

Testimony of the  
New York State School Boards Association  
to the  
New NY Education Reform Commission  
Presented by Jay L.T. Breakstone, Bellmore Union Free School District

Thursday, October 11, 2012  
SUNY College at Old Westbury, Student Union Building  
Old Westbury, New York 11568

On behalf of Long Island's boards of education I welcome you to Long Island, where high performing public schools are an enduring priority for our communities.

Long Island's reputation for top public schools derives from local school districts serving a supportive, demanding public and the recognition that economic vitality is highly dependent upon a worthy reputation for excellent schools.

I must begin by taking note of the assertion in the Public Notice for this hearing that New York's high school graduation rates are an indicator of failing public schools. This is not reflected in the Long Island I know and serve. In fact, if Long Island were a state, it would rank FIRST in the nation in high school completion rates and would similarly place in other national and state rankings. Furthermore, a myriad of nationally recognized measurements rank New York's education systems far higher than this sound-bite factoid. Absent the backing of a rigorous curriculum and a well-rounded educational program, graduation rates present a significant but limited perspective for defining a quality education.

New York State's percentage of state contribution to the costs of its education system has dwindled to among the lowest in the nation. Its over-dependence on local school property taxes to foot the bill is keenly felt on Long Island where strong education systems have been built primarily with local funding.

Albeit, if a correlation between money spent per pupil and graduation rates persists as the baseline for this Commission's measurement of outcomes, then we've delivered what Long Islander's refer to as "bang for the buck". When the State Education Department's regional cost index is factored in, Long Island's per pupil cost is below that of the median county in New York.

On behalf of the communities who have built and struggled to sustain quality public schools, I reject any premise that our citizens and school boards have not been caring and careful stewards of their local schools. For them there is no single more political, social and economic principle or goal than education.

New York State School Boards Association calls for an updated costing-out study that links New York's constitutional guarantee to a funding system that is equitably distributed, reliable, sustainable and sufficient. Our region is a microcosm of the State as a whole....our school systems might be examined as a veritable petri dish for exploring what works and what needs assistance in public education. If a laboratory has produced impressive results despite contra-indications it begs to be examined further.

New York State School Boards Association calls for raising expectations for all students. While we live on the largest inhabited island in the continental United States, it is still an Island. Our finite borders create an intimate dynamic when it comes to our public's involvement in its schools. A desire for top performing schools sets the bar and promotes a beneficial competition among communities to place a high value on delivering the best educational opportunities within their means.

New York State School Boards Association calls for promoting greater public and parent participation in Education. That demanding public I referred to earlier? It is here and thriving on Long Island and no more visible and vocal than at board of education meetings. The Commission is right to factor in greater parental involvement as a goal. The ability of parents and citizens to directly engage their local school board members is key to responsive and accountable schools.

Nonetheless, the close proximity of a great diversity of Long Island student populations highlights the dramatic differences in educational investment and outcomes which, in turn, contribute to an acknowledged "achievement gap". Reasons for this persistent "gap" are complex and solutions must be far ranging. Adequate resources, however, are a given necessity. State aid must be distributed more equitably to eliminate the disparity between high and low needs districts by leveling up, not by leveling all districts downward.

For decades our citizens have rallied to support school budget increases to make up for shortfalls in state funding and to absorb the trickle-down costs of state mandates.

Economic pressures and the imposition of a cap on school revenues now severely hinder the ability of local taxpayers to continue to bear that burden. As a result, troublesome fiscal and educational impacts are beginning to emerge. Schools across the fiscal spectrum are reporting larger class sizes, fewer AP courses, reduction in career and technical offerings, elimination of full-day Kindergarten, fewer electives and after-school offerings, cuts in middle-school athletics. The ability to sustain all that make our schools exemplary is eroding.

In their unrelenting efforts to protect core education program board members are finding fewer and fewer options. Maintenance cannot be deferred forever. Fund balances are not a bottomless source of revenue. Staffing can be cut just so far and employee concessions cannot be expected to continue on an unending trajectory.

Nonetheless, despite every impediment the State throws at us, board members continue to honor their commitment to protect their community's investment in its schools. The hard choices relegated to school boards have thus far been accepted by our voters. Voter-approved school budgets have reflected the reality of the tough economy as well as the cumulative impact of multiple years of frozen or slashed state education funding. What those budgets do not reflect is the promised "significant mandate relief" that was to accompany the imposition of New York's cap on the school levy.

New York State School Boards Association calls for strengthening the Education Workforce. Local school boards well understand the importance of attracting and retaining a highly educated work force as well as the benefits of providing a secure and stable work environment. The ability of school boards to successfully balance those needs against limited local resources is often hampered by State-mandated management constraints. Significant in its ability to weaken a school board's bargaining power is the Triborough Amendment to the Triborough Doctrine of the Taylor Law which requires all terms of an expired labor agreement, including automatic salary step increases, to remain in place when a contract expires. School districts should not be required to pay wage increases under an expired contract.

New York State School Boards Association calls for stimulating the Student Learning Environment. New York State should no longer be allowed to evade its obligation to address the hard political choices needed to provide sufficient resources for its schools; to empower local districts to adapt to the new reality through flexibility and innovation; and to deliver immediate, meaningful relief from costly state mandates.

There is little time to spare. Unwarranted and underfunded state mandates mean cuts to local school program. Lack of sufficient resources relegates high-needs districts to the lowest level of the State's priorities. Inadequate state support for schools struggling to retain strong educational program will likely condemn them to the same fate. Assumptions that high-performing schools can continue to achieve on their own will assuredly set New York on a downward spiral towards acceptance of educational mediocrity.

If New Yorkers are to be provided the world-class schools necessary for economic pre-eminence and sustainability it will come about only through a reaffirmation of the joint responsibility and commitment of the State and its local school districts.

ADDENDUM TO TESTIMONY - MANDATE RELIEF  
New York Education Reform Commission  
October 11, 2012

A call to honor the Legislature's commitment to provide substantive mandate relief, commensurate with revenue losses attributable to diminished state aid and local school levy cap:

>Impose no mandates that are not fully funded by the state; sunset all existing mandates and reinstate only those that are deemed essential; require that all bills contain a full disclosure of local cost and tax impact

>Amend the Triborough Amendment to the Triborough Doctrine of the Taylor Law, ending requirement to grant automatic step and lane increases beyond expiration of a contract. *Any meaningful attempt to contain school costs must garner savings from the portion of the school budget that covers staff and salaries. While it is the school board that ultimately determines salaries, it is often hampered in negotiations by employee benefits and management constraints mandated by the State. Significant in its ability to weaken a school board's bargaining power is the Triborough Amendment to the Triborough Doctrine. This provision mandates the continuation of step increases throughout the period of negotiations despite the absence of an agreed-upon contract.*

*School districts should not be required to pay wage increases under an expired contract.*

>Exempt Schools from the Costly Wicks Law. *New York's local and state taxpayers continue to be required to waste the hundreds of millions of dollars it costs to fund the restrictions imposed by the Wicks Law. The State avoids compliance by redirecting funding for its capital projects through the Dormitory Authority. New York remains the last state in the nation to cling to this arcane law.*

>Cap school district contributions to employees' health insurance

>Mitigate ever-expanding special education costs through greater state funding and by conforming state laws and regulations to those of federal IDEA requirements.

>Halt the use of school budgets as a repository for shifts of burdensome costs from the state and other levels of government.

>Relieve communities of the mandate to turn over school funds to State-imposed charter schools that are not locally accountable.

>Increase local districts' share of federal Race to the Top funds in order to more adequately cover the local costs of implementing the State's APPR mandates.

>Withstand attempts to shift schools' state aid to competition contests for education funding

EDUCATION REFORM COMMISSION  
ADDENDUM TO TESTIMONY – “IF LONG ISLAND WERE A STATE”

- If Long Island were a state, it would be ranked #1 in high school completion rate

AVERAGE GRADUATION RATE OF PUBLIC H.S. STUDENTS – RANKED	No. of Diplomas Conferred
Long Island (if LI were a state)    90.8%	34,614
Wisconsin                                    90.7%	65,410
Vermont                                      89.6%	7,209
North Dakota/Minnesota            87.4%	7,232/59,729
Iowa    85.7%	33,926

- The *Washington Post* ranked the top 1,900 high schools in the United States. The top 7% of 27,000 schools includes 54 Long Island high schools. Nearly half (54 of 116) of the high schools on Long island are among the top Schools identified by the *Washington Post*.
- *Newsweek* compiled a list of the Best High Schools in America. 21 Long Island high schools rank in the top 300 of *Newsweek’s* list.
- If Long Island were a state, it would be ranked #1 in Intel Semifinalists.
  1. Long Island (61)
  2. New York – excluding LI (44)
  3. California (40)
  4. Maryland (18)
  5. Virginia (13)
- If Long Island were a state, it would be ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in the number of Siemens Semifinalists
  1. California (48)
  2. Long Island (46)
  3. Texas (38)
  4. New Jersey (16)
  5. Michigan (16)
  6. Illinois (11)
  7. New York (excluding LI) (11)

- 106 Long Island students are on the 2012 National Merit Semifinalists list
- 9 Long Island school districts won the “National AP District of the Year Award”
- Students earning a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation
  - Long Island 50%
  - Rest of NYS 27%
- *2012 Long Island Index* reports that Long Island outperforms the rest of New York on College Readiness indicator by 11 percentage points

*\* 2012 Random Statistics compiled by Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and Nassau County Council of School Superintendents*