betting he never picked-up a volume of New York's Education Law or sat in on a session of decision-making at the state Budget Division's Education Unit. This remarkable man also said: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex.... It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction."

So let's be geniuses when it comes to education funding. Let's simply decide to be fair, and take the approach that, as a colleague of mine said, "a kid is a kid is a kid." Let's adopt a system of student-based funding, and scrap all the truly crazy formulas that are so complex as to involve such curious components as "total aidable pupil units."

Pension Reform & Other Collective Bargaining Issues

With public-education revenue sure to remain tight in the coming years, school districts surely would appreciate savings that wouldn't require changing the stream of dollars targeted to the classroom. Letting teachers retire at 55, many tiers with full pensions and benefits for life (plus other retirement perks) and with as little as 10 years of service, is a huge expense – one that's breaking the backs of districts and taxpayers without spending a single one of those dollars in the classroom. Some reform – whether raising the retirement age, switching overly generous defined-benefit pension programs into reasonable 401(k)-style plans, or simply requiring more modest retirement-benefit packages – is just common sense.

Longer school days and school years, working even a little beyond one's job description, employee-contribution levels to health insurance, tenure protections tied to expertise and not length-in-the-seat, and even giving merit-based bonuses to star teachers all are restricted by

onerous collective bargaining contracts, contracts typically negotiated by experts from the teachers unions and folks with less skill on the districts' side.

New York State could and should create a pool of expert public education contract negotiators to negotiate for districts on behalf of such common-sense reforms.

TEACHER/PRINCIPAL QUALITY & DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Annual Professional Performance Review

New York has the opportunity to make its teacher-evaluation system mean something, or to water it down to the point where it serves little purpose than to waste teachers', principals', district administrators' and state education officials' time. That seems to me to be an easy choice.

To ensure that good teacher-evaluation systems are implemented in a better fashion than they have been to-date in New York, the Board of Regents should develop a high-quality "default" policy that would be required to be implemented in each district that fails to timely submit its proposal and in each district that submits a proposal that does not exceed the standardized "default" policy in quality.

And the state should allow districts to supplement teachers' pay who perform superbly on high-quality evaluations regardless of limits embodied in their salary contracts.

Teacher Education

Almost a decade ago, Arthur Levine from Columbia Teachers College began a scathing series of comprehensive research reports that highlighted fundamental deficiencies in the state's teacher-education and school leader-education programs. Whether because those departments were too often treated as "cash cows" by universities, admission standards set too low, or that faculty are too disconnected and outmoded from the real-world current state of public education, one finding summed up the damning findings: Teacher education programs "have not adequately prepared graduates to teach in the new outcome-based, accountability-drive education system that demands all students be raised to the highest knowledge and skill levels in history."⁸

New York State should work with teacher colleges to ensure that full, quality coursework such as "data-based decision-making," "urban school culture," "the use of effective internal diagnostic assessment systems," and similar coursework is not only offered, but required for today's teacher- and principal-candidate graduates.

STUDENT & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

This Commission has rightly recognized that family engagement in student education can make a fundamental difference in the academic success of children. Assembly Speaker Sheldon

⁸ Levine, Arthur, "Educating School Leaders," (The Education Schools Project, Columbia Teachers College: New York, NY, March 2005).

Silver acknowledged this, too, when he said earlier this year “the most powerful lobbying group for our students is their parents.”

What better way to engage families than by building public education on elements of parental choice among school options, and by empowering parents with the ability to remake failing schools when the bureaucrats and politicians won't?

Parent Trigger

Seven states now have “parent trigger” laws, giving parents the ability to petition for a redesign of persistently failing public schools, and proposals have been made in nearly two dozen other states. There is no reason why New York should sit back and wait for this element of the education-reform train to role on by rather than stand up and help lead the charge.

The best programs and proposals ensure that parents have real reform options available to them, options that will most certainly transform their children's school: free transfers out to non-failing schools; creating a new charter school, not a “conversion” one; and, transferring governance of the school from the school board to the mayor all should be options added to the typical list of federally prescribed reform options, which have been shown to be less successful.

Radical change? Maybe so, but it's not radical in its support. The bipartisan national Conference of Mayors recently unanimously endorsed parent triggers, and state legislatures and governors of different parties endorse the concept. And parents involved in the parent-trigger process really don't care what their own or others' politics are, they just want a better education for their children.

What Form is Best for Parent Triggers?

The need to implement dramatic reforms in low-performing schools is unquestioned. New York's education department identified 1,325 schools and 123 school districts in the 2011-12 school year that failed to meet academic performance targets and, according to its current standards, faced an overhaul.

Parent trigger laws introduce a way for parents to circumvent local school districts unwilling or unable to improve failing schools and directly initiate reforms. This new approach, with potentially dramatic institutional changes, has inevitably created controversy. Critics of parent trigger laws, most prominently the national and state teachers unions, have charged that such laws are likely to lead to “lynch-mobs” of unqualified parents trying to take control of public schools.⁹ Other skeptics claim that allowable reforms under such programs will inevitably be over-regulated and will only create a false sense of parental involvement that in the end delivers no real reform.¹⁰ But these issues can be effectively addressed and any obstacles strategically overcome.

⁹ Jim Sanders, “Apologize for Using ‘Lynch Mob’? Teachers Group Says No,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 7, 2010, <http://blogs.sacbee.com/capitolalertlatest/2010/01/teachers-group.html>.

¹⁰ Parents Across America, *Why We Oppose California's Parent Trigger Law*, March 2011, http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/PAA_Parent_Trigger-position-final.pdf.

But, if carefully crafted, a parent trigger law in New York can empower citizens themselves design the overhaul of the hundreds of schools serving thousands of students, reform that has been avoided by an often immobile and unresponsive education system.

The five key features that every piece of parent-trigger legislation should contain: a definition of the schools eligible for reform; the petition process used to initiate reform; a process for validating petitions; reform options; and the structure for a reform implementation plan. In the end, the ideal parent trigger law combines true parental empowerment with responsible foresight and planning to ensure that it can deliver effective reforms for improving student achievement.

Current federally-outlined options for districts to reform their lowest-performing schools are largely failing to have positive impacts. Thus, in addition to these federally prescribed options, an effective parent trigger policy for New York should parents to choose from several additional effective reform model options designed to more immediately increase student achievement:

Opportunity Scholarship Model: Provide students with publicly-funded scholarships that could pay for tuition at private schools or charges at public schools outside of their district of residence.

Mayoral Academy Model: Close a failing school and replace it with a new public school operated by an independent board selected by school parents and accountable to the local mayor, and run independently.

Closure Model: Close a failing school, as under the federally prescribed options, but here allow students to transfer to higher-performing public schools located both in and outside of the local district.

Restart Model: Close a failing school and replace it with a new independently-governed public charter school accountable to state authorizers but free from control of the local board of education.

For more information and model legislation, see: http://www.nyfera.org/?page_id=3843

Charter Schools

With nearly 80,000 New York students now enrolled in public charter schools, and almost that many more on waiting lists to get in, are not the signs clear enough that charter schools are providing a good and desired public-school option for New York families? It is time for New York State to stop putting obstacles in the way of charter school growth.

Eliminate the statutory cap on the number of charter schools allowed – they're entire survival depends on whether parents what to send their children there, so there will only be as many charter schools as needed to meet the demand.

Let charter schools contract with BOCES for services those organizations provide very well, such as services for students with special needs, just as districts do. The prohibition to establish such relationships does nothing but hurt students that need some of the most help.

And, change the law to allow charter schools to provide pre-kindergarten classes. Make “universal pre-K” actually mean “universal.”

School-Choice Vouchers & Tax Credits

States such as Indiana and Louisiana and others are enacting broad school-choice voucher programs, and research is showing the success of those programs in increasing student academic performance and enhancing family involvement in education. If a state-wide system of school-choice vouchers is too much reform for policymakers to bite-off, let's at least admit that the children being hurt the most and with the least opportunity – students from low-income families in failing schools – should be given the promise vouchers offer to escape the desperate system in which they are trapped. Rochester School Superintendent Bolgen Vargas's well-conceived 2002 proposal is a good starting point.

Pennsylvania, Florida, and other states have adopted broad education-tax-credit programs, allowing private dollars to better help finance students' education. Those programs deserve a shot here in New York, too.

Vouchers

As noted, the idea of a city-wide publicly-funded school-choice voucher program in Rochester isn't new. In 2002, then-Rochester City School District board member Bolgen Vargas, Ed.D., proposed a "Guarantee for Student Success" that would have provided the entire locally funded per-pupil education payment to parents of students attending failing Rochester schools as scholarships to transfer to a private school of the students' choice. Under the proposed program's design, to qualify for this scholarship, students would have to have had attendance rates of 95 percent or better (missing no more than 9 days) at their current school, must have had records of good behavior, and must have completed their homework assignments. Despite Dr. Vargas's thoughtfully conceived proposal, this bold school-choice voucher proposal was not approved by the city school board. The hopes everyone had in seeing significant reform and academic improvement achieved in New York's schools over the last decade have not come to pass and the time has come for the implementation of a bold plan such as that offered by Superintendent Vargas.

Education Tax Credits

Low-income students trapped in failing schools don't have to wait to gain access to quality education options. Personal and business education tax credits can be made available that are designed to allow disenfranchised students to attend tuition-charging private or out-of-district public schools.

Personal education tax credits allow families to claim a portion of qualifying education expenditures – often included are such things as private school tuition, supplemental curricular materials and fees at public schools, and supplemental education services such as tutoring or test preparation classes – as a reduction of their state income tax obligation. Personal education tax credits exist in five states: Arizona, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and North Carolina. The strongest personal education tax credit law, adopted in North Carolina in 2011, provides tax credits of up to \$6,000 per child.

Business and personal education tax credits for donations to nonprofit organizations providing tuition scholarships for student to transfer to better public or private schools exist in 11 states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia. Scholarships provided to students through donations

to nonprofit organization generally cover the full cost of tuition, allowing them to have a direct benefit on low-income students unable to afford tuition otherwise.

During the 2011-12 school year, nearly 130,000 students nationally benefitted from nearly \$343 million donated or expended through scholarship tax credit programs. Designed properly, education tax credits could help equalize access to various educational services and options for New York students.

ACADEMIC (NON-)ACHIEVEMENT

Outlined above are all ideas designed with one purpose in mind: create policies, systems, schools, and an environment that will raise the academic achievement of all New York students. Still, a system should be put into place to ensure that something is done for schools that fail even with these reforms in place.

Schools that have been allowed to continue to fail for a certain number of years need dramatic intervention. The governance structure at such schools, the school leadership, ineffective teachers, and contract restrictions that have stifled innovation, accountability, and achievement should be wiped away. Louisiana did that when it created a “recovery district,” transferring responsibility to turnaround these failing schools to the state. Whether the state, the county, or the city leader is given control over a failing school in New York under its own version of a “recovery district,” one thing is clear: letting such a school fail under the control and system it exists for even one more year is unacceptable.

Thank you.

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The Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability (FERA) is an independent, nonprofit, research organization dedicated to improving education in New York State by promoting accountability, stimulating innovation, and supporting school-choice efforts across the state.

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