

Thank you for serving on this Commission and hearing what public-school stakeholders have to say.

You asked us for solutions. I wanted to limit myself to one proposed solution, but this proved impossible. I wound up with a list that includes two ambitious items and several simple, straightforward, easy-to-implement ones.

My suggested solutions include commissioning a blueprint that could serve as a starting point for the long-term project of desegregating Monroe County schools. They also include a drastic shift in the way we frame the accountability question.

On a less ambitious level, they include the following: meaningful charter-school oversight; more time for instruction and less time dedicated to bizarre assessments and mind-numbing test prep; and educational debates that are conducted using terms and constructs parents can understand.

In this written document, proposed solutions are presented in bold-face font.

Addressing Concentrated Poverty Through School Choice and/or Desegregation:

I sometimes think discussions about poverty are in danger of disintegrating into the verbal equivalent of urban warfare – Twitter sieges where volleys of #noexcuses cross paths with volleys of #povertymatters.

No matter which camp we find ourselves in, no matter which hashtag serves as the artillery shell for the blog posts we fire at one another – and regardless of whether we see ourselves as being under attack or as being the ones who are ready to pull the trigger – we can surely all agree on one thing. Teaching, learning and parenting in a district where poverty is concentrated is, in many ways, different from doing any of those things in a district where poverty is rare. Not always better or worse, but different.

Urban families live in a world where there is school choice: My daughter has spent her entire academic career in magnet schools, first in Rochester's public Montessori school and now in Rochester's international school. I am very grateful that both options were available to us.

We have not taken advantage of the charter-school opportunities open to us, however. My daughter was offered a spot in one of the more highly-regarded charter schools but, because I was deeply unsettled by some of the remarks made by people associated with the school, we declined it.

When it comes to questions of poverty, desegregation, and school choice, I would like to remind the panel, very briefly, that New York State charter schools were not created in order to give middle-class children an alternative to schools where there were “too many” poor children.

When we talk about desegregation, we need to be wary of conflating the term “socio-economic desegregation” with “an absence of concentrated poverty.”

You can easily avoid concentrated poverty by limiting the number of poor children who attend an exciting, innovative, well-appointed school, which is what the Genesee Community Charter School does. If you happen to be the leader of the leader of the charter school that elects to do this, you might even say that you have helped a small group of low-income students escape from concentrated poverty, and are therefore part of the efforts to break up concentrated poverty.

This argument is disingenuous – and disgraceful. Exclusion is not the same thing as desegregation. If we define desegregation as being nothing more than lauding schools for limiting their low-income populations, then expensive private schools should also be held up as models of desegregation.

I am asking you to include, in your report, a recommendation that charter schools be subjected to oversight and that authorizers inform the public of the steps they are taking to address situations where charter schools refuse to comply with the regulations that prohibit the deliberate under-enrollment of at-risk students, low-income students, or students of color.¹

Of course, even charter schools that enroll large numbers of low-income students are still sometimes accused of under-enrolling the very neediest students; special ed students and English language learners, homeless children, children with an incarcerated parent, children with a parent experiencing substance-abuse problems.

There is a very ugly question that may lie at the heart of the successes charter schools sometimes demonstrate, a question so ugly that people are often reluctant to discuss it publicly.

Here is the question: In urban settings, is there any research demonstrating that students who have both extreme behavioral problems and extreme family problems are more likely to graduate if they are in classrooms with low-income students who do *not* have extreme behavioral and family problems?

¹ I have attached some documents that attest to the severity of the problem when it comes to the charter school that offered my daughter admission.

It's an important question because the successes of organizations such as Uncommon Schools may very well be proof that low-income children *can* succeed in school, and in fairly large numbers, when several conditions are met – and one of these conditions may be classrooms that are not disrupted by students who are having trouble coping with almost unendurable levels of hardship.

We might – and should – ourselves feel an almost unendurable level of discomfort when we seriously consider this possibility, but this does not excuse our failure to ask the following question:

Is it really fair to ask low-income families to send their children to school where poverty is concentrated *and* where teachers may sometimes have to shortchange the low-income children from more stable homes in order to give the low-income children who are living in truly unbearable circumstances just a fraction of the help they need?

It is an extremely uncomfortable question, isn't it? Unspeakable, almost.

I hope the very discomfort of this question pushes us out of the inertia we've fallen into.

I hope it makes us lay the groundwork for the arduous task of once again attempting to desegregate our schools – because the only decent answer, of course, is that low-income children should *not* be asked to shoulder the burden of this sort of quasi-integration alone. The only decent response is for us to decide to start working on real integration, along both racial and socio-economic lines, which means working on integrating city students and suburban students.

When we talk about this in Monroe County, we have a couple of metaphors and a disclaimer: We could “blow up the city school district” which means “dividing it up like a pizza,” but “suburban voters will never agree.”

Well, of course suburban voters will never agree – they've never seen a proposal that addresses any of their obvious concerns.

I've repeatedly asked to see any credible existing blueprint for desegregating Monroe County schools. Everyone I've ever asked has told me that there isn't one, because any hint that a politician supports such a thing offends suburban voters to the point where the politician loses their votes. Since the very idea of desegregating the county's schools is political poison, why would there be a detailed proposal to go with such an idea?

It's a maddening game of chicken-and-egg. It almost makes me want to go back to asking painful and unspeakable questions.

You asked us to propose solutions: Perhaps you could recommend that the governor commission the development of a blueprint for desegregating in Monroe County schools – one written by local organizations² and one that acknowledges the concerns and reservations of suburban parents (and urban parents) and looks for ways to address them.³

At present, because we lack a starting point for real desegregation effort, I think we are pinning too many of our hopes on a project that even RCSD parents who count themselves as supporters sometimes describe as “a baby step;” namely a five-year-old effort to create a metro school on a college campus.

This effort is certainly laudable; if it comes to fruition, the school will be able to offer its urban students a valuable opportunity.

But is this project scalable? Is it scalable to the point where we should pack up our urgency when it comes to more sweeping efforts at desegregation?

For the project to be scalable, we would need to assume vastly increased funding for education, either from the public or the private sector – this is the only scenario under which we could create enough metro schools to address segregation in a meaningful way, the only scenario in which we could create a large number of schools that can draw in suburban students by being even more attractive than the current suburban schools are.

These concerns lead me to believe that such metro-school projects are not scalable to the point where we should put away our urgency when it comes to more sweeping efforts at desegregation – and so, again, to this end, I ask the Commission to please recommend the development of a blueprint that can serve as the starting point for a larger effort.

Obviously, since this isn't a quick fix, the Commission also needs to give urban families other tools – such as the following components of parent engagement and high-quality teaching:

² Perhaps this could be a somewhat unconventional collaboration between Empire Justice and the Center for Governmental Research, both of which have expertise in the field.

³ Such a blueprint probably shouldn't aim for complete desegregation, as there are families (both urban and suburban) who want their children to go to schools that are within walking distance. There are also students whose personal issues are such that a well-appointed school and a more diverse group of classmates might not suffice when it comes to improved academic outcomes, students who might need intensive, targeted interventions instead.

- **An evaluation system that can serve as a foundation for better relationships between teachers and urban parents**
- **More instructional time and fewer bizarre assessments**
- **A push for educational conversations that parents can follow – educational conversations are conducted in English (or Spanish, Arabic, Somali, Karen, Nepali, etc., in anything but the made-up language of the educational bureaucracy).**

Reframing the Accountability and Evaluation Question

It's hard to make good things happen in our schools if we don't have a system where parents and teachers trust one another. This trust has been undermined by many things, but most recently by state and federal governments, which have drawn battle lines that force parents and teachers to exchange insults in order to protect their most vital interests. In order to start rebuilding this trust, we need a fair solution to the poverty-and-accountability issue, especially as it affects teacher evaluations.

Perhaps, given the way the debate was framed, it was inevitable that we would fight our way to a bloody impasse over evaluations – and inevitable that we would inflict plenty of collateral damage on urban families in the process.

After all, teachers were never going to say, "It's okay. I don't mind being penalized for the fact that some of my students did badly on their exams because family members were shot, parents were jailed, or eviction notices were executed." I am actually shocked by the fact that reformers ever expected teachers to accept this.

At the same time, poor families were never going to say, "It's okay. Our family is poor and so are all the other families in our school so – until the whole political and economic situation changes – we're going to agree that, when our kids aren't reading at grade level, it's always because we live in poverty and never because of shortcomings on the part of the teacher." I am actually shocked by the fact that the "poverty matters" crowd, which is almost always sympathetic to the educators unions, ever expected poor families to accept this.

We are at an impasse because each side is insisting on a position that is deeply unfair: because each side is insisting on a position that is oppressive, arbitrary and very likely to make important stakeholders mistrust our educational system.

You asked the community for solutions. Here is another one that is not particularly easy to implement – but, then again, continuing to fight a war of attrition won't be easy either.

When it comes to evaluations, perhaps we should stop framing the discussion in terms of poverty. Perhaps we should instead frame the discussion in terms of the specific problems and traumatic events that sometimes (but not always) accompany poverty and that sometimes (but not always) affect academic outcomes.

Perhaps the targets we set for student growth should be adjusted, not for each child who claims a meal subsidy at school, but in cases where school employees can actually point to trauma or neglect.

Low-income families often object the idea that teachers might be allowed say, in August, "I can't be held accountable for how much these low-income kids will learn, because so many of them will be traumatized or simply neglected."

Low-income families might, however, accept limitations on accountability if teachers were saying, "I couldn't get this particular child to do his homework -- I tried to contacting the parents for help, but no one has been able to give me a working telephone number. And I tried going to the child's home, but no one answered the door."

If we did this, we would no longer be arguing about whether "poverty matters" when it comes to academic outcomes.

We would no longer be pushing educators into a corner and then watching them try to escape from it by employing a generalization that is understandably off-putting to people of limited means – and one that is also understandably off-putting to many decent people of more comfortable means.⁴

The stereotypes – traumatized, neglected, unfed, unsupervised – that attach themselves to poor children are not just offensive. They are extremely toxic because, as recent articles have emphasized, teacher perceptions actually do affect student academic outcomes in striking and measurable ways. Students' perceptions of themselves also affect academic outcomes, and students' perceptions of themselves are not formed in a vacuum – what the educational professionals around these students think of them must play at least some role in this.

It is, therefore, vitally important that we resolve the evaluation issue fairly and quickly, because only by doing so will free teachers from the need to protect themselves from arbitrary terminations by emphasizing their most lurid stories about poor students.

⁴ After all, even the people who belong to the "poverty matters" camp probably know it's offensive to insist that someone's demographic classification should lead to predictions about their behavior and their destiny.

Moving away from an accountability system that generates furious debates about poverty and toward one where poor students were seen as individuals with varying family situations would require us to collect and use more data, which might trigger furious criticisms about spending that doesn't put extra teachers in the classrooms. However, if we use the data wisely – if we use it not just for accountability, but also to connect students with support services and to understand which services work well and which ones don't – then we wouldn't just have more data. We will have an urban educational system that focuses on the whole child.

There are a couple of other accountability-related issues I want to touch on very quickly. They are extremely important but, since my opinion reflects a set of widely-held beliefs, you will have heard all of this before.

Teachers cannot be expected to make sure students read at grade-level by third grade, that crucial year, if students are coming to school without the necessary pre-reading and social skills. **Any serious efforts at urban educational reform must include funding for full-day pre-K programs for three- and four-year-olds – programs that include transportation.**

Any serious efforts at urban educational reform must also allow students and teachers adequate time for instruction, which should not be defined as “learning how to bubble in answers,” or “learning how to use computer testing software.” It should also not be defined as “taking lots of old state exams for practice so that you'll do better on the real thing.” All of these non-instructional activities are currently taking place.

Our children will not learn more by taking more tests. And they will not learn more by spending more time doing test prep in hopes that they will come closer to meeting bizarre and impossible targets, such as the one that plagues my daughter's class: 5th-grade ELA proficiency for students who have only been in the US for several years, but who cannot be deemed proficient unless they pass tests that are beyond the abilities of some native-speakers in the affluent suburbs.

Our children will only learn more if they are allowed to have lessons. There's no point in talking about quality teaching if teachers aren't given time to teach, or if unreasonable targets mean desperate teachers try to game a bad system by inflicting excessive test prep on their students.

Parent Engagement Depends on Learning to Discuss Education without Using Jargon

When I talk about communicating respect and trust in the context of poverty and teacher evaluations, I am of course talking about what educators and their unions say in the media.

There is another facet of communication that is equally important: communications with parents. When parents try to understand more about their child's education, they are sometimes met with a wall of language that conveys almost no meaning.

Here is an example that affected my child.

My daughter's 3rd-grade report card said she required Academic Intervention Services in both math and ELA. This did not sound like a good thing.

I examined her report card and found that her math grades were all fine. Her reading grades were excellent, but she had a couple of 2s (what we used to call Ds) for writing.

She received 2s in the following areas: Uses rubrics to assess quality of work; Seeks and provides useful feedback.

Baffled, I showed the report card to a friend who teaches in a different elementary school.

"What is it that my daughter isn't able to do?" I asked.

"Well, she's not able to use a rubric to assess the quality of her work," my friend answered.

"Yes, but what does that mean?" I asked.

"Do you know what a rubric is?" my friend asked.

"Yes," I snapped, "I do know what a rubric is, but not in this context -- what's on this rubric and how can they tell whether she's using it to assess the quality of her work?"

"I don't know," my friend said, "but you should ask the teacher."

I did, but I never got an answer delivered in language I could understand. In fact my daughter's teacher sounded just like my teacher friend.

So, I never found out what was on this mysterious rubric or what these Academic Intervention Services were, although my daughter's report card said she continued to get them for the rest of the year. She passed both of her state exams by a comfortable margin -- so I assume that, whatever the deficits were, they were not extreme enough to show up on the state exams.

Still, this is not the sort of experience that turns urban parents into equal partners in their children's academic success. When reasonably well-educated urban parents are saying, "Wow, understanding my third-grader's report card is beyond me," there is a problem. To put it mildly.

I do not believe that my daughter's teacher was to blame for the communication breakdown; this teacher was excellent and very approachable. I believe the fault lies in the educational system as a whole. **Increasingly, there seems to be a sense that, in order to discuss education intelligently, we need to discuss it using language that is far removed from everyday speech, in language that is abstract, obscure, and sometimes intimidating. The loss of easy communication with parents is one of the problems that arises from this, but there are others.**

The time and mental energy educators spend on decoding one another's comments could almost certainly be better spent on other things. The same is also true of the time and energy groups of educators spend (according to a teacher friend of mine) on "jargoning up" their plans so that these plans will sound more impressive, more professional, less like "just teaching" and more like "educating using a research-based framework to create instructional value that will be assessed according to the criterion established by and reflected in our formative and summative assessments." ⁵

I am begging you: As members of the Education Reform Commission please lead by example and deliver a report that is full of complicated, nuanced, intelligent arguments -- and written entirely in language that requires no background in education or business.

⁵ Here is a real-life example of a "jargoned-up" lesson plan from the Common Core toolkit. If you look closely, you can see that it's a lesson plan covering very simple concepts for very young children. One of my teacher friends and I read it together and laughed for a long time:

Students enter pre-kindergarten and find a well planned, sequential math program awaiting, one that is embedded within hands-on, playful, interactive, largely concrete experiences. Students are encouraged to use their math words to communicate their observations. The first step is to analyze, sort, classify, and count up to 5 with meaning (M1). Students practice their numbers up-to-five fluency as they encounter and engage with circles, rectangles, squares, and triangles. Students practice fluency with numbers to 5 while they are learning about shapes in Module 2. With numbers to 5 understood, work begins on extending "How Many" questions up to 10 (M3). The key here is to build from 5, using their fingers to support this perspective.