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Testimony of the
New York State School Boards Association
to the
New NY Education Reform Commission

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Binghamton University
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The New York State School Boards Association has outlined a number of reforms as part of its “Be the Change for Kids” platform. The focus of this testimony is on Reform #2, “Stimulate the Student Learning Environment.” I will also touch on Reform #1, “Raise Expectations for All Students,” and Reform #3, “Cost Out an Adequate and Equitable Funding System.”

I have been a member of the Newark Valley Central School District Board of Education for 22 years, and I also serve as the chairman of our Region-Wide Legislative Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to address you today.

As outlined in prior testimony, many of our educational mechanisms are detached from the technology prevalent in the world today. Our students are often more attuned to technology than our education is ready to handle, and so we try to force fit today’s students into yesterday’s educational system; or more appropriately, into an educational system largely modeled from before the turn of either of our previous two centuries. Podcasts, smart phones, the internet, Twitter, Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube (the list seems endless) are how the children of today communicate and educate themselves. However, we still require them, for the most part, to “sit in class” for a set amount of time, pass a test at the end, and use that requirement of time and a test to say that they are now “educated” and can receive “credit.” Really?

What does “time” (the requirement for 180 days of instruction) have to do with knowledge? Many of the people in this room already have a firm understanding of where technology is and where our classroom instruction processes are. All of us should not be required to sit here for some fixed amount of time before we are deemed to understand it. We are all different, learn at various rates, come in with different backgrounds, and attune ourselves to various forms of knowledge. Our children, our students, are no different yet we require them to all be moved through a very narrow funnel of time and educational delivery assuming that it will serve them all best.

With today's technology we can greatly broaden our horizon of education and educational delivery. We can remove the "seat time" requirement, which should have been removed long ago, and still test and sample knowledge to see if it meets (or exceeds) our benchmarks for passing and mastery. Numerous examples exist where technology, specifically online learning, is being used to provide greater flexibility in the learning environment:

- In our area, summer school is online. The same course credit will be given, but we are allowing those who failed a course to now get credit through online courses. We should not require failure to be the only avenue to alternative learning and credit opportunities.
- In my area, we are using credit recovery with online courses. We are doing this in my district now, but have already discussed expanding the program to students prior to them putting in the "time" and failing.
- Many colleges and universities are offering credit bearing online courses. If we are to prepare our students for the next step in their lives, then we should offer the same type of online learning opportunities in the K-12 environment in order to prepare them.
- Programs, such as the Khan Academy, which has been highlighted repeatedly in national news reports, exemplify the power of online learning and "flipping the model." There are a number of schools that have integrated offerings such as the Khan Academy that not only augment but replace their own programs. The teachers in these settings often use the school as the place to help/coach with homework, and use the home as the time to receive the assignments.

For some time now, New York has talked about being a state with high educational standards. In New York we test for these standards and students cannot receive credit, or in some cases a Regents diploma, without passing these tests. However, we are not truly a state that bases its educational system on standards. We still require "seat time" along with testing for the standards. In fact, once a student puts in their seat time then we do not really care what they have to do to pass the tests. If a student can pass the test with mastery on day 1, he or she does not receive credit for the class. However, a student who, after day 180, passes the test with a 66 will receive credit for the class. Which student really knows the material better? Why do we not recognize knowledge instead of seat time? Few businesses measure their employee's performance based on time; they do it based upon what the employees can do/demonstrate. Education should be no different.

Technology offers us another tool to provide educational delivery in a "time neutral" manner. Students with prior knowledge or a talent for learning quickly can advance at a pace suitable for them. Students who need extra time or a slower pace can move at a rate suitable for them. Both ranges of students can advance with as much teacher direction and supervision as necessary. Technology does not care if students are all at different places in a subject's curriculum. Technology does not slow some down so that they do not get too far ahead. Technology does not care about spending as much time as necessary to assist students with particularly difficult concepts. Technology provides another tool for our educational environment to provide individual, differentiated teaching for the wide range of student abilities.

Enhanced technology in education, and the removal of seat time, is likely to appeal to a wide range of student abilities. Those students most interested in quick advancement to more challenging subjects could leverage opportunities to demonstrate existing proficiency in subject matter, receive credit, and move directly onto more advanced work without needing enough other students to be "ready" or having to wait to achieve a certain grade level in school. Those students who need extra time could remain in the technology driven coursework as long as necessary to grasp and apply the concepts. Those students who view school as a requirement and a place they are forced to go to may be encouraged by an ability to move at their own pace

and graduate. This may also help this particular type of student to discover what they can achieve, and value education more when they can move successfully through it.

Technology is not a panacea. It is not something to replace what is being done today. It is another tool. It is something we should use to augment what we do today. By providing a wider variety of instruction techniques we are likely to be able to appeal to a wider variety of learning abilities. The need for teacher contact, guidance, and help is still necessary for all students. However, with the help of technology teachers will be more likely to focus and spend their limited time on the students most in need of their help. To some degree teachers do that today, but often it is to the detriment of other students who not only do not get the attention they need but who are required to move at the same pace as everyone else in the class.

There is another potential benefit of enhanced technology use in education. It is nothing that should be expected to happen in the short term but it may be something worth considering for the long term. Technology companies have discovered they can reduce their capital expenses (building costs) by having employees work from locations other than company owned buildings (i.e., work from home). Capital costs detract from the core mission of companies and drain financial resources. It is no different for schools. The annual building/maintenance costs in New York State are staggering and quite likely unsustainable on their current trajectory. At some point, we may need to consider how those costs can be reduced and ensure that our entire system is "plumbed" for this type of technological change. If we were to have more students complete a portion of their school work from home that could help to alleviate full-time classroom needs which could meet rotational schedules and reduce the need for space and buildings. Over the long term this could represent significant resource savings that could be better spent on the core educational mission. Since this type of work environment is growing it is also part of preparing our students for that next phase of their lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. We must better allow education to keep pace with how our children receive, process, and use information. We must better match our recognition of knowledge to the demonstration of that knowledge. We must provide more, cost effective, differentiated learning opportunities in order to address a broader range of students. We must be mindful of a changing world both for what it will expect of our children and for what it will be able to fund and sustain.