

Good Morning, members of the commission, my name is Campbell Brown. I am a writer and former TV news anchor, but more important, and the reason I am here today is that I am also a mother of two children who will soon begin their education right here in the greatest city in the greatest state in this country.

I was drawn to journalism early in my career because I wanted to try to be a voice for those who didn't always have one. And now as a mother too, I have become increasingly interested in lending my voice to the discussion of how to reform our education system so that it can provide all of our children with the skills and training necessary to be ready for college and careers and to meet the unprecedented economic challenges facing our city, state and nation.

I would first like to commend Governor Cuomo for all that he has done and continues to do to move this discussion forward and reform New York's education system. Specifically, I commend him for establishing this Commission to provide guidance and advice on matters pertaining to education policy, performance and innovation.

I would also like to thank the esteemed members of the Commission for seeking broad input from groups, organizations and individuals, such as myself, as you consider how to improve the quality of education and the level of student performance in New York State.

I am here today as part of the growing chorus of concerned citizens focused on the need to recruit to our schools the highest quality teachers and principals. Every student deserves the highest quality teacher at the front of the classroom. And we know that this more than anything else that happens during the school day, will help our students succeed. In service of this critical goal, schools should be empowered with the authority to reward exceptional teachers and remove others who do not belong in the classroom.

Every year, when we review the success of our schools, it is clear that many of them are not adequately preparing their students. Statewide, just 55% of 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders are reading at grade level, according to test data released last week.

In New York City, just 60.9% of students graduate high school on schedule after four years. And just 20.7% do so ready for college. Our schools are failing far too many of their students.

Certainly, many of those who are falling behind face challenges at home. But those students, most of all, need teachers who have what it takes to prepare them for college or a career. That is the promise of public education and we owe it to our kids to deliver on it.

It is a sad commentary, however, that right now, we cannot even deliver on the promise of a safe classroom, let alone a highly effective teacher. Recent and far-too-frequent reports of sexual misconduct in the classroom have made me, like so many other New Yorkers, sad and angry. And as we think about broader questions of excellence in the classroom, what hope do we have if we can't address this most basic issue of student safety and wellbeing?

The inability of school districts to remove teachers for sexual misconduct shows us just how distant the State education law is from the interests of students. Fixing this must be something the Commission tackles, both to protect students and restore the basic faith of parents and the public in our schools.

Under current law, the superintendent of a district – or in New York City, the Chancellor – despite having responsibility for student safety, has no ability to terminate a teacher for misconduct. Instead, an independent arbitrator – appointed jointly by the district and the union, and therefore with a constant incentive to split the difference – must find the teacher guilty under what has become a criminal-justice-like standard and determine that the behavior is egregious enough to merit termination.

And so we have case after case where misconduct occurs but an arbitrator finds the evidence insufficient and sends the teacher back to the classroom. Or even worse, instances where arbitrators find the evidence sufficient but prefer fines and penalties to termination.

Just one example: A teacher was found guilty of telling a young girl she could give him a striptease, harassing students by text and engaging in sexual banter. The arbitrator concluded that since the teacher hadn't actually solicited sex from students, the charges only warranted a suspension.

Students' interests are simply not represented in these proceedings. A commitment to the highest level of due process – as if these were criminal proceedings, instead of determinations of whether an individual is worthy of the trust of parents with the care of their children – trumps student safety every time.

This must change. The Commission should advance reform along the lines of what State Senator Steven Saland has proposed, and give superintendents and the New York City School Chancellor the authority to act when they believe a teacher represents a threat to the safety and wellbeing of his or her students. The final say cannot lie with an arbitrator incentivized to set high thresholds of evidence and reduce penalties wherever possible.

Of course, school districts should have the authority not just to remove sexual predators but also teachers who are merely ineffective. But the issue of student safety is something that New York's families should not have to wait one day longer for the State to address. Doing so would mitigate the untold damage these cases do to our school system's reputation and the reputation of good teachers throughout the State

A British school in the 19th century was the first to adopt as its motto the words *in loco parentis* (“in the place of a parent”). Since then, it has become an expectation for millions and millions of American parents. It assumes that schools will take on some of the responsibilities of a parent, including protecting students from harm.

As the Commission examines ways to empower schools to improve student learning and to lift student achievement, I urge you to put students first by prioritizing teacher quality. And as you strive to ensure that only the best teachers are educating our students, it is also our responsibility to create mechanisms to enable those responsible for the safety of our children to swiftly and effectively remove them from harm's way, and from the reach of those who threaten the safe haven schools are intended to be.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today.