



Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection

Testimony Presented To:

New NY Education Reform Commission's Public Hearing: *Putting Students First* Finger Lakes Region

Monday, October 22, 2012

1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Rochester City Hall

30 Church Street, 3rd Floor

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Board President, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection**

Thank you, Commissioners, for inviting comment on ways to improve our state's educational system. Representing the second largest private sector employer in the Finger Lakes Region, and one of the largest employers of youth, education reform is a huge priority for us at Wegmans.

The stakes couldn't be higher- our region's continued economic growth and vitality depend on our public school systems to produce the next generation of skilled workers, innovators, and entrepreneurs. But without an embedded framework for collaboration between industry, higher education and our public schools, we will continue to see graduation rates stay stagnant and fewer graduates leaving high school college and career-ready.

And without stronger alignment across industry and education sectors, opportunities for high school graduates will decline even further, as they lack the practical and technical skills necessary to compete for our region's high-demand jobs in advanced manufacturing, optics, and healthcare.

The Finger Lakes region is fortunate to have some of the best college, universities and secondary schools in the nation. We also have a stable and diverse economic base with many opportunities for growth, a stable housing market, and a robust healthcare system. Why then, have our public schools, particularly those in our urban districts, seen few advances in performance over the past decades?

Poverty. In Rochester, 84% of the district's students live in low-income households. Poverty is the top factor impacting a student's chances for success. Children living in poverty are six times as likely to drop out of school than their more affluent peers- and we know what that means for their chances in life. And unlike trends in employment and technology that can be addressed with new skills and tools for learning, the impact of poverty doesn't change. The question we hope to address is how do we do things differently so all children, no matter their household income, stand a real chance to make it in the world?

First, let's not reinvent the wheel, but let's look at performance, not promises. There are great programs and partnerships happening in schools every day across the state, that if given the chance to grow to scale, have the potential to create an incredible sea change. But they require significant investment from the public sector to make it possible to expand to the level where district-wide outcomes can be met.

For example, since 1987, Wegmans, through our association with Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, has forged strong partnerships with Rochester, Syracuse and Buffalo city schools, numerous community-based agencies, local business leaders, and regional colleges and universities, to help at-risk youth graduate and be successful in college, while learning some invaluable on-the-job skills to take with them along the way.

We have invested millions of dollars and countless staff and volunteer hours in helping city youth enrolled in Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, making sure that they have access to the support systems they need, including relevant job readiness training to prepare them to take their place as part of our state's dynamic workforce. And we've experienced the impact firsthand- as an employer and a community partner. In 2011, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection helped 626 youth secure year-round, part-time employment with partners across our local communities in Rochester, Syracuse and Buffalo. Beyond the personal impact of providing real-world experience and the building blocks for a lifetime of positive work experience, these students earned on average, \$5,655 a year, resulting in a total economic impact of \$3.54 million in taxable wages- and best of all, 91% of these students graduated on-time.

However, across nearly three decades of investment, and a consistent track record of improving student performance and our regional economy, there is still no sustainable funding stream to support student achievement through programs like Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection- or similar programs that have data demonstrating their impact and a long legacy of effective partnerships with schools. They have had to rely on charitable donations and grant dollars from the private sector, while school districts have had to cobble together funds to provide partial support for the programs they endorse.

But this is not a private sector problem- it requires collaboration on every level to make lasting inroads, including funding. Funding streams should be based on performance- and not on the politics of city councils or school boards, or any single political unit. Too often, education funding for supportive services get mired in politics, leaving students' needs behind.

As a member of the state's workforce investment board, I applaud the Governor's efforts to seek greater coordination across education policy makers with the employer sector- ensuring that the skills students acquire in school are compatible and adaptive to the changing needs of the marketplace. That was the impetus for the Work-Scholarship Connection program when we began in 1987 – to figure out a community solution to the 30% graduation rate in Rochester City schools, and to simultaneously, craft a solution to the excessively high employee turnover rate for youth employed in our stores- and it took a collaborative approach involving the schools, to learn about the types of support they needed from the community, and from valuable community based partners, who were expert in addressing the unique needs of adolescents and youth- especially those living with the challenges of poverty, along with input from the employer community, to help provide alignment and coordination across all sectors.

While we're pleased to see the Governor support new ways to leverage private philanthropy with public sector priorities through the proposed social impact bond program and private-public partnership funds, we would like to see the state take an even wider lens to its reform priorities and create mechanisms for sustainable partnerships with schools and community providers to meet the unique needs of children living in poverty- inside and outside of the classroom.

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