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2011 Nassau BOCES Education Partner Award

2011 New York State Middle School Principal of the Year

Written Testimony of Anael Alston for the New York State Education Reform Commission

Good morning. My name is Anael Alston and I am currently the principal of the Richard S. Sherman-Great Neck North Middle School in the Great Neck, New York. Chairman Parsons and members of the New York State Education Reform Commission, I am honored, humbled, and appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's discussion. My testimony today is framed through the varied hats that I wear or have recently worn as a professional educator. My comments today are centered on increasing student learning with recommendations in the areas of resource allocation, evaluation, and equity and poverty.

I am the former principal of a school that was racially, ethnically, socio-economically diverse, and high poverty. As a team, we worked feverishly, worked smart, and were recognized nationally for dramatic gains in student achievement. At our peak, we virtually eliminated the achievement gap among student groups, while significantly raising student achievement for all students. I am currently principal of a high achieving school in arguably one of the best school districts in the United States of America; the Great Neck Public Schools. Finally, I also serve as a trustee on the Quogue UFSD Board of Education. Quogue UFSD is a small pre-K through 6 school district that, while still has its challenges, remains among the top 5 performing elementary schools in New York State for several years running. Through these varied experiences in very different educational contexts, here is what I've learned:

Resource Allocation

Through my varied professional experiences I've learned that resources alone do not equate to better learning and raising student achievement. You can provide a school or district more money to improve student outcomes, but if it is not used prudently, it will have little to no impact on student learning. In fact, it is the effective allocation of resources in practices, guiding principles, and human resources that impact the quality of teaching and learning that go on in a school or school district. Case in point: With the support of a stable, well informed board of education, a superintendent of schools grounded in curriculum and leadership development, a talented leadership team, and tireless teachers who believed in their students, in my former district we were able to create a culture of performance and achievement for all. This school community was diverse, high poverty, and on the verge of academic crisis when the leadership team took over. A significant part of our plan was to reallocate existing resources. We were able

to identify and cut waste and ineffective programs and invest in quality professional development for teachers and supervisors without increasing expenditures. The series of steps that we took over a 6 year period are greatly attributed to our rise from academic mediocrity to winning the Sylvia Chorp Award for Innovation in Technology (2009), a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence at an elementary school (2010), and the Met-Life/NASSP Breakthrough School Award for dramatic turnaround in raising student achievement at the middle school (2011). In total, a struggling high needs diverse district won three national awards over a 6-year period. With regard to the allocation of resources, from 2005-2010, each year, the school budget came in below contingency; in effect giving voters an opportunity to vote themselves a tax break by voting for the school budget. It was never a matter of the amount of money being spent on the education for the students; it was the way in which the money was being spent.

Evaluation

Through my varied professional experiences I've learned that absent the politics that can creep into the evaluation process with educational professionals, the evaluative process is possibly the most powerful tool a supervisor has in raising student achievement. How? When done well, the evaluation process provides a mirror to the practitioner of their work and opens the door to stimulate the reflection needed to affect positive change. More effective teaching leads to better student learning and raises student achievement.

Equity and Poverty

Through my varied professional experiences I've learned that poverty is an area that many people don't like to talk about, but poverty plays a role in student achievement. I've also learned when not addressed properly, poverty condemns children, particularly children of color, to a life of second-class citizenship. Not because kids who live in poverty can't achieve at high levels, but often people who do not know how to teach students in poverty, use poverty as a crutch for why students in poverty don't achieve. Supervisors who don't know how to properly develop staff with the tools to reach impoverished students join the chorus, unwittingly singing backup in the soft bigotry of low expectations song to those who don't know any better. By the time students who live in poverty come to school, they are often standing at bat over home plate with one or two strikes against them and are expected to make it to home plate like everyone else. Meanwhile, other students come to school and begin on second and third base with no strikes against them and a friendly umpire overseeing the game.

SOLUTION-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Resource Allocation

It was not by chance that in my former district we reallocated resources from things that, while good, had minimal impact on the teaching and learning that went on in the classrooms. When a school or district is struggling academically they may need to know where they should be investing their resources, and how to minimize costs by building capacity within the organization. Resources will best increase student learning if they are invested in improving instruction and assessment, teacher practices in the classroom, and supervision. The investment in improving instruction is an investment in the professional development of teachers and supervisors. My top two recommendations for improving student learning and increasing student learning are Differentiation of Instruction (DI), and Inquiry-Based Instruction. I strongly

recommend quality training in evidenced-based supervisory techniques and effective questioning for supervisors.

Although the concept of DI has been formalized and promoted formally for over 20 years, I find that it is very much misunderstood and often misapplied. Classroom teachers must be able to meet the needs of students who show up to school with two strikes as much as they meet the needs of students with no strikes and all social advantages their life circumstances have afforded them. Inquiry-Based instruction guides and forces students to think, figure out, and process what is being asked of him or her. It also forces teachers to resist relying on a text and facilitate instruction.

Based on the health and well being of a school district attendance, graduation rates, etc., I recommend that NYSED offer direction as to how to allocate resources. For the most troubled schools or districts, I recommend an Educational Audit.

What Is An Educational Audit?

In short, the Educational Audit is an analysis of a school or district. It would bring in an educational professional/team to analyze all aspects of the educational program (staffing, scheduling, curriculum, textbook selection, job descriptions, courseware, population needs, physical plant requirements, etc.) in order to ensure that the program in place is running in as efficient a manner as should be expected. The auditor's report will provide the school or district with efficiency choices that can be implemented in order to reduce costs, redirect funds, and/or modify their core structure to make their fiscal needs easier to manage while, at the same time, providing the greatest "bang for the buck" in programming, teaching, and learning for the students.

Recommendations for Evaluation

Using an evidence-based epistemology to evaluate teachers and supervisors will provide feedback that stimulates reflection and growth. For the 60% of the newly implemented APPR formula which applies to teacher and principal evaluations, New York State has made great strides with respect to schools and districts that are not well informed on how to properly evaluate trained professionals. However, there are high performing solid districts across the state that already have quality evaluation systems in place and may be negatively impacted by the broad stroke approach to evaluation.

An analysis of New York State Report Cards shows that across Long Island, some schools and or school districts consistently do very well, others hold steady at acceptable success rates, others fluctuate between well and doing poorly, and some consistently do poorly. This trend holds true across New York State, in some cases irrespective of the race and socio-economic status of the school community. Do some districts need some direction and guidance with professional evaluation? Yes! However, if a district is consistently performing well above the state standards, I posit that this mandate takes away precious resources and time that would ordinarily be dedicated to improving teaching and learning. Going forward, I recommend that NYSED provide a waiver application to relieve districts that would not benefit from the APPR mandate. Money and resources that are directed towards developing and implementing APPR could be redirected back to teaching and learning. Additionally, districts that have been provided waivers could be

identified by NYSED as resources that other districts visit and learn from in order to improve aspects of their evaluation and educational programs. Just as we expect teachers to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of students, a differentiated approach based on the needs of a school district would be welcomed, appreciated, and most importantly create greater possibilities for increasing student learning.

Recommendations for Equity and Poverty

To address the disparities in equity that children in poverty have as it relates to teaching and learning, it is imperative that teachers, schools, and district leaders at all levels are equipped with the tools that enable them to make connections with these children.

The tools used in addressing the academic needs of students who live in poverty are often quality teaching practices that benefit all students. Examples include Differentiation of Instruction, empathy, Project Based Learning, Problem Based Learning and, of course, the basics. Of monumental importance is a shift in the mental models related to the innate potential that children of poverty have. I strongly recommend training in cultural diversity and teaching students in poverty to help close the equity gaps that many vulnerable and needy children come to school with.

Finally, to begin to close the social capital and life experience gaps that children of poverty have when they come to school, schools must provide trips, enrichments, remediation and experiences that include music, dance, literature, hands on science and engineering opportunities, as well as providing experiences and enrichments that middle class and upper middle class students do regularly and by design. To bring all students to minimum standards that will prepare them to be college and career-ready requires a differentiated approach. Some students need more, some students need less, it may not seem fair, but it is equitable. To accomplish the aforementioned activities require resources. Having done it in the past, I assure you that when school and or district leaders partner with community residents, foundations, local officials, and businesses, not only is it possible, it is doable. It is also necessary to create instructional equity and equity leading toward a clearly articulated redundantly shared purpose for educating all students.