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Targeting State Aid for Professional Development and Innovative Initiatives to Help High-Need Districts Attract and Retain High-Quality Teachers

Testimony to the New York Education Reform Commission, August 14, 2012
Vito Sciscioli, Board Member, SYRACUSE 20/20

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Vito Sciscioli and I am a Board member of SYRACUSE 20/20. SYRACUSE 20/20 is a non-partisan, not-for-profit coalition of Central New York business and community leaders that advocate on quality of life and governance issues that impact Syracuse and our surrounding region. With respect to education, SYRACUSE 20/20's Education Task Force has as its mission to "provide advocacy and support for the Syracuse City School District and to advance the performance of city school children." We feel strongly that the fate of our City and region is directly tied to the fate of our City Schools. I have included with this testimony 20/20's Education Task Force's guiding principles.

The academic challenges we currently face within the Syracuse City School District, a District with a graduation rate of approximately 50%, are serious long-term issues for our entire community. No community can successfully compete when it leaves a large number of its future workforce behind. Therefore, on behalf of the Board of SYRACUSE 20/20, I convey our organization's strong support for your efforts to identify innovative reforms that will provide all children a solid educational foundation that enables them to be successful in New York's global economy.

We commend you for taking on some of the most critical issues that are before New York's education system today. We are long-standing advocates for reforming New York State's school aid funding system with a formula that is transparent and distributes funding equitably with an emphasis on low-wealth, high-need districts such as the Syracuse City School District. We encourage you to advance recommendations that will result in a revamped State aid formula that corrects historic inequities in the distribution of aid and complies with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. Also, 20/20 has had a long history with advancing the Community School model in Syracuse and we are strong supporters of Say Yes to Education Syracuse in its holistic approach to education reform. We applaud your efforts to replicate model programs that remove obstacles to learning, increase parental involvement and promote best-practices for at-risk students. Finally, we encourage your efforts to explore whether shared services, consolidations or regional strategies will result in

greater efficiencies that can improve student performance.

While all the areas that the Commission is focused on are critical elements of improving New York's educational system, today we want to focus on the Commission's Objective 1: finding ways to ensure that we have high quality teachers in every class room. We wholeheartedly agree with the Commission's description of this objective: "in order to improve student achievement we must ensure that every student has an excellent teacher."

To that end, we commend New York State for moving forward in two critical areas, adoption of the Common Core State Standards and implementation of a new teacher evaluation system. The Common Core will raise the bar in student learning and challenge New York's students to achieve higher-order critical thinking and analytical skills that are so necessary in today's global economy. With regard to the new teacher evaluation system we are hopeful that the state will utilize practitioner input to improve the new system just as the new system itself endeavors to drive continuous improvement among professional educators. However, we are concerned with the strain these new initiatives are placing on already stressed District's throughout the State. In many ways these initiatives are unfunded State mandates that if not carefully implemented and adequately supported by the State, they will result in financially strapped school districts falling further behind. Furthermore, we are at risk of alienating educators and jeopardizing morale if we don't adequately fund the successful implementation of both of these initiatives.

As you know, the ultimate goal of the new teacher evaluation system is not solely for the punitive purposes of terminating the employment of unqualified teachers. As the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality states, "the ultimate goal of all teacher evaluation should be to improve teacher and student learning."ⁱ As successful companies and organizations know from their significant investment in human resources, personnel evaluations are used to guide the growth of an employee. That is why we feel strongly that we need to change the tone of the current discussion around teacher evaluation, that we need to emphasize the importance of professional development and that we need to put money into the system to allow Districts to be successful in implementing the Common Core Standards and an effective teacher evaluation system.

Under the new teacher evaluation system, teachers that are assessed as ineffective or developing will require necessary supports to ensure that they obtain the skills to make them effective and highly effective teachers. The individual professional development growth plans developed in response to the evaluations will require Districts to offer professional development to low rated teachers to transform performance levels. However, if districts that have limited resources do not have funding to implement professional development, the instrument is rendered ineffective and eventually useless.

To prevent the new teacher evaluations from failing, the State should help to develop high-quality professional development systems that are grounded in best-practices. According to Christine Lowden at Seton Hall University in her research on professional development, "*the federal government has also increased its*

*understanding and definition of what constitutes effective professional development. The law (No Child Left Behind) defines professional development activities as high quality, sustained, intensive, and classroom focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher's performance in the classroom. The legislation also states quite clearly that professional development activities are not one-day or short-term workshops or conferences. States and local districts are required to plan systemically for professional learning and to focus efforts on the improvement of teacher performance and student achievement (Richardson, 2002)."*ⁱⁱ

In addition, the Christian Science Monitor notes that “many nations invest significantly in the ongoing improvement of teachers. In Singapore, Sweden, and [the Netherlands](#), teachers have at least 100 hours of professional development each year. In [England](#), teacher training has been credited with raising the portion of students meeting literacy standards from 63 percent to 75 percent over three years.”ⁱⁱⁱ

If we are sincere about making sure that all students have excellent teachers, we cannot leave professional development as an unfunded State mandate. As you know, when budgets are cut, often the first thing to go is professional development. For example, in a recent analysis conducted by outside consultants for the Syracuse City School District, it was determined that less than one percent of the District's budget is dedicated toward professional development. In a low-performing District, this is an unacceptable level of support. Superintendent Sharon Contreras, a Board Member of 20/20, wisely recognizes the short-sightedness and has set as a priority raising that level of investment in her workforce. We are strong supporters of her prioritization of professional development. The State should be her partner in this endeavor and invest in professional development, at the very least for low-performing, high-need districts.

Budgets that have eliminated or reduced professional development are short sighted but are responding to real fiscal constraints. We encourage the State to develop a categorical funding source that sends dedicated funding support to Districts for high-quality professional development. The support can help Districts with the transition to the new Common Core standards as well as ensure that we have meaningful implementation of the teacher evaluation system. As clearly stated in the Center for American Progress's 2012 report, “Federal and state policymakers should incentivize school systems to eradicate ineffectual and unproven professional development and invest in proven models. If reformers and education leaders can leverage that opportunity to design a broader set of policies that both “move it” and “improve it,” the ultimate increase in teaching effectiveness will be vastly greater. Many more teachers will benefit, and so will their students.”^{iv}

Finally, we know that low-performing school districts struggle to attract and retain high quality teachers. The Commission needs to focus on advancing innovative approaches to help low-performing districts attract the best and the brightest into their classrooms. A pipeline of high achieving students from our best college education programs to our high-need districts needs to be constructed in New York. Best practices from high-performing nations that successfully recruit from their top tier of college graduates should be identified by the State Education Department and

incorporated into practice in New York.

Retention is another critical element in school reform. If Districts are going to make the professional development investments in educators to help them achieve highly effective status, we want to make sure those educators stay in our high-need schools. The NEA estimates that urban districts face turnover rates of up to 50% of new teachers in their first five years.^v

The State should be encouraging and rewarding effective teacher retention programs like Peer Assistance and Review, a union/district collaboration that has been successfully operating in the Syracuse City School District for seven years. There are many examples throughout the country for building a high-quality work force, including developing Grow Your Own programs, loan-forgiveness programs and offering incentives such as meaningful bonuses and career advancement to highly effective teachers. The research in these areas is ongoing. New York should be leading the way in investing in innovative ideas that address these challenges.

In conclusion, the Board of SYRACUSE 20/20 is made up of diverse leaders from a variety of employment sectors in our community. However, our Board members all have one thing in common. The success of our respective institutions is dependent upon the people we employ. Our employees are our greatest asset. Therefore, we invest in our people and put in place structures to attract and retain high quality employees. There is no doubt that our public schools, and especially the state's low-performing districts, need to have the ability to attract and retain a world-class workforce to improve educational outcomes.

At the end of the day, teacher preparation, recruitment, retention and professional development requires much more attention from the State Education Department and local districts. As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted at an International Summit on the Teaching Profession, "When it comes to teaching, talent matters tremendously. But great teachers are not just born that way—it takes a high-quality system for recruiting, training, retaining, and supporting teachers over the course of their careers to develop an effective teaching force."^{vi}

The stakes are too high not to dramatically transform who goes into teaching and how we evaluate and support teachers once they are in front of our children in the classroom. We think New York is on the right path in raising standards and expectations for everyone involved in the education system; however, we urge the Commission to consider the need to significantly enhance State support for professional development through dedicated funding support. It will require resources to develop high-quality, effective professional development programs that enable us to reach our goal of having highly effective teachers in every classroom. We also encourage the Commission to consider innovative approaches to helping low-performing Districts recruit and retain the best and brightest our education system produces. Investments in educators, arming them with the tools to implement the Common Core Standards, will go a long way toward improving New York's educational outcomes. I thank you for this opportunity to provide you with testimony on behalf of SYRACUSE 20/20.

Endnotes

ⁱ Linking Teacher Evaluation to Professional Development: Focusing on Improving Teaching and Learning, Kietha Biggers, Understanding Teacher Quality Center, A Workshop for Regional Comprehensive Center Staff Hosted by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality

<http://www.tqsource.org/workshops/January2012/Presentations/Linking%20Teacher%20Evaluation.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Evaluating the impact of professional development, By Christine Lowden, Seton Hall University, 2005

http://institute.nsta.org/learningcenter/pdp/NSDC_Evaluating_Impact_PD.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Roundup: Other countries' efforts to develop and support teachers. A recent study identified teaching-related areas in which nations with high student achievement tend to have an advantage over the US. The Christian Science Monitor, March 2009.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2009/0324/p11s01-ussc.html>

^{iv} Movin' It *and* Improvin' It! Using Both Education Strategies to Increase Teaching Effectiveness

Craig D. Jerald, Center for American Progress, January 2012

http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/01/movin_it_improvin_it.html

^v Research Spotlight on Recruiting & Retaining Highly Qualified Teachers, National Education Association,

<http://www.nea.org/tools/17054.htm>

^{vi} US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's statement at International Summit on the Teaching Profession.

<http://asiasociety.org/education/learning-world/worlds-education-leaders-support-teachers>