

United Way of New York City's Perspective on Education Reform
Jennifer Jones Austin
Testimony to the New York Education Reform Commission
Thursday, July 26, 2012

Good afternoon, and thank you for hearing this testimony.

United Way of New York City fights poverty across the five boroughs, and a critical component of our poverty-fighting efforts is education. Education is the greatest antidote to poverty.

We seek to achieve community impact through an initiative approach that comprises **programs, policies, best practices** and **advocacy**. Through research and evaluation we aim to identify game-changing solutions to address specific underlying root causes of critical problems. Then, once proven effective, the solutions we've developed are scaled up through policy and related best practices so that they positively impact many more New Yorkers than can be helped through programs alone.

United Way wants all New York City children and youth to get the education they deserve and is working to **improve early grade literacy, boost on-time graduation rates** and **ensure college and career readiness** for low-income students across the five boroughs.

In developing these education strategies over the last four years, our organization has arrived at several key truths not only well-supported by research but also borne out in our experiences:

- 1. Early childhood education opportunities are absolutely necessary for all children.**
- 2. Children must be adequately supported at critical transitions in their education.**

3. Attendance improvement and dropout prevention efforts must include provision of social and emotional supports.

4. College exploration and career readiness are imperative for vulnerable students to succeed in high school, college and beyond.

Ample evidence suggests that **early childhood education** is critical to positive educational outcomes. During preschool-age years, cognitive and social development lays a foundation for success in college, work and life. Without that foundation, the outlook is grim:

- **One in six children** who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time.
- **26% of children** with 2 risk factors—poverty and reading skills below proficiency level—do not graduate from high school.
- The Department of Justice states, "**The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure.**" Over 70% of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above a fourth grade level.

Therefore, to effectively reduce the high school dropout rate, we must begin by improving access to quality early education. We know this, and yet funding for early education programs is regularly at risk. United Way regularly advocates to restore and increase funding for early education and works to mobilize, local, state, and national stakeholders to develop, reform, and implement policies that ensure a strong early learning foundation.

Through our **Supporting Transitions from Early-ed to Public School**, or **STEPS**, initiative, we seek to improve early grade literacy by ensuring that a child's learning and

developmental needs are continuously met during the first eight years of life. The initiative is helping to ease the often difficult transition that occurs between pre-school and elementary school by:

- Improving teacher effectiveness by strengthening educators' use of teaching strategies that are responsive to children's developmental needs as they progress from birth to age 8
- Increasing family knowledge of parenting skills and child development and empowering parents to advocate on behalf of their children
- Building school-community partnerships designed to support children's school readiness, pre-school-to-elementary transition, and need for extra supports

We've achieved great things in the first two years of this project and are currently working to expand government collaboration with agencies including Department of Education, the Administration for Children's Services, and the Mayor's office to explore existing policies and STEPS policy implications, as well as to advance systems bridging.

Programs and policies that recognize and foster alignment between the early childhood and early elementary school systems are critical to ensuring that children enter school ready to learn and continue to build the foundation necessary for academic success.

With older youth, our efforts focus on **boosting on-time graduation rates** and **ensuring college and career readiness**.

In New York City, approximately 39% of students who enter ninth grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers four years later. Ninth grade is another critical transition. Many students get to high school only to find that they aren't prepared for high school-level work. They fall behind, stop going to class, and then eventually drop out.

Our **Graduate, Prepare, Succeed** (GPS) initiative targets ninth grade students with a history of chronic absenteeism. The initiative pairs schools with community-based organizations to provide students with holistic services that address barriers to attending school. Students receive academic support, attendance outreach, counseling, and case management. Most importantly, they get the social and emotional supports that they need.

Additionally, GPS works to ensure that students gain a minimum of 10 credits in the ninth grade—a positive indicator of graduation—by providing credit-bearing opportunities both inside and outside school.

Another key component of GPS is college and career exploration. Often vulnerable students have never even considered college, or life beyond high school at all; it is important for them to see what's out there.

Now beginning its third year, GPS is working via 60 public high schools with approximately 5,000 students.

From this work, we have learned that for youth at risk of dropping out to succeed, they need educational experiences and environments that are academically nurturing and stimulating, opportunities for exposure to different careers and career paths, and socio-emotional supports, when they are not readily attainable in their homes.

What all children and youth need is more integrated educational and social supports that help meet their whole needs. Initiatives like STRIVE, where community-based organizations work together to set goals for children and families and then hold each other accountable in meeting them, can help achieve greater outcomes for kids.