

Testimony before the New York State Education Reform Commission
Mid-Hudson Education Commission Hearing
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Chairman Parsons, Workgroup chairs and Commission members, my name is Kelly Chiarella. I am Westchester –East Putnam Region Director for the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA). As NYSPTA representatives have stated in previous testimony, we are a 116 year old association representing more than 320,000 volunteers from across New York State with a mission devoted to advocating for the best interest of our children. Westchester-East Putnam represents almost 55,000 of those constituents and PTA members.

I am also a parent in the Yonkers School District with its 39 PTA's. Yonkers is the only one of the Big Five that has a chartered, active PTA unit in every school building thanks to a strong Superintendent who supports Family Engagement and PTA. Yonkers also has its share of fiscal deficiencies that I will be discussing here.

I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to offer input to the Governor's Education Reform Commission. I would like to offer a brief overview of these themes but then focus specifically on Westchester and more specifically, Yonkers.

Teacher/ Principal Quality. PTA members support the establishment of a strong, effective evaluation system that will identify a teacher's strengths and weaknesses, give shape to his or her goals for professional growth, and support individual and group efforts to achieve teaching excellence. The dependency on state tests to aid in this evaluation is where we are skeptical. . We believe that there will be negative long term effects on schools and students as a result of using test scores as a measurement. While high stakes test results may get most of the public attention, we conclude that such tests must provide fair and valid information that promotes instructional strategies for improving student performance. Building quality professional judgment skills among those who observe and evaluate teachers or principals, however, must be central to the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) effort

Funding Distribution and Costs. Recent limits on state investment and caps on local taxes have and will continue to increase gaps in spending and performance among New York State Schools. We need to establish with greater clarity just what a sound basic education is and what it costs to achieve acceptable results in a variety of diverse settings. We then need to determine whether the foundation approach, as adopted by the legislature, provides a real chance for achieving the potential envisioned by the courts and legislature.

Student Outcomes and Family Engagement. We believe that parents are their children's primary advocates and that effective family engagement in schools is essential to providing children the sound, quality education to which they are entitled. We also believe that transparency of school policies and standards is an important aspect of family engagement and student ownership of learning

Research supports the value of moving beyond parent involvement that consists primarily of information sharing to full family engagement that results in knowledge and action based on meaningful two way communication between school and care givers. The PTA National Standards for Family School Partnerships are suggested strategies for successfully integrating such standards into school operations.

I would like to focus my remaining comments on Structure and Financing as well as Family Engagement in my region which to me are highly interconnected especially speaking as a Yonkers parent.

It is my hope that this commission will address the specific needs of an impoverished, unemployed, non-English speaking community and educating these constituents' children as well as educating caregivers about the importance of being involved in their child's education. Parents need strategies and an understanding of policies, navigating systems and roadblocks but this can only happen with strong Family Engagement policies and the finances to back up working initiatives.

Westchester East Putnam is most likely NYSPTA's most diverse region socio-economically. Our PTAs are chartered in Chappaqua and Scarsdale as well as Yonkers, Mount Vernon and Port Chester. We have 205 PTA units and 13 Councils in small towns and large cities. The basis for the school aide funding formula being directed by property taxes has put many of our districts at a fiscal disadvantage. Urban populations simply do not "look like" what the formula states as our wealth is and wealthier districts who receive little aid, no longer control meeting the needs of their districts by raising taxes. The needs in an urban district are costly and our families do not have the means or the ability to supply what the wealthier districts students' have. Simplistic daily activities largely do not occur in low wealth homes such as dinner conversation in English, playing outdoors, community engagement in sports and arts programs, homework help and reading to children. Without the basic needs being met, these children enter school far behind any of our more affluent neighbors. Our families are impoverished and struggling to put food on the table or sometimes even owning a home is the challenge. Yonkers has identified 828 homeless students in their public schools! It is for this reason that we must address the needs of these urban areas through fiscal reconstruction of the funding formula, funding educational mandates and more flexibility with current funding. We must also create a strong family engagement policy that is part of the APPR process. Family Engagement is grass roots- it has to start at the classroom level and touch every child. Teacher's evaluations should include a measurement for how well they engage the diverse needs of the families they serve. Teachers also need training in cultural diversity so that they have the tools and sensitivity training they need to provide support to families but I say that carefully so that we do not see yet another unfunded mandate.

I'd be remiss if I did not mention that all of our affluent districts are extremely concerned about their own five year projections in their home districts in light of the lack of local control under the Property Tax Cap. As I have been able to educate them about what true cuts to education can look like, they all now look at Yonkers as what they do not want to happen, the annual belt tightening. My youngest son entering 7th grade has phenomenal teachers in a great school that I was lucky to get into, but he has class sizes no less than 30, no sports, no instrumental music, no arts programs, extremely limited support personnel. Out of 12,000 High School students, only 1100 will have the chance to play a sport and there are no sports in middle school. Only 2 of our 9 high schools have a band left and they have no students feeding into those bands. The only after school programs being offered in our district are grant based and face elimination every year. There are only 16 psychologists for 27,000 students in 40 schools. The district enrollment is growing annually and yet the funding has not increased to match that growth which begs the question, "Is the formula truly per pupil based?" The district has cut personnel and programs at every level, especially at the Board of Education which makes it near impossible to conduct business. The effects of not providing a well-rounded, sound, basic education with means for children to be engaged in school and after are far reaching into the community. Gang violence and other crimes are certain to continue to rise. Quality of life issues are on the rise as well as a deteriorated morale and reputation for the Yonkers Public Schools.

It is essential that we invest wisely in strategies that will assure the economic future of today's children who will become tomorrow's taxpayers. If the primary motivation of our state is a short term effort to save money, improving long term results that can assure a sound economic future may be sacrificed.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak.