

**Virginia Carmody, Executive Director, Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County**

Testimony for the Governor's Education Reform Commission on Student Achievement  
and Family Engagement

Submitted by Virginia Carmody, Executive Director

Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County

August 14, 2012

My name is Virginia Carmody and I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. As the Executive Director of the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, I offer our vision of "100% Literacy through 100% Community Engagement" -- a community impact strategy that seeks to shape a coordinated pipeline of programs and services that support children and their families across the lifespan. Much like communities throughout the state, we face unacceptable levels of educational outcomes and a concentration of poverty in our city's urban core. This can be seen in the jaw dropping 80% of students at the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) that live in poverty, which is three times the rate of all Syracuse families (25.1%) and eight times the New York (10.5%) and US (9.9%) rates. Furthermore, among the nation's 200 biggest cities, only five have higher estimated poverty rates than Syracuse.

Recognizing these challenges, the Syracuse community -- recognized as the birthplace of the modern adult literacy movement -- took action with civic leaders, businesses, nonprofits, school officials and higher education. Although measurable positive outcomes resulted, it became clear that the sheer scope of the challenges faced required a more unified and collaborative effort. The CNY Community Foundation spearheaded efforts to bridge community service providers within the field of literacy. A network of literacy organizations developed as interactions among service providers continued to grow and the benefits of mutually beneficial collaborations and data sharing became more apparent. What resulted was the evolution of a shared vision of what could be achieved collectively and the creation of the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County.

Over 200 community members met in extensive planning sessions, with guidance from national consultants Literacy Powerline, to establish a community-wide literacy plan with a focus on specific community literacy outcomes indicators and priority recommendations. Efforts to date have drawn from models of mutually beneficial partnerships, reciprocal relationships, leveraged resources, and a landmark initiative, Say Yes to Education. Considerable steps have been taken to facilitate access to comprehensive literacy and community services for individuals and families. The leadership of Syracuse University Chancellor Nancy Cantor, our elected leaders, especially County Executive Joanie Mahoney and Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, and our business community, led by CenterState CEO, is transforming the way we support our preK-12 students, creating a pathway for their success and a pipeline for tomorrow's workforce. In addition, the School Board and Syracuse community have charged newly hired Superintendent Sharon Contreras with improving student achievement and making the school district's

systems more effective and efficient.

The region is in the midst of pioneering a new mode of community institutional transformation that places literacy at the heart of networking relationships and in solving an array of socio-economic problems perpetuating illiteracy and generational poverty, which ultimately serve as the backdrop for educational underachievement.

Literacy is also at the heart of the comprehensive economic revitalization underway in the City of Syracuse, which has seen over \$200 million in new development projects in the last year. Construction to transform an empty warehouse on the edge of downtown in one of our poorest neighborhoods is currently underway on the state-of-the-art Broadcast and Education Center for WCNY public broadcast station and the new home of ProLiteracy and its' Ruth J. Colvin Center for Innovation and Excellence in Adult Education. The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, with the United Way of Central New York as its' fiscal agent, is located with ProLiteracy as well.

Engaging the scholarly work of the Community Benchmarks Program at Syracuse University's Maxwell School, the report "Laying the Foundation for Literacy" was conducted and focused on eight Community Literacy Outcome Indicators that cover the lifespan from early childhood to adult education and provides the framework that allows us to measure progress.

A number of research studies have made a compelling case for early education as a critical public investment. Early literacy, specifically, has proven to be a reliable indicator of a child's future success in school. Consequently, this has led to our focus on the importance of regular reading to children as a means to develop skills necessary to enter kindergarten ready to learn and, in particular, our development of a dual-generation strategy that seeks to fully involve parents – a child's first and most important teacher.

As the centerpiece of a broader community literacy plan that is targeted and measurable, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was launched in May 2010 as a program that not only provides books to children but also establishes a central data system through which collaborating partners will strategize and mark their progress toward shared outcomes together. With unparalleled frequency and duration, new age-appropriate books are mailed monthly to enrolled children 5 and under in our initial zip code areas of 13203 and 13208 in the SCSD's North Literacy Zone, a "Made in New York" adult education reform initiative developed by the New York State Board of Regents and the State Education Department to close the achievement gap in urban and rural communities of concentrated poverty and high concentrations of families and individuals with limited literacy or English language proficiency. This month we will expand to zip code 13204, the SCSD's West Literacy Zone, and thereby cover half of the City of Syracuse.

Research conducted by Le Moyne College's Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research showed significant positive results for our Imagination Library program, including the fact that it has a positive effect on family reading regardless of child age, gender, family income, parental education, race, parental nation of birth and primary language. We are also monitoring enrolled children with the use of our automated monthly database dashboard. With our partners' help, including St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center which has facilitated the enrollment of 46% of our enrollees, this dashboard provides a demographic snapshot of those who completed our welcome surveys, along with a statistical overview of

their reading practices. Finally, this is the medium that allows us, in partnership with the American Institutes for Research and with data supplied from the Syracuse City School District, to examine early reading assessment scores with associated demographic and behavioral characteristics so we can examine the relationships between reading practices of families and their children's eventual kindergarten readiness. With Institutional Review Board approval, this analysis is being conducted on data that we receive in a format that conceals each student's identity. Our innovative approach to school readiness and the associated analysis, we believe, is significant, already producing results. We thank all the work of our Measurement Action Team, co-lead by Jessica Cohen, recently retired Superintendent, OCM BOCES and Frank Ridzi, Ph.D., Director of Research & Community Initiatives at the CNY Community Foundation.

To date, we have now distributed over 20,000 books and plan to expand to zip code 13204 in the West Literacy Zone this month thereby targeting half the City of Syracuse. In addition we have also awarded over \$100,000 in "Literacy Champion Grants" over the past two years to support family literacy programming. These target areas represent some of our neediest neighborhoods in the crucial area of school-readiness - nearly half of the children from these zones have historically entered school without being ready to read. Such deficits can place children at a scholastic disadvantage for years to come.

The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County has also made the strategic decision in 2012 to join the Annie E. Casey Foundation-led Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. More than 120 communities, including Syracuse, submitted plans with specific targeted outcomes focused on getting students on track for grade-level reading by the end of third grade. The third grade milestone marks the point when children shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn. Students who have not mastered reading by that time are more likely to get stuck in a cycle of academic failure, drop out of school, and struggle throughout their lives. We are now charter members of a national movement of local governments, nonprofit organizations, foundations and others adopting a collective impact strategy and engaging the full community around a focus on three challenges that keep children from learning to read well: school readiness (too many children are entering kindergarten not ready to learn); chronic absence (too many young children are missing too many days of school); and summer learning loss (too many children are losing ground academically over the summer).

We see our role in the Campaign for Grade Level Reading much the same as the role it plays in moving forward the literacy mandate of the community. This is well said by the Urban Institute which describes a literacy coalition as "A coalition is at once a distinct organization AND a collective of many organizations and stakeholders. It is both the lead organization AND its membership. The coalition's work is to act on behalf of the collective. Primary tasks for literacy coalitions are to facilitate change and track improvements in literacy in the community as a whole."

As we know, schools cannot succeed alone. The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County has made a commitment to support the efforts of Superintendent Sharon Contreras with a spirit of collaboration and partnership. The Syracuse City School District has already attracted national attention and praise for the progressive implementation of the Say Yes to Education framework, ensuring better teaching, better curriculum and need for accountability. We also encourage the continued investment in QUALITYstarsNY and value the advocacy of Peggy Liuzzi, Executive Director, Child Care Solutions.

Today, this community of practitioners and leaders are at the table with a much clearer vision of the next steps towards "100 % Literacy through 100% Community Engagement" with an eye-opened, practical

approach towards collaboration and the strategic use of resources. We are poised in a new way to set goals through 2020 in order to achieve and celebrate success in the area of early childhood education through Grade 3.

As such, please consider the words of Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke at the Children's Defense Fund National Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio on July 24, 2012:

*“So how can we improve the opportunities for all children and give them a chance to succeed in our ever-changing, globalized economy? As the husband of a teacher and an educator myself, as well as a parent and former school board member, I know from personal experience that, for creating opportunity and changing lives, there is no substitute for a quality education. The research shows that effective educations lead to lower rates of poverty, higher lifetime earnings, and greater satisfaction on the job and at home. And specialists in economic development have identified educational attainment as a key source of economic growth and rising incomes in many countries around the world.*

*Although education and the acquisition of skills is a lifelong process, starting early in life is crucial. Neuroscientists observe that if the first few years of a child's life include support for healthy development in families and communities, the child is more likely to succeed in school and to contribute to society as an adult. Conversely, without support during these early years, a child is ultimately more likely to drop out of school, earn lower wages, depend on government programs, or be incarcerated.*

*Consistent with this research, early childhood education programs aim to nurture healthy development from the earliest years. Programs that provide enriched experiences for children and that also involve parents have shown to benefit children from all backgrounds, but they have the strongest influence on children from disadvantaged environments. Importantly, state preschool assessments have shown that early childhood education programs make children better prepared for school, a precursor of future success.*

*Economically speaking, early childhood programs are a good investment, with inflation-adjusted annual rates of return on the funds dedicated to these programs estimated to reach 10 percent or higher. Very few alternative investments can promise that kind of return. Notably, a portion of these economic returns accrues to the children themselves and their families, but studies show that the rest of society enjoys the majority of the benefits, reflecting the many contributions that skilled and productive workers make to the economy.”*

We are targeted, ready and realistic about the challenges before us. We anticipate state-wide leadership to support the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Nothing is more basic, more essential, more foundational and more important to a child's success in life than the ability to read well. Together, this is a problem we can solve if we bring the community to bear on the challenges that keep children from reading well. Together, we are putting students first.