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SANDRA R. GALEF
Assemblywoman 90th District

September 10, 2012

Thank you for this opportunity to address the New NY Education Reform Commission and to Governor Cuomo for his leadership in authorizing this Commission to look at the need for an overhaul of the educational structure in New York State.

I would like to offer some suggestions for you to think about as you are deliberating.

Through my experiences as a teacher in the Albemarle County School District in Virginia, I recognize the fact that larger school districts can provide cost efficiencies without sacrificing quality of education. We have all read the reports about Fairfax County, Virginia's excellent education provided for a fraction of the cost that we pay in comparable counties in New York (Specifically, a study conducted by the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) in 2007 compared Fairfax and Loudon Counties, VA, to Nassau and Suffolk Counties, NY in a comprehensive look at the size of government entities and property taxes.

Here is a link to the report

http://longislandindex.org/fileadmin/pdf/pollreport/Long_Island_Index_Comparative_Analysis_of_Cost_of_Local_Govts.pdf).

My recommendation is that as a committee you look for solutions to ways that school districts can combine forces without necessarily losing such emotional tangibles as school identity. In my assembly district, there was a citizens' effort in Putnam County to look at setting up a pilot for a Countywide School District. However, because of the need to get every school board on board, as well as the financial implications it would have had for a subset of taxpayers if schools were combined, to date it has not gotten off the ground. This is one example of why we need to look at alternative approaches to what is now in place in state law for school district reorganization. Modifications would need to include enhancing financial incentives for a longer period of time to smooth transitions if schools do decide to combine, so there would be less of a negative impact for some taxpayers.

Another obstacle in combining school districts relates to teacher contracts. One potential solution is to work toward regional negotiations so that there could be similar contracts in place for school districts, which could also facilitate teachers' ability to transfer between schools, allowing them greater opportunity for movement and professional growth. As we look at the possibility of regional negotiations, we may have to evaluate how step and lane increases are determined, again making a more equitable playing field, and not pitting school districts against one another for obtaining quality teachers.

We should consider a state health plan for all educators with everyone paying a contribution in some sort of tiered system based on salary, so we level the playing field in this benefit area as well. In addition, with a larger pool in a health insurance system, there would be potential for financial savings. For example if all were to be part of the Empire Plan, I would think costs might be reduced across the board.

BOCES has already made strides in some areas of the state in consolidating back office operations for multiple school districts, such as payroll, purchasing, and personnel management, and more. I have had Sullivan BOCES down to my district to talk with school boards and superintendents. I am not exactly sure what the obstacles are, beyond fear of job loss and downsizing and just plain change, but I know that



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this has not been embraced by my local BOCES because schools in the BOCES have not opted to pursue this route. Perhaps there is a way to look at BOCES for more widespread consolidation of back office services.

I think that financing of Charter Schools should come from a separate account instead of taking away from individual school districts' revenue. This would enable Charter Schools to act more like the pilot programs they were intended to be without having a negative impact on the local community's school district budgets.

Wicks Reform is a no-brainer, in my opinion. We have exempted New York City, Buffalo and Niagara, basically acknowledging that communities with greater financial problems need relief for their tax base. Why should this not be true statewide so that all schools could share in tax savings on capital projects?

As Assembly Real Property Tax Chair, I want to conclude with the notion of equity in taxation. All people should be taxed on the value of their property, no matter what type of property they live in. We need to have reassessment in our state everywhere every 4 to 5 years. This absolutely affects education. Most recently, we have seen staggering settlements through tax certioraris which could be mitigated by having periodic reassessment. Also, locally, in the Lakeland School District, which consists of 6 communities, 3 in Westchester and 3 in Putnam County, the equalization rate has to be used because of the inequities in assessments—Putnam Valley has reassessed as recently as last year, whereas the Westchester communities have not done so at least 35 years. This angers residents who feel they are paying more than their neighbors across the street who live in a different county or town, but reside in the same school district. (Attached please find examples from school districts and communities in my A.D. detailing tax certioraris since 2009, as well as charts on reassessment dates that compare Putnam and Westchester Counties.)

I also believe consideration should be given to allowing school districts to have a different approach to raising tax revenues. Allowing individual school districts to raise taxes for their school budgets through a blend of property and local income taxes, which would both be assessed at a local level, should be studied as an option. This could vary proportionally from school district to school district, or it could be imposed on a statewide level.

Thank you for considering some of these alternative approaches to education reform. I look forward to participating with the Commission in any way that would further its cause. I would be happy to provide legislative support for any changes that would maximize the benefit of our schools for our children and our communities, while minimizing the impact on taxpayers and making it more equitable.

Sandra R. Galef, Assemblywoman, 90th A.D.

Please see attachments.