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Chairman Parsons and members of the Education Reform Commission thank you for holding these hearings on the current structure of the states education system.

I come to you today as a 10-year veteran teaching students health and physical education in the small rural district of Schoharie where we do a fantastic job. I speak to you on behalf of my members in the Schoharie Teachers Association. The majority of our students go to college including the best colleges and universities in the nation and those who don't are prepared for the workforce through excellent vocational training programs. Our students produce award-winning work recently winning first place in the national Samsung video competition. And when our community was devastated by Hurricane Irene it was the school that was used as the headquarters for disaster relief and it was the public employees who led a program to not just clean up but also to re-insulate 170 homes and businesses.

But you'd never know how well our school or our students are doing by reading the news or watching the television. Because too often teachers, others who work in schools and most importantly our students have been demoralized by a media focus on misleading statistics that fail to tell the true story of our achievements.

Recently the New York Times reported teacher morale and job satisfaction is now at a 20 year low and a Metlife Survey said one in three teachers are looking to leave the profession in the next five years. It's no surprise when you consider:

- deep state budget cuts
- public attacks on teachers and their unions
- being asked to do "more" with less
- increased class sizes and
- a fixation on standardized testing that is getting in the way of learning.

Good teachers know that when you only harp on only negative aspects of student performance you will lose that student. That is exactly why we are losing good teachers. If this commission wants this state to retain and attract good teachers, then teachers students and schools must get the credit they deserve. For example this commission should highlight that New York state ranks:

- first in providing an education businesses need to succeed by MSNBC
- first in representatives to the prestigious Intel science competition
- second in students successfully completing Advanced Placement courses
- third in the nation in educational performance by Education Week
- third in the nation for educational factors making up the "Talent Pipeline" in Enterprising States a U.S. Chamber of Commerce.
- New York was one of only two states in the nation to have increased graduation rates by double digits between 2002 and 2009.

Also a recent ranking by Newsweek of the top 1000 high schools in the nation had 119 here in New York. These schools and many more like them work because the teachers and staff in them constantly strive to improve. The state should learn from the many many schools that are working. Yet too many in the media or politics misleadingly call the school system a failure.

I will provide for your review numerous newspaper clippings of programs and schools that work on July 10.

The way New York state's graduation rates have been compared to the rest of the nation is misleading. To graduate New York's students are required to pass high-stakes exit exams in more than three subjects. Only eight other states come close to matching New York's rigorous standards. If New York state really wants to improve graduation rates why not answer the President of the United States' call to raise the dropout age to 18 years old Thirty-one other states have a higher dropout age than New York.

As to education funding and costs declining state aid to school districts has caused a crisis. State aid to schools has gone from funding 47 percent of their costs in 2002 down to 39 percent now. Schoharie has seen a 1.6 million drop in state aid since 2009. The impact on our small community with only a 20 million budget has meant significant program cuts and fewer opportunities for students.

The recent budget cuts combined with the tax cap was bad enough. Add Hurricane Irene to the mix and it is devastating my community. Consider:

- Hurricane Irene destroyed 80 of the town of Schoharie along with all downtown businesses.
- Coming up on the 1st anniversary of the flood only 20 of those homeowners and businesses flooded out have reoccupied.
- 142 students out of a 850 students were left homeless.
- This has created both a humanitarian and budgetary crisis.

Which leads me to poverty many in my community now live in poverty. Research points to poverty as a primary cause when achievement gaps exist. This commission must address the fiscal needs of schools while understanding the economic challenges of the communities that support them. It is just common sense. No matter how good a teacher is he or she is not going to find success with a student who comes to school hungry or sick. This is why teachers nurses secretaries monitors and administrators often go out of their way to provide food and other assistance for these students. It's also hard to find success with a student who doesn't know where they are going to sleep the next day may be wearing the same clothes for days and is dealing with a host of other issues that are of more immediate concern to their safety and well being than math or English. If the state wants to get serious about closing the achievement gap then it must focus on stamping out poverty.

I feel confident that if New York state would significantly recognize the success of its public education system then we would see a dramatic increase in teacher morale and job satisfaction. I would also strongly urge the commission to recommend the following:

- The state should use yearly figures when calculating the percent of students on Free and Reduced-Priced Lunch rather than a three year average. For example after the flood in we had a drastic increase to 142 homeless students. This wasn't able to be fully calculated into our state aid figures and as a result we didn't qualify for the amount of state aid needed.
- State aid formulas should take into account the impact of a natural disaster regarding renovations that will be needed or school districts should receive the same consideration counties received by having the mandated 12.5 local share for flood cleanup picked up by the state.

· Consideration must be given to what happened to the tax burden when school districts and towns were allowed to retroactively reassess town property values to help flooded-out home owners. What helped some created an additional burden for the remainder. The state should provide a program that assists when taxes are reshifted due to reassessments.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak and your kind attention. If you need anything further I can be reached anytime at mmessner@schoharieta.org.

Sincerely

Martin Messner