

Testimony of John Reilly to the “New York’s Public Education System” Workgroup of the NY Education Reform Commission

Good Morning Chairman Weill and distinguished Committee members. My name is John Reilly. I am the President and owner of Dynamic Applications, a small software development firm in North Greenbush. I am also the founding Board Chair of KIPP Tech Valley Charter School, the highest performing Middle School in Albany, NY.

I grew up in Northern New Jersey and attended public schools in a city not all that different from Albany. As I approached high school age, my parents opted to move the family to a better school district. At the high school I would have attended, 72% of the students took the SAT and scored, on average, in the mid 400s out of the maximum 800 points at that time. At the high school I did attend, 100% of the students took the SAT with average scores in the high 500s. Needless to say, it was a community of high expectations for school achievement and college attendance. That support, and the support of my parents, led me to and through college and into a career that I love.

After graduating from college, I joined Big Brothers Big Sisters as a volunteer, and eventually joined the Board and served the organization for 25 years. While I’m proud of the work of Big Brothers Big Sisters and believe that one to one mentoring relationships can make a huge difference in the lives of many children, I came to believe that public education was not serving these children adequately, and that all of our efforts at raising money in order to support volunteer mentors were being dwarfed by the experiences that these children were having at school.

I came to the conclusion that improvements in Public Education could have a much greater effect on underserved children than mentoring alone, and I began to focus my personal energies on that. I gravitated towards the charter movement because the idea of giving parents choice in education resonated with me, and I could get substantially involved. Parents want what’s best for their children, and all should have equal access to excellent educational opportunities.

I am speaking today as a business person and community volunteer looking for ways to improve educational options, primarily for at risk students. As the Commission looks at the structure of Public Education, I ask that you consider these recommendations.

Making decisions in the best interests of children

Many decisions in public education, surprisingly, are not made with the best interests of children in mind. The primary purpose of Public Education is to educate students, but many of the laws, policies, structures, and funding mechanisms in Public Education do not exist to serve students, but instead to serve constituencies of adults.

I applaud the Governor’s mission to be a voice for children; it is certainly needed. I found out early on that every aspect of Public Education that does not seem to be serving children has one or more groups

of adults that support it. Our Education system has been in place with the same structure for so long that the status quo has become a balancing act of competing special interests.

Power and Accountability have to be coupled

Power and accountability look very different in Public Education than they do in business. To be accountable for something, one has to have the tools to control or influence it and the ability to apply one's own judgment and experience to deliver the desired outcomes. Few would argue that it is appropriate to hold someone accountable for something that they have no control over, or – conversely -- that it is inappropriate to hold those in control of something accountable for it.

However, in Public Education, control is frequently widely distributed, and there is therefore much less accountability. Principals rarely have control over who their team members are, their work schedules, or how they are compensated. Many of the tools that businesses use to influence behavior are not given to Principals, who therefore have less ability to get the job done, and cannot be held completely responsible for outcomes. One could go as far as to say that Public Education has become a study in distributed power and lack of accountability.

We see today the results of trying to apply more accountability to such a system from the outside. Those being held accountable demand more control, as they should, but legislation, policies, and prior contractual agreements take control away, and the person held accountable is severely constricted in what they can do. Large challenges, such as achievement gaps, cannot be solved with the small changes that are possible in such a system.

My understanding is that the average tenure of an urban school superintendent is 2.5 years. A new superintendent is hired with high hopes for making progress on big issues. After a few years, when results are not delivered, the superintendent becomes the scapegoat and is asked to move on.

At my school, we frequently reallocate resources to address small issues before they become large ones. Our School Leader has wide latitude to adjust programs, schedules, and resources to accomplish the goals we have set out for him. We actively seek to remove potential barriers to success that are not under his control.

To be effective, power and accountability have to be tightly coupled together in the form of delegation; the granting of power and autonomy in exchange for accountability.

Delegation

What is needed is delegation, the distribution of tightly coupled power and accountability. For example, I am a supporter of the portfolio model for school districts, and I believe that the role of school boards should evolve to where they become managers of a diverse group of schools, each of which is given

wide latitude as long as they follow curriculum and safety and are serving students effectively. Instead of being responsible for everything, the Board can have a narrower focus on how to support the best schools and improve those that aren't performing.

At our school, we follow the Kellogg Foundation Logic Model, which is a very useful tool for separating inputs, outputs, and outcomes. We hold stakeholders accountable for outcomes; giving them flexibility in how to achieve them. It is never sufficient to say that x hours of service were delivered or that y activities were completed from a checklist.

In a model like that, measurement is continuous, as is Professional Development. Data is used extensively to measure both outputs and outcomes, and activities that don't work to improve outcomes are quickly stopped.

This focus on data, outcomes and accountability is not oppressive; instead, it frees teachers to teach and develop their craft. When we are all looking at the same measurements and outcomes, we can all work to achieve them. Management delegates and shares responsibility and control. Teachers respond by asking each other and school leadership to help get the best results. This is the teaching profession at its best and servant leadership supporting that profession in the best interests of students.

Money should follow the student

Where should power come from in Public Education? I think the answer comes from the mission. The needs of students should be foremost, and power needs to come from successfully educating students.

I believe strongly that money in Public Education should follow the student and reflect the investment that the community is making in each individual. If money is provided without being coupled to that investment, the incentives don't support the mission and the funding will not be used as efficiently as possible to create the desired public good.

The next obvious question is where the money should be aggregated and distributed. If power and accountability are to be tightly coupled, the money has to go to an entity that can be held accountable for outcomes.

The best center for Power and Accountability is at the school level and with the Principal

I've argued for multiple centers of power and accountability (delegation). One fair question is where the greatest level of control and accountability should be. Should it be the State Education Department, the School District, the school, or the classroom? For sure, there are appropriate degrees of autonomy at each of these levels.

I believe that the highest level of autonomy should be at the level of the learning community; typically the school. The reasons that I have reached this conclusion include:

- This is typically, and ideally, the unit of parental choice (whether the choice was a neighborhood to live in, or a specific school). That choice requires a high degree of transparency and accountability, so it makes sense to be rigorous and uniform about accountability measurements at this level.
- Culture (student, staff, parent, and community) typically resides at the school level and can best be influenced there.
- Enough decisions are made at the school level (or should be) to make a substantial difference in the way students are educated, including the structure of the school day, staff assignments, and resource allocations.

If schools become the primary autonomous units in Public Education, the roles of School Boards and District central offices have to change.

School Boards have to focus on managing their portfolio of schools, which includes creating and maintaining measurement criteria, and setting broad policies that ensure transparency and adherence to mission. They also recruit and invest in school leaders and school models, and take appropriate action when a school is not measuring up.

District central offices have to evolve into service organizations. They provide services to the School Board in support of its responsibilities, and also provide a menu of services to individual schools.

Ideally, central offices have what businesses refer to as zero-based budgets. In business, zero-based budgeting is used to keep horizontal support organizations, such as Marketing, Information Technology, and R&D, from getting too far away from the mission. These departments start with a zero budget, and get “paid” from the budgets of revenue-producing business units.

In Public Education, the majority of budget should be assigned to schools based on per pupil reimbursement (varying by need). The school would then purchase services from the Central Office.

What can go wrong?

There are potential downsides to the autonomy that power and accountability provide. Accountability measures have to be broad, or the delivery of services can be narrowed to that which is measured. When this happens, it is a failure of the measures, not of the entire concept.

Also, general principles like safety, fairness, transparency, and adherence to law have to be applied, or inappropriate shortcuts may be taken to get the desired results.

This leads me to my last thought...

Immobility

I frequently describe the various constituencies in Public Education as being “painted into corners”. Each seems to have happily “painted” policies and precedents that leave them stuck, afraid to leave their corner for fear of being taken advantage of. This is where it seems to me that the Commission can play a role: negotiating fair exchanges of power and accountability that can happen simultaneously for the benefit of students.

An issue that may be considered simple in the business world, such as merit pay, becomes dangerous territory in Public Education. Many of the best teachers don’t support merit pay because they don’t believe it will be applied fairly, and in some cases, they may be right. If principals are not held accountable for results, they may reward teachers that are supportive and easy to work with as opposed to those that might be more challenging to the system but get better results.

Another frequent source of immobility in Public Education is letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. Teacher accountability is a good example of this. Many of the discussions regarding evaluations compare a proposed system to perfection and point out where it comes up short. This is just not a productive way to solve a problem. Instead, a system has to be evaluated against the current practice. It is better to implement an imperfect system that is better than what we have today and then continuously improve it.

Summation

As I’ve described, my personal journey has led me to support some key initiatives:

- Money follows the student
- Parents have choices about where their children go to school
- Principals are given increased control in exchange for increased accountability
- Data is abundant and transparent

I sincerely hope that the Commission is able to move Public Education forward. We have to change certain structures so that every student in the great state of New York may receive an excellent education.

Resources

1. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model: <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2006/02/WK-Kellogg-Foundation-Logic-Model-Development-Guide.aspx>
2. Portfolio School Districts: Center for Reinventing Public Education, <http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/projects/7>