

Testimony of Amy Ellen Schwartz  
The New NY Education Reform Commission Hearing

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New York City

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony today. I appreciate the commitment of the Governor and the members of Commission to improving education in New York State. Today I will focus on four key suggestions on how to re-structure our education system and deploy limited resources toward improving student achievement and opportunity. I will also offer comments on three additional areas.

To begin, I suggest we **reorganize schools to widen grade spans**, reducing the number of transitions that students need to make as they progress from kindergarten through high school. My research on New York City public schools – and the research of others – shows that switching schools decreases student performance. As an example, sixth graders attending a middle school (serving, say, grades six to eight) earn lower scores on standardized tests than sixth graders still enrolled in an elementary school (serving grades K to six). The effects persist and, indeed, the academic performance of eighth graders who have continuously attended combined elementary/middle schools (serving grades K through eight) is higher than the performance of eighth graders who attended differently configured schools. More generally, performance declines with the number of school moves made over a student's academic career and re-organizing our schools to reduce these transitions is, therefore, an intervention that promises to improve outcomes.

Of course, re-organizing grade spans will require some investment of resources. In my view, these are likely to be relatively small and offset by reducing the resources currently spent on school transitions such as administrative costs of school applications, registration, orientation, and so on.

Second, we need to **improve the coordination and collaboration between school districts in the face of significant and persistent mobility of students** between school districts. To give a sense of magnitudes, roughly one quarter of New York City's first grade students attend middle school in another school district – mostly elsewhere in New York State – and more than a third of New York City's high school students attended first grade elsewhere. Such mobility is not unique to New York City. Instead, school districts across the state regularly educate students previously educated in another school district – with different protocols, curricula, standards, etc. The consequences for students and school districts can be substantial – depending, in part, upon the extent of these differences. These externalities (or spillovers) in education across school districts suggests an important role for the State in addressing them. Clearly, common curricula, standards and policies are critical here. So, too, will be a state-wide student level data base that will document the movements of students across districts, to coordinate services and programs, track performance, etc., even as students move across school districts. At the same time, statewide data on students will facilitate research on the effectiveness of programs and interventions over the long term.

As I understand it, New York State is pursuing both curriculum standards and a statewide data system and I encourage them to develop these with the eye toward serving these purposes as well.

Third, we have to **expand and invigorate programs and opportunities for students outside of the traditional school day**. It is well known that student success is significantly shaped by experiences after school, during the summer and on weekends. Even more, differences in summer activities and after school enrichment activities lead to important and significant differences in academic persistence and performance between more advantaged students and their less advantaged peers. We need to address this both by expanding opportunities and by improving existing programs.

Importantly, while school districts throughout the state provide a wide range of out of school time activities, out of school time programming is also substantially provided and funded by non-governmental organizations and non-school governmental units.

One such program that I regard as quite promising for high school students in particular is the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) run by NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Each summer, SYEP provides summer jobs for tens of thousands of city youth who might otherwise have had little to do during the summer break. Students work in camps, parks, and offices. They gain work experience, make a little money, and, potentially, gain some job skills. Importantly, our preliminary study of the impact of SYEP on academic success finds that SYEP increases attendance and academic performance for at-risk students at relatively low cost. Rather than cutting this program back, we should expand it and aim to provide summer opportunities for all students.

Other examples can easily be found in programs run by New York's not-for-profit sector including religious institutions, community based organizations, museums and arts organizations, and so on. The bottom line is that college and career readiness are shaped by what happens outside of school as well as what happens inside of school and we can improve student success by strengthening both and finding the synergies between them. Ignoring them disadvantages all of our students.

Fourth, **leverage school breakfast, school lunch, and physical education to enhance student learning**. A long and broad literature documents the link between fitness and nutrition and student academic performance - hungry students have trouble paying attention; healthy students are less likely to miss school, and so on. While schools cannot take on the full responsibility for students' health and fitness, they can – and should – marshal the resources they have to create the conditions for student success and there is growing evidence that school food and fitness programs matter. For example, New York City's adoption of Universal Free Breakfast improved attendance. Breakfast-in-the-classroom has been shown to improve performance on standardized tests. Rather than isolating school food and fitness from the academic enterprise, we need to leverage these resources and integrate with the academic administration.

To summarize, then, I offer four broad suggestions:

- 1) Reorganize schools to widen grade spans
- 2) Improve the coordination between school districts in addressing student mobility
- 3) Expand and invigorate out of school time programs and opportunities
- 4) Leverage school food and physical education programs to enhance student learning.

I would also like to offer comments in three areas of your work.

First, **on special education.** Despite skyrocketing spending, there is an astonishing dearth of research on the cost effectiveness of different strategies and modes of service delivery in special education. Instead, there seems to be a widely held view that districts have little discretion in the provision of mandated services and there is little room for cost savings and efficiency. Building the research base and identifying cost effective strategies is critical to creating and sustaining high quality programs for students with special needs. In the absence of careful research accounting for the costs and benefits of different services delivered different ways, these costs will continue to soar, straining already tight budgets.

Second, **on high school reform.** While there is much enthusiasm for the small school reforms implemented by New York City – and tantalizing evidence that the popular new small high schools deliver better outcomes – my research with colleagues at NYU suggests some caution is warranted in attempting to replicate those results elsewhere. In particular, our results suggest that school size may not, in fact, be the critical factor. Instead, it is likely that *new* schools are different. *Old* small schools do not post better results than large schools, and there are large schools that do quite well. Further, eliminating the links between high schools and middle schools may, ultimately, be more costly than we appreciate – due to the same factors mentioned in my comments about grade span.

Finally, **on parent and family engagement.** As a public school parent myself, I would offer this reflection: if we want parents and families to be more involved in education, we have to create opportunities for authentic participation and be responsive to the competing demands for parents' time. That means being prepared and willing to compromise on policies and practices – since their priorities may differ from those of the education leadership. As an example, parents may care less about test scores or AYP than about class size. Or they may cherish a “low value added” teacher for her ability to foster qualities unrepresented in current metrics. At the same time, many of the structures and schedules for parent participation still seem predicated on the assumption of a stay-at-home parent who is available during the traditional work day or has substantial leisure. Encouraging parents to engage without valuing their input and the realities of their lives is, in my view, unlikely to yield much in the way of engagement.

Thank you, again, for your time and effort on behalf of our children and for your patience.