

Paul Grasso, President and CEO of The Development Corporation (TDC).

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Testimony: New York Stated Education Reform Commission

Good afternoon Chairman Parsons and Members of the Education Reform Commission. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Paul Grasso, and I am the President and CEO of The Development Corporation (TDC).

The Development Corporation is a private not-for-profit economic development organization with a fifty-year legacy of supporting job creation in Clinton County. The corporation owns and operates three industrial parks and acts as a resource for its tenants and prospective clients looking to expand or grow their businesses.

My background includes being the executive director of two workforce investment boards, the North Country Workforce Investment Board and the San Diego Workforce Partnership. Consequently, I have now worked on both the supply side and the demand side of economic development, and my experience has taught me that there has never been a time when education and workforce development have been more interdependent.

Be assured that I am not here today to criticize teachers or their union, the public school system or its administration.

I am here to reinforce the sense of urgency that we all feel regarding how to ensure that young people in New York State obtain the tools they need (the education, the occupational skills, and the soft skills) to enter careers paying family-sustaining wages.

A failure to educate any New Yorker will affect all New Yorkers; it is time for all of us to play a role in demanding change and implementing solutions.

Let's work together to "fix the problem, not the blame".

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If we are to continue to create an environment in New York State that is conducive to economic development, it is imperative that we transform our public education system into one which moves young people from “cradle through career” with the goal of having successful students, productive citizens, and thriving communities.

To achieve that goal requires creating an educational system that incorporates a holistic view of 21st century teaching and learning, a system that involves educators, parents, businesses, and community leaders.

We need an educational system that combines a focus on 21st century student outcomes with innovative support systems to ensure that students have the “scaffolding” to assist them in acquiring the multidimensional abilities that employers need.

We need an educational system that offers students from middle school through high school opportunities for career exploration and for internships.

We need an educational system that offers teacher externships through which teachers can see firsthand how their academic discipline is applied in the private sector.

We need an educational system in which parents and the private sector are actively involved.

We need programs and policies that help instill in young people that education is not only valuable, but it is probably the best antidote to poverty.

In the past, to quote Georgetown University’s Andrew Carnavale, “postsecondary education or training has always been the preferred pathway to middle-class status and earnings. Today, it is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class status—increasingly it is the only pathway.”

We need a new kind of community collaborative.

We need an approach that inspires all sectors of our communities to work together toward a common goal, an approach that promotes broader, longer lasting change.

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We need an approach that improves early grade literacy, increases graduation rates, and promotes postsecondary education in any of its incarnations – a two or four year college, an apprenticeship program, a certificate program, or on-the-job training.

In Clinton County, we believe that STRIVE, an initiative where community-based organizations work together to set goals for children, families, schools, and communities and then holds each other accountable for meeting them, may be that approach.

Recently, Clinton County became the first rural community in the nation join the STRIVE Network. STRIVE provided us with five key truths that are not only well supported by research but simply make common sense when discussing student success:

1. That early childhood education opportunities are absolutely necessary for all children to ensure that they are PREPARED for school;
2. That children are SUPPORTED at critical transitions in their education both in and out of school;
3. That children who are prepared and supported SUCCEED academically;
4. That children who succeed academically ENROLL in postsecondary education – either college or technical training in greater numbers; and
5. That children who succeed academically tend to GRADUATE and ENTER CAREERS paying family-sustaining wages.

STRIVE offers us a model through which we can create more integrated educational and social supports that help meet a young person's whole needs. Initiatives like STRIVE, where community-based organizations work together, can achieve greater outcomes than those that do not.

In conclusion, I want to add that the education system needs to ensure that education and training is available to individuals outside the usual college-age population. While it is important to focus our efforts on young people still in school, many New Yorkers have seen their old economy jobs disappear – never to return. Failing to ensure access to education and training for this segment of the population risks leaving thousands of workers without the skills employers will need as the economy recovers.

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Wouldn't that be depressing?