



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

**July 10, 2012
Meeting Room 6 - Concourse
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The New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) is well known for its reform campaign motto: “Be the Change for Kids.” These five words represent the mission of average citizens from across New York who are elected to serve on their local school boards. They are forward-thinking, focused and driven to serve their school communities in providing all students an opportunity to learn today what they will need to know tomorrow.

As a representative of over 650 school boards statewide, I am honored to have this opportunity to present our recommendations for educational reforms. Please consider this testimony to be NYSSBA’s first installment of a series of testimony to the New NY Education Reform Commission. We plan to have NYSSBA representatives testify at most if not all commission hearings. Future testimony will build on what you hear today, fleshing out details and offering examples on how our recommendations might be implemented.

School boards contribute to students’ present-day success in many ways, but the obstacles are many, and public education is ripe for reform. We are hereby offering five necessary shifts that transcend public policy, cultural traditions and education law. These five reforms must become the new cultural norms that direct educational policy reforms if we are to truly improve the chances for academic success for all students. We have carefully selected these particular reforms because they are in direct response to the most pressing problems in public education today.

Reform #1: Raise Expectations for All Students

High school graduation rates in many school districts are not satisfactory. Statewide, the number of high school graduates who are college and career ready is grossly inadequate and carries life-altering consequences for students. At-risk students and students with disabilities are

not succeeding as well as they could because they are often not sufficiently engaged. Early childhood education is treated as optional. Important academic programs have been standardized to the point of mediocrity. We have underfunded test development, and been slow to embrace the use of information technology and electronic communications that anyone under forty years of age finds indispensable.

The time has come to raise the standards of academic achievement for all students, irrespective of socioeconomic status and district wealth. We have no hope of closing the achievement gap unless all students, regardless of their ZIP code, are held to the same rigorous standards. Without high expectations for all students, challenging academic programs and meaningful accountability for results, we cannot begin to improve public education in New York.

Reform #2: Stimulate the Student Learning Environment

There is sometimes an embarrassing disconnect between the classroom and the world outside. The pace of change throughout the world is evolving at an unprecedented speed while, in the school setting, teaching and learning have changed little during the last century. The school house, at times, seems to operate in a bubble, ignorant to the modern world where students learn, often on their own, using interactive learning tools that are not available in school. By comparison, the traditional classroom can seem dull, uninviting, and irrelevant.

Public education must embrace innovative new ways to deliver teaching and learning, which recognize the power of technology to eliminate traditional barriers that unnecessarily restrict class sizes, class schedules, school calendars, school and district boundaries, instant communications, social media, and access to worldwide information sources. The industrial model worked well during the Industrial Age. It is no longer appropriate for the age of information.

Reform #3: Strengthen the Education Workforce

No industry, organization or leader can successfully manage transformational change without strong support from a highly educated workforce. However, employing high quality teachers and administrators at every level is an enormous challenge. Public education's human resource systems – from the credentialing process through hiring and retention procedures, tenure decisions, performance evaluations, professional development programs, layoff rules, and disciplinary considerations, not to mention negotiated salaries, benefits and working conditions – are phenomenally complex, overly-regulated, costly and inflexible.

In particular, New York is the only state in the nation that requires all terms of an expired labor agreement, including automatic salary step increases, to remain in place, when a contract expires. Seniority trumps all other considerations when making layoff decisions even as staffing requirements must adapt to changing student learning needs. The new Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) system may help in strengthening the professional workforce and,

on occasion, expedite the removal of ineffective individuals. Eventually, however, archaic restrictions on school districts to hire, reward and dismiss staff based on credible performance results must be lifted or education reform efforts are doomed.

Reform #4: Cost Out an Adequate and Equitable Funding System

The method by which New York funds its public education system has long been in need of reform. Prior to the settlement of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) lawsuit, several “costing out” studies were conducted, some simultaneously, to determine the cost of a “sound, basic education” – New York’s constitutional promise to public school students. The settlement agreement provided welcome relief until the Great Recession hit, putting a perpetual halt on many elements of the new funding formula. Since then, school districts have been plagued by fiscal uncertainty, declining enrollment, a shrinking tax base, unpredictable swings in federal funding, a new property tax levy cap and indexed growth in state funding.

It is time to conduct an updated costing out study that links New York’s constitutional guarantee to a funding system that is equitably distributed, reliable, sustainable and sufficient to support educational reform efforts. Fundamental to costing out the funding reforms must be a full accounting of state and federal mandated spending, which greatly restricts local cost containment options.

Reform #5: Promote Greater Public and Parent Participation in Education

Public schools are community institutions that require vociferous community participation and taxpayer support to survive and flourish. Negative perceptions of public schools are often linked to greater community problems and pressure from frustrated taxpayers. Parents, on the other hand, are a positive source of community support of public schools if they are engaged in meaningful ways. Success or failure for a student is unquestionably linked to family values and parental involvement.

As with any system redesign, an understanding of the issues and expectations as expressed by the “customer” are essential to success. The “market forces” that shape public education are vast, complex and ever-changing. School officials and staff cannot reform education alone. This commission would do this state a great service by advancing education reforms that attract strong citizen and parental support for public education. Look for concrete examples of what is working well; there are many to be found. Help school officials replicate success without urging privatization of public schools. Local education reform leaders will require the assistance of many supporters and encouragement from this commission.