

Testimony submission for
The New York Education Reform Commission

October 18, 2012

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Good Afternoon Members of the New York Education Reform Commission:

My name is Jody Siegle and for the past 24 years I have been deeply involved in public education policy and district oversight, first as a school board member and now as Executive Director of the Monroe County School Boards Association (MCSBA). MCSBA is made up of the 21 districts here in Monroe County including two BOCES, the city of Rochester, and the surrounding suburban and rural districts. We serve 111,100 students.

MCSBA was created to provide a place for the school board members and superintendents here in Monroe County to share ideas and training. That cooperation has benefited all of our school districts. This booklet, "The Best for Less: Cost Saving Strategies and Shared Services in Monroe County School Districts," which can be downloaded from our website at www.mcsba.org, documents how we work across district lines to save money and to offer better programs to our students.

I am here to say this is a region with very strong school districts and where student performance falters, it is most often tied to poverty. Living in poverty is often accompanied by factors that affect how children cope with their lives, and school performance is affected by those factors. But I am also here to say there are specific programs that have been proven to bring about positive changes in the lives of children who live in poverty and because of that, improve their school performance.

I am extremely proud of the work done by the staff and the students in our schools. For suburban and rural districts the graduation rate averages 89.6%.

In our county SAT scores substantially exceed both state and national averages. The 2012 Annual Advanced Placement Report ranked New York State 2nd for the percentage of students in the class of 2011 who scored 3 or higher on their AP tests and last year Monroe County students received 8,970 scores of 3,4, or 5 on their AP exams.

Additionally thousands of high school students take dual enrollment courses at regional colleges as well as acquiring certificated skills in career and technology programs through their districts and BOCES. The success students have with these optional programs ensures in very real terms that they are college and career ready. These students start their college studies having already earned a significant number of college credits. We also estimate that in a typical year our seniors are offered over \$50 million in college scholarships.

Clearly the schools are benefiting the students and their families. And the community's strong support for the work of the public schools is evidenced by solid budget passage rates, with pluralities well over 60%.

I say these things not to boast but so you will realize that within this community there are education leaders who know how to provide the programs that children need to thrive across a wide range of measurements.

There are many measures of student and school success. But measures of success are also measures of failure. If we are to provide every child with the best opportunities, we need to identify what problems impede success.

Legislated solutions which are based on ideas but not research can impede progress. Well-intended but ill-conceived laws fail to home in on the real issues, and instead mire everyone in compliance details of one-size-fits-all plans that truly fit no one. They do not help the districts that need help and they interfere with the successful work done in districts that are doing well.

Right now school districts are being forced to spend millions of dollars and to redirect staff time implementing untested unpiloted programs that were imposed on districts while the problems that working educators ask for help with are ignored. This is not how to make headway on real problems.

You have a unique opportunity to draw attention to what works and suggest ways to replicate those programs. You also have the ability recognize that not every district needs to make the same changes as every other one and we will lose if we toss aside what is already successful.

We have two systems of education in our state – hundreds of districts, the majority of districts, where students are doing well, and unfortunately a smaller number of districts that includes the large urban centers, where we see alarmingly poor performance.

Our city of Rochester has the 7th highest child poverty rate in the nation! Free and Reduced Lunch rates are rising all around the county. The reality of this poverty is so much more terrible than any statistic. Did you know that superintendents dread closing school because of weather because they know it means that hungry children may not get to eat that day? Did you know that Foodlink the local hunger prevention program, has a Backpack Program (http://foodlinkny.org/fight_hunger/programs-initiatives/) to provide children with discreet packages of food to take home on weekends to ensure they will have something to eat?

When children are hungry, cold, depressed, and stressed one cannot rationally expect there to be no impact on school performance. So what can we do to mitigate the effects of poverty that undermine the healthy development and successful education of children?

All children need supportive attentive adults in their lives if they are to thrive. Academic studies, medical reports, and human instinct tell us that children need care to grow up well. This is especially important in a child's earliest development. Because tragically, if children are not "ready to learn" when they enter kindergarten, they begin a challenging catch-up process that may never end. It makes sense to ensure every child begins school ready to learn.

Fortunately there are programs that have been studied and have proven records of effectiveness in countering the toxic effects of deprivation. They also result in less child abuse and criminal activity later in life. They can make life-changing differences in the lives of children and we ignore providing this help at peril to our society.

Professionally staffed, properly run mentorship programs that provide long-term support and guidance have a proven track record of mitigating the negative effects of an otherwise inadequate environment for nurturing a child. The Nurse-Family Partnership has demonstrated its effectiveness in multiple studies in several cities, including

Rochester (<http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/locations/New-York/Monroe-County-NFP>). It assigns a nurse to high-need low-income first time pregnant parents. The nurse meets with the woman regularly through the pregnancy and until her child is 2 years old. The nurse provides information on nutrition, stimulation, and the general care of a baby. The nurse also helps the mother understand how to better organize her life and encourages the mother to finish school so she can better provide for her child. Research by the Children's Agenda (<http://www.thechildrensagenda.org/whatwedo.php>) here in Rochester and by other groups has shown that children of mothers in this program overwhelmingly enter kindergarten ready to learn! Not prioritizing this program and making it available for all who need it is alarmingly short-sighted because every child who enters school not ready to learn is already on track to be more costly to educate and at greater risk to drop out. Pre-K is very important but birth to 3, when critical neural networks are being established, must not be overlooked.

Other programs with a demonstrated track record of success are also available for older students. The Hillside Work Scholarship program (<http://www.hillside.com/hwsc.aspx>) provides mentors, employment and consistent long-term mentoring to high school students, with a graduation rate 50% higher than the unmentored peer group.

Our state and our districts are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on new teacher assessments, new curriculum, and new tests. Will any of those things change the future of an at-risk child as much as a responsibly assigned mentor? No, they won't. I work in K-12 education but I am here to say if we want meaningful change we need to ensure that young children get the stimulation and guidance they need to develop and thrive.

We have all heard and witnessed that what gets tested gets taught. It is also true that what gets reinforced gets valued. How we treat others ripples out from ourselves, whether we are talking about the example set by a school board in a district, a teacher in a classroom, or the education leadership in the state capital. And long before a child can read a book or take a class, how we treat young children will shape their readiness or lack thereof.

Please do your due diligence – do not make recommendations on buzzwords, assumptions, and untested ideas. There is much that is valuable in education today, hundreds of districts are doing an excellent job. But other districts are struggling and it is important to make sure our finite resources of time and money are well used to bring about improved learning in our schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you.