

Testimony for the Governor's Education Reform Commission

To be delivered at the Hearing at Lemoyne College, August 14, 2012

To the Esteemed Commission:

I represent the Central New York Council for the Social Studies (CNYCSS), an affiliate of the New York State Council for the Social Studies and the National Council for the Social Studies. On behalf of the over-300 members of my organization who come from public and private schools and institutions of higher learning across upstate New York, I wish to voice hopes and concerns that many teachers have in the realm of school reform. Every day we work hard to make the world more familiar to New York State students and to give children the insights they need to function in our civil society. I respect the Governor's interest in improving education in New York State and I applaud the hard work that your group has already put forth. I recognize that there are many constituencies whose needs and wants deserve to be addressed in the course of these hearings. The voices of social studies educators should be added to the list. Our discipline is faced with many implied changes and challenges in the near future and there are several points we wish to communicate to the Commission and the public-at-large.

There are many ways by which teachers organize and represent their needs and ideals. Teachers' unions indeed represent teachers' voices when it comes to many of the areas of reform your commission hopes to address. Collective bargaining is and should continue to be an effective manner by which we achieve reform that leads to greater student achievement. That affirmed, strong educator voices have been notably absent from this reform conversation with regard to matters of content and pedagogy that will fundamentally impact the "what" of our children's education in New York State. Our organization has existed for decades, connecting practitioners in social studies classrooms and related fields, offering professional development when school districts failed to do so and standing up for a necessary discipline that is often sent to the back burner in moments of "crisis" and "reform." CNYCSS has built and maintains vital relationships with area colleges, particularly teacher preparation programs, providing outreach, support and feedback for generations of new teachers. We work closely with curriculum leaders at the State Department of Education. We regularly facilitate State-mandated trainings for exam scoring and to address changes in the curriculum. We offer input to textbook publishers and education technology developers to improve the materials with which we pursue our state and national social studies standards. Our members are superb educators – deeply committed to rich and rigorous curricula and to producing global citizens that will aptly function in the new economy Governor Cuomo speaks of with great frequency. Legitimate attempts should be made to include groups such as our own in the dialogue. Social studies teachers across the state are eager to assist in educational change, motivated by the reality that any reform enacted will have an impact on the content taught and learned by children.

One area of school reform that concerns our members is in the realm of graduation requirements. Several changes have been proposed to the state's requirements for social studies. Most notably, a recommendation was considered by the Board of Regents that would make the Global History

and Geography Regents exam optional, thus clearing an alternative path toward graduation for students that struggle on the exam. Many of our members are global history teachers who work diligently to make this exam less of an obstacle for our students, and we understand the desire to see more students, not less, graduate from high school. But graduation must mean that students are work/world ready; that expectation would be seriously undermined by less global education. Reform has to center on what is best for students. If anything, students in this era (particularly in a state as diverse as New York) need more global awareness, a better understanding of geography and the changing “landscape” of history. Especially with the upcoming introduction of the Common Core, the social studies classroom is a place where students further develop vital reading, writing, research and thinking skills. It is in the social sciences where students most frequently learn to reason, persuade, collaborate and compromise. Students who intend to work in the medical field, the military, the business world or virtually any other profession will not function without these skills in place. It is our great fear that if the graduation requirement is changed, there will be some places that marginalize the Global curriculum in favor of other disciplines, or in an effort to create further teacher “efficiencies.” It is true that the exam is a challenge, but in the hopes of reforming our education system for the better, we can not sacrifice content simply because it is rigorous. That being said, there are many in our ranks who can articulate a vision for global education that is more practical, more accessible and may be more efficient than the current structure. It is our opinion that no test or requirement should be eliminated without a vigorous public analysis of the potential consequences of such a policy change. We would welcome a role in working with the State in creating a better curriculum and exam that targets meaningful content and skills for this generation of learners rather than wave a “white flag” of defeat and eliminate an area of core learning all together.

In a similar vein, social studies educators are troubled by a trend in school reform that advances math and science in public education at the expense of our discipline. There is no doubt that STEM-related curricula is critical for a workforce that can compete in the global marketplace, but the social sciences that are often taught in our public schools can frequently build upon these other disciplines and compliment them. Our organization promotes an understanding of the social studies that moves well-beyond traditional history. We regularly emphasize other areas of social science – psychology, public policy, anthropology, economics and others that dove-tail frequently with those of our STEM colleagues. Our economics classes create a new platform for students to think logically about their choices and to practicably employ skills they’ve cultivated in their math classes. What about the students who examine science of hydrofracking in New York State before engaging in a public policy analysis of the issue? Or the engineering class that examines potential projects for water waste management based on geography and population models they learned about in their social studies class? A deep cultural awareness of the social structures of China and India would certainly help students to understand how we might approach future business and technological partnerships with such countries...the possibilities are endless. All of the content taught by our colleagues – whether in the core curriculum or as enrichment – actually facilitates better understanding of the very skills we praise in other nations’ education systems. Many studies show that other cultures do not ignore the examination of social sciences, but engage them to produce truly well-rounded learners. It may actually be more efficient to create more opportunities for interdisciplinary learning involving the social studies, rather than cutting

course offerings to make room for STEM courses. Furthermore, social studies educators often supplement classroom instruction with a plethora of extracurricular opportunities that enrich the educational experience and frequently motivate students from all walks of life. Social studies has become a natural fit for student council, community service organizations, debate teams, Mock Trial, Model United Nations, to name a few. Students learn how to be engaged and productive in these activities; they breathe life into traditional classroom learning. Without robust and well-supported social studies faculty in schools, many of these opportunities for students will fail to thrive. Research suggests that engagement is a critical component of both student retention and achievement; these kinds of activities more than return on the modest investment that lots of school districts make in them and we believe, again, when strengthened - not undermined - the social studies can contribute to the overall health of our state's educational system.

On a different note, our organization feels strongly that it serves as an important model for the Commission to consider when examining the professionalism and preparedness of New York State teachers. There is no doubt that New York State's teachers – new teachers, teachers in struggling districts, teachers who are reassigned to teach new courses due to staff cuts and school restructuring, all of us on some level – are overwhelmed by the many challenges of providing a sound education to our students. We often need help – from fellow colleagues, from experts, from administrators – understanding what can work in our classrooms. Very little opportunity exists within schools for most teachers to get this kind of support, leading to the understandable frustration of teachers themselves, their students, administrators and the communities they serve. Opportunities must exist for teachers to improve their content knowledge, to re-tool their skills and to dialogue with colleagues about best practices. Our organization is an incredibly efficient “model” for this needed component of reform. We regularly bring together the power and resources of diverse groups to help connect teachers from all backgrounds and settings. We are blessed with the support of some of the most prestigious academic institutions; our efforts are often praised by school boards and administrators from many diverse districts and our members take full advantage of the time we create for professional development and teacher improvement that functions outside of the “control” of formal institutions. We believe it is a model that can be replicated in many disciplines with great positive impact on public education. To be blunt, our organization has managed to cut through a great deal of “red tape” to provide meaningful professional opportunities for career teachers. We would welcome more opportunity and responsibility in this regard – creating an even wider compliment of services to be made available to more educators, even helping to support and improve the process of becoming a teacher through more efficient and effective teacher training. Through partnership and celebration of teacher professionalism, teachers are successful. It is when they are excluded from such opportunities (as happens often in the neediest of districts) that students suffer. Furthermore, our organization is proof that collaboration leads to strong schools and broader educational success. We improve when we see what happens in successful classrooms, we lend our expertise when we see teachers who want to get better. Rather than believe that all schools have to generate this kind of opportunity “in house,” school leaders should open up to wider avenues of curricular connection and development and reach out to professional organizations like CNYCSS for our advice and support.

I recognize that this testimony only addresses a narrow sliver of the Commission's work. There are many matters that concern our members, but we do not have the time to comment on all of them here. Rather, we wish to share observations about this process in hopes that future changes in the state education system are fruitful and smooth. Members of CNYCSS are concerned about the lack of transparency with which such significant matters as making the Global Regents "optional" and adapting the state curriculum have been considered. In the past, we have been in close proximity to such important conversations – dialoguing with the Social Studies specialists at NYSED and communicating our views with the Regents who serve our area. It is important to our members that we have a role in the process of determining what we teach and the standards by which we will be judged. At this point, the process seems very disjointed, and it is unclear how the Commission will be empowered to make the changes they recommend, how the Board of Regents relates to this process and what role actual teachers in the field will have in the implementation of the approved reforms. Our organization seeks to advocate for the needs of teachers and students in our specific field – while such decisions logically can not be made by the entirety of the teaching corps of New York State, teachers should be able to know both "who" will make many of these important decisions and "what" framework exists for communicating their own ideas to those in a position to affect change. They count on our organization to keep the lines of communication open between our classrooms and Albany. This is an increasingly difficult aspect of our mission to honor, if not given more opportunities such as this testimony to make our voices heard.

Thank you for the opportunity to share concerns of social studies educators to the Commission. I wish you the best of luck as you seek to improve opportunities for New York's children, something we teachers endeavor to do every day.

Respectfully Submitted by Katherine Gross, President of the Central New York Council for the Social Studies