

Testimony for Ernest Flagler-Mitchell  
New NY Education Reform Commission  
Rochester hearing October 22, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony today. I am Ernest Flagler-Mitchell, Rochester parent and founding president of Rochester Parents United.

For decades, Rochester parents seeking to organize and improve their schools have had only two options: the sanctioned district parent council and the outside advocacy groups working with the teachers union. We believe that neither option is truly independent or in the best interest of parents and students. Neither option empowers parents to bring change in their schools, instead both simply use parents to lobby Albany for more funding and to block reform. For this reason, we founded the Rochester Parents United, a union of district and charter school parents with a unique focus: greater accountability and choice.

As a firefighter and first responder, I see on a daily basis the personal tragedy that comes from the school system's failures. Generations of our children have been lost and generations more will be without courageous leadership from Albany. The Commission has heard little testimony from independent parent organizations. Contrary to the special interest scripts you've heard read by parents, parents in Rochester want reform and they want it now. Following are our specific recommendations:

**1. Give parents and the public real tools to hold the system accountable.** Last year, Albany policymakers responded to the cries from our community for more sunlight in our schools and classrooms. The Commission must not bend to the considerable lobbying from the teachers union to water down the new *teacher evaluation* law that Rochester parents fought so hard for. Instead, the Commission must do more to empower districts to use the

evaluations to make good staffing decisions that put our children first.

In addition, if we are serious about improving the public education system, then the system must be willing to listen to parents and taxpayers—it currently is not. School systems regularly speak for parents. Local efforts to collect customer feedback are not systematic and are used to contain problems rather than fix them. Complaint protocols at the local and state level are so complex and rigged in favor of the system that parents rarely find remedies to their problems. The solution is a *third-party Parent Ombudsman* at the state-level that would systematically collect parent and taxpayer complaints that have gone unresolved by the local districts. The parent feedback data can be aggregated and used to troubleshoot system problems and inform the state’s reform agenda.

**2. Expand the providers of parent education.** The same policies that empower parents to hold their districts accountable charge the districts with informing them of their rights. Given this conflict of interest, none of us should be surprised that systems do a poor job of engaging parents. Federal funding explicitly requires “meaningful parent participation” in school improvement planning and evaluation, yet under the current scenario, this participation is nothing more than a charade. This results in a critical missed opportunity to improve student achievement and improve our schools.

The Commission must address this conflict of interest and the monopoly that districts have in parent training and organizing. In Rochester, like communities throughout the state, there are a number of community-based organizations, churches, technology providers and colleges that have the capacity for adult education and a sincere interest in empowering parents. We must enlist them in the work to build strong parents who have the skills to support

their children's education. We must allow parent training funding to *follow the parent* and empower parents, not district bureaucrats, to choose the best provider for their needs.

**3. Give parents real options.** Too many of Rochester's children are trapped in failing schools that have been unable or unwilling to improve. Their parents cannot afford to move to a high-performing district or pay for private school. There are long wait lists at the handful of high-performing district schools.

We can no longer ask these parents to be patient while the system fixes itself. We must give parents real power to compel change and give their children a lifeline out of these failing schools today.

- • The state should enact the Parent Empowerment Act, aka Parent Trigger, to give parents in persistently lowest achieving schools the legal power to compel change in their schools, which would include converting to charter.
- • The state must develop regulations to comply with the NCLB provision for out-of-district transfer for students in failing schools when there are no transfer options within their district
- • As of today, only 68 slots remain under the current charter school cap. New York State must lift the cap to ensure that more parents have high-quality school choices for their children.