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This education reform commission is an important first step in improving an education system that continues to miss expectations. I congratulate the Governor on establishing this commission and hope students can be heard through these regional hearings.

For background on myself, I am a recent graduate of Norwich High School where I served as Student Body President. Next year I will be attending the University at Albany.

In my term as Student Body President I faced one huge challenge, attempting to incorporate student values in the decisions of our school administrators. Student Government at my high school discovered students did not favor a new block schedule as opposed to semester scheduling, students wanted to be involved but struggled to find clubs and activities with a tight school budget, and the school board did not make many efforts to learn student's perspective.

I took the initiative to attend each school board meeting for the second half of the school year. In those meetings I was shocked to discover huge decisions being made in the blink of an eye, without any student input. It is hard to admit for some, but student involvement in actual decision-making is dwindling. Some schools have taken great effort in involving students. I am impressed with schools that have a student representative to the school board, or student member, and I encourage this commission to recommend this on a state level.

After speaking with many students on education policy, I discovered most students are frustrated with the way they are taught. They want to see something that will benefit them in life rather than learning facts or formulas for a test. Students need to see the value of a lesson before fully paying attention to that lesson, so you may hear students ask "what does this have to do with life after school?" Most teachers struggle to answer that question.

I would also like to speak about school administration. Students around my school district hardly ever see administrators and to an extent, become afraid of them. When my superintendent walked in a classroom every student looked and the tension skyrocketed. Students were too afraid to speak up to administrators and frequently felt intimidated by their titles. To solve this, we need to give administrators a closer connection to students. This may be an old-fashioned idea, but many years ago principals actually taught a few classes. That put principals in the classroom and gave them a better understanding of learning and actual evidence of school policy impacts.

I have proposed many new policy ideas, but they are all pointless without one change. New York State needs to make student voice a priority. The vast majority of students will not speak up and need encouragement. Lets focus our reform efforts on involving students in school decisions. You will not be disappointed in the results if students are encouraged to speak up.