

TO: New York State Education Reform Commission

**FROM: Michael J. Mensch, Chief Operating Officer
Western Suffolk BOCES**

RE: Testimony for October 11, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Education Reform Commission. My name is Mike Mensch and I have served Western Suffolk BOCES for the past eight years as its Chief Operating Officer in addition to representing Western Suffolk BOCES' 18 component school districts as a liaison with the New York State Education department. Prior to this position I served as a teacher, principal and superintendent of schools in both Nassau and Suffolk counties and will be completing my 40th year in education this spring.

I am confident that as the Commission nears the end of its state-wide hearings that you may have "heard it all" by now. I am also confident that each of you have already reached some common reactions to the tasks set forth for you, but sadly, have not found too many solutions. This is not your fault. Schools that are successful by our standards, as well as those we deem not so successful, are all complex, socially driven organizations influenced by fiscal, social, emotional and community driven factors. All these factors are impacted by the never ending challenges of a faltering state and national economy. Nonetheless, you are seeking solutions to:

1. The structure of NY's public education system
2. Teacher and principal quality and district leadership
3. Student achievement and family engagement

My agency and the 18 superintendents representing our component school districts offer the following thoughts on these areas. They are in no way comprehensive. We do so by beginning with the premise that public school education and all that goes with it are, in fact, mandated. We should stop trying to criticize the system and try to recognize where in the system it is being done with the effectiveness and accountability we all strive for and emulate these successes across the state. Across NYS low and high wealth schools achieve educational and financial criteria that meet and exceed the standards we desire. With this in mind . . .

1. The Structure of NY's Public Education System

- How to provide sufficient school funding for a sound basic education seems to be eluding all of us. Even as employee unions across the state settle for zero or moderate salary raises and increase contributions to health insurance, it has become abundantly clear the school community cannot keep up with inflation and the uncontrolled cost increases in health plans, retirement systems, utilities and maintenance.

We recommend this Commission focus on the cost drivers that local schools and all employers in the state have little or no control over. CSEA and teacher units have begun to do their part in the equation, but even with zero increases, the cost drivers combined with a 2% cap are destined to cripple and bankrupt schools and public agencies across the state. Find a way to suspend the Triborough regulations wherein unions maintain current benefits and salaries without increases until we all figure out a better way to fund schools and counties.

- Revisit the 60% voter mandate on budgets exceeding 2%. Whatever happened to the simple majority rules?
- Technology infrastructures need to be examined and updated so that students have access to the technology that they need to access the world outside of the school. Thus, the roles, processes of schools, educators and systems need to change to reflect the world we live in. Textbooks and 6 hours of seat time are almost obsolete.
- We need wireless access for all. The digital divide is becoming frightening.
- Create/discover/align learning experiences for students that are available via technology that are not hostage to the time constraints of a traditional school day. These experiences could also be personalized to meet the needs of individual students.

2. Teacher and Principal Quality and District Leadership

- We recommend that the commission spend time researching the hundreds of successful schools across the state and allow them to modify their respective responses to costly mandates, the most recent being the APPR legislation. The current statistical and economic ramifications imbedded in the state's new approach to teacher and principal accountability will take years to manifest themselves. Virtually every respected education association across the state and its

members have been ignored when bringing to light the flaws of this overly tested and numbers driven plan. The accountability system will take at least 5 years to get to a place where current data can be used for accountability purposes. This is long after the economics of the plan further strain school budgets. Some data used for the current labeling of schools under the federal guidelines re-uses 09/10 and 10/11 data upon which districts have already been judged. We suggest that the current APPR and school district accountability measures will be replete with errors and require impossible statistical details to manage, all of which will serve as reasonable cause for the established appeals process for teachers and principals rated as ineffective. It is the 800 pound gorilla in the room that we need the legislature and SED to acknowledge. Few people outside education realize we are now required to track daily student attendance in periods as little as 15 minute intervals in order to create a record of, or lack of, attendance during instruction in order to track student results. This is just absurd and further minimizes critical time on instruction that is needed.

We recommend to proceed with caution and leave the door open for informed and fact-based revisions in the current APPR regulations. Have the SED issue quarterly updates with the plus and minuses of this system to the Governor's office. Holding districts captive to a flawed system, without financial resources and under the threat of lost aid is just beyond our basic democratic principles.

- APPR and Impasse. Districts across the state have submitted APPR plans as far back as last June citing they are at impasse with one or both unions. Although complete, none of these plans have been reviewed or commented on. This is wrong! We recommend submitted plans be reviewed in anticipation of an ultimate agreement. Superintendents and Boards that have done due diligence should be recognized.
- Leadership and how to recruit and retain it. Training teachers, administrators and related school personnel is a time and money issue, attracting and retaining them is even a larger financial issue. Forgive me for using a personal example here to make my point and recommendations. My 28 year old daughter was born and raised on Long Island. She attended the University of Albany and Stony Brook for her bachelors and Masters degrees culminating in a school social worker certification. She is in her fourth year as a Jr High School counselor in a Long Island district.

The cumulative cost of the two degrees required to hold her license and position cost just under \$110,000 and this is at a state university.

Her initial salary was \$60,000 per year. Her net weekly salary after all taxes, a 15% health insurance contribution and 3% TRS contribution came to \$736.00 per week or \$2,944 per month. Her current minimum monthly expenses are rent \$1,500, car payment \$290, Car insurance \$150, and school loans of \$300 because I help pay them. So my daughter has \$704 dollars per month left for the rest of her expenses before eating, entertainment, gasoline, cable, etc. etc.

I think we get the point I am trying to make and again there is no easy solution to the problem. Education, housing, commuting and just plain living in New York state is expensive. Apply this same formula to those making less or unable to find employment and it becomes overwhelming.

Recommendation – If we want to combat the brain drain in New York state, we need incentives for candidates to enter and remain in education. This also applies to all work force positions in New York state. Salaries that are competitive enough to cover costs of living in high costs regions and possibly, tax credits for employees who remain in positions for a specific period of time might be helpful. School loan forgiveness programs should be broader than they currently are.

3. Student Achievement and Family Engagement

- We recommend that the commission re-visit the inherent and fact-based value of early childhood education and in particular, Pre-K programs. The possibility of mandated state funded school attendance earlier than age 5 and providing public schools with the funding to conduct full day instruction for all children age 4 and older would literally rock the foundations of public education. It would move our state well along the achievement pathway we aspire to. Required attendance from age 4 on would also bring scores of at risk children under a school umbrella that would enhance their safety, health, nutrition and ultimately their academic achievement. Although out of the box, consider creating a pathway where parents who pay for Pre-K schooling privately, could pay their local public school. Sounds like a reverse charter school plan. Why not!

- Provide families within high needs communities opportunities to become directly engaged with their schools and become a part of the goal setting process to raise student achievement. In contrast to an “event” that parents might be invited to such as Meet the Teacher Night, or Parent Conferences, parents could become connected directly through working in partnership with the school to establish their child’s learning goals. Revisiting some level of free, limited internet would help.

Having parents become directly connected to their child’s academic program, learn about the common core standards, have access to data on their child’s performance, understand the data and be involved in the development and support of the child’s specific learning needs is critical to success.

Using emerging technologies, parents could gain access to ongoing review of data measuring student achievement, with turn-around feedback to both the student and parent centered on “next steps” within an instructional plan to support the child’s learning. This is a digital divide issue.

- Easing restrictions that limit sharing resources among districts (transportation, technology, facilities, instructional support programs, Virtual Learning Library resources, local library databases, e-books, etc.) should be considered. When need is identified at the local level, tapping into and sharing the existing resources within and among districts could support families in accessing educational support systems that may not be available in high needs communities. Current BOCES services across the 37 New York State BOCES serve as a model for this type of cooperative approach.
- Revisit parochial/private transportation regulations and the charter school funding system. Public schools should be publicly funded. Private and charter systems should not.