

Testimony of Onondaga County Executive Joanne M. Mahoney

New York Education Reform Commission

August 14, 2012

Mr. Chairman,

I am Joanie Mahoney, the County Executive here in Onondaga County.

I thank you and the rest of the commission for taking the time to visit and listen to community and government leaders across the state as you seek ways to ensure we do better as a state providing our young people with the opportunities they need to be successful.

I am also thankful that Governor Cuomo has established such a commission. We know improving education is central to not only maintaining a strong democracy but to building economically flourishing communities.

In Syracuse and Onondaga County, I am proud to say that we are working together across city and county agencies and across the public and private sectors to make sure we provide what our children and families need most.

Our community partnership, begun four years ago, is working together in ways that were barely imaginable when we first started. We are bringing CEOs and heads of community organizations, educators and union leaders, and government officials together to reallocate resources and strengthen our education system. And the results we have seen from committing to working together on behalf of our young people are transforming this community.

We have made a number of investments in the Child Welfare system, such as our new OnCare system of care. Our efforts have resulted in a 45 percent decrease in foster care placement since 2005 and a 43 percent decrease in foster children living in highly intensive, high cost institutional care since 2006. These decreases are far exceeding state averages.

And these programs dovetail smoothly with our commitment to our regional strategy launched with the help of Say Yes to Education. Say Yes is an all-encompassing effort that puts the necessary support pieces in place to assist children in successfully completing school. Keeping our children with permanent, supportive families improves academic outcomes.

We've partnered with Huntington Family Center to handle referrals of students having academic, attendance, family, or medical problems.

In 2011 alone, 342 families, which included 1,038 children, were served by the Family Support Program. Ninety-six percent of those served reported progress, 99 percent reported that the services helped connect them to needed supports and since the program's inception four years ago only three children have been directed to out of home placement.

As of January 2013, every student in the Syracuse City School District will have their own mental health clinic, something we're proud of. By the time someone shows up at the civic services center downtown with an issue, it's a pretty big issue. But if we can address those issues before they become a crisis, not only are dollars saved, but the outcomes for children and their families are proven to be much more positive.

Because we are focused on helping students who encounter some of life's harshest challenges, we are seeing fewer young people fall into a life of crime and instead pursue a higher level of learning. Graduation rates are going up, property values are increasing and for the first time in generations, every sector of our community—from government, to the school district, to community providers—is focused on improving the educational trajectory of our young people.

Efforts like Say Yes to Education, over time, can help improve educational attainment, reduce social services costs, and build a stronger tax base. We see this as a focal point in our plan for economic growth. All of our work is focused on building capacity within schools, communities, and families to create a shared commitment to the success of every child.

Despite all the great work being done locally, we are still tremendously affected by what happens in Albany. I am here today to ask for a reduction in the red tape and unfunded mandates that make it harder to do the collaborative work our city and county are pursuing.

Budget silos also make it difficult to align resources in a way that produces meaningful outcomes. Removing these barriers will make it easier for us to direct our resources aimed at meeting the health, social, and educational needs of young people, in a way that ensures they reach our most vulnerable populations.

We aspire to see the model we've created in Syracuse and Onondaga County applied city by city, school by school, across this great state as a core strategy to bring school- and community improvement efforts to bear on a large scale. Our approach not only engages the entire community, but also creates a collective accountability for the destinies of our young people.

We have an obligation—both moral and economic—to create better outcomes for our young people. Our failure to act will narrow the future for new generations of New Yorkers unable to take on the high-skill jobs that will propel our economy forward. Thank you for an opportunity to share our experience and insights into the key barriers to our continued success. We have

much more work to do, but we are committed to making it happen for the sake of our young people.