

TESTIMONY
OF THE
UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
MICHAEL MULGREW, PRESIDENT

BEFORE THE
NEW NY EDUCATION REFORM COMMISSION

JULY 26, 2012

Good afternoon Chairman Parsons and members of this distinguished commission. My name is Leo Casey, and I am the Vice President for Academic High Schools for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). On behalf of UFT President Michael Mulgrew and our 200,000 members, I want to thank Governor Cuomo and the commission for this opportunity to testify before you today, as well as your strong leadership in the education arena.

There is no higher priority for our state than moving our education system forward and improving outcomes for children. We currently have too many students who are unable to think critically or read and write at a high level; too many students who lack the skills they will need for the 21st century workforce.

It is essential that we address the needs of students and prepare them for college and future careers. That begins with strengthening our school communities and reversing the years of disinvestment that have meant the loss of so many programs and services that children rely on.

It means bringing the failed policy of closing struggling schools en masse to a halt, and beginning the real work of fixing and supporting our schools and educating our high needs students.

It means moving away from high-stakes testing and returning to the core educational values that we have lost.

It means ending the politically motivated attacks on teachers, returning to a dialogue of civility and finding ways to value and support educators in the important work that they do.

It also means reengaging parents and restoring the public's trust in public education. After all, the educational system works not only for students, but also their families, surrounding communities and our larger society.

We will get improved outcomes by thinking bigger, acting bolder and most importantly, working together on behalf of our students.

New York State has a significant opportunity to move education forward and make a difference in the lives of every child. Reasonable solutions and proven strategies are within our grasp, and a lot of meaningful work is already underway.

FIXING SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The most urgent issue facing our New York City public schools is ending the failed policy of mass school closures, and undertaking the real work of fixing and supporting our schools.

What cannot be denied is that after a decade of mass school closures, the main educational challenges facing our struggling schools and the students they serve remain unmet. What we have instead is an educational shell game. Students with the greatest needs – students living in poverty, English Language Learners and students with special needs – are concentrated in large numbers in struggling schools. These schools are then besieged with more crises and more desperate needs than they have the capacity to handle. Never provided the supports and resources they need to serve their exceptional student populations, these struggling schools spiral downwards, headed toward failure and targeted for closure. As each struggling school is closed, the high needs students are diverted in large numbers to another struggling school, where the same pattern repeats itself. Regents Chancellor Meryl Tisch was exactly right when she condemned this policy of mass school closure for the ways in which it “warehouses” high needs students, denying them the educational opportunities they need to improve their lives.

In the early years of the Bloomberg administration, the New York City Department of Education commissioned a Boston based firm specializing in corporate strategic planning, the Parthenon Group, to undertake a comprehensive policy study of graduation and drop out rates in the city’s public high schools and secondary schools. The Parthenon found that when it comes to educating and serving high needs students, high schools and secondary schools have a tipping point: if the numbers of high needs students are concentrated beyond that point, the school is overwhelmed and unable to provide the educational environment, the supports and resources, their students need. In sum, the Department of Education was told that if it pursued the policy it has so single-mindedly followed, concentrating high needs students in struggling schools, it would deny the students the education they needed and doom the schools. And yet it chose to take that path: the policy of mass school closure is a policy of “failure by design.”

What defines the failed policy of mass school closure after a decade is the intellectual exhaustion of its advocates. Mass school closure is the **only** policy, the **only** idea that comes out of the Tweed courthouse headquarters of the New York City Department of

Education these days. The notion that closing a school and upending the existing relationships between educators, administrators, guidance counselors and the student population will in itself help students is evidence that the Bloomberg administration is in over its head when it comes to supporting schools. Yet now, more than ever, we need solid ideas and proven programs on how to fix and improve our schools, as the only path to improving student achievement.

Last week, UFT President Michael Mulgrew and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten jointly authored a *New York Daily News* op-ed in which they explained how the closure policy has ill-served our schools and students, and laid out an alternative way forward for our schools. The first step, they point out, would be to adopt the proven school turn-around approach of the Chancellor's District, in which struggling schools were given additional resources and intense support from the highest levels of the Department of Education.¹ Through the mechanism of a Chancellor's District, a number of very important initiatives could be implemented.

INCREASING PARENT/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BY CREATING COMMUNITY 'HUBS'

One concept that shows a great deal of promise is the idea of reinventing schools as 'community hubs,' where students and their families can take advantage of wraparound programs and services that are seamlessly integrated into the school building.

Imagine health and dental clinics, youth development activities, tutoring, counseling programs and social services, all accessible under one roof. Imagine food bank partnerships and dinner programs that ensure children get healthy meals every day, while help centers in the schools assist immigrant parents with translation services and securing housing. Envision robust afterschool programs packed with arts, music, dance, theater and sports, and armies of parents and retirees reading and tutoring the kids – and at the same time, their parents are learning English or computer skills right down the hall.

It's already happening in Cincinnati, Ohio, and it has revolutionized their school system, improving not just student attendance, test scores and graduation rates, but also the overall health of their population.

What's more, it's done at no cost to the local schools. Instead, local businesses and organizations create their own sustainable funding models, and work in collaboration with the schools to find needed space and connect with students and parents. Some sponsor and 'adopt' classrooms while others literally move into the school building to provide services to the whole population.

¹ Deinya Phenix, Dorothy Siegel, Ariel Zaltsman, and Norm Fruchter, *Virtual District, Real Improvement: A retrospective evaluation of the Chancellor's District, 1996-2003*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University, 2004.

A school-based resource coordinator and a larger decision-making committee oversee it all, vetting the organizations and holding them accountable for results. It's a remarkable program that addresses the needs of the whole child, and we think it can work right here in New York.

Our kids often have enormous barriers to learning that have little to do with their academic ability or their school's instruction – chronic illnesses, family problems, and other issues that schools by themselves are not equipped to deal with.

At the same time, many important health and social services already exist in our neighborhoods. By empowering schools and engaging the community, we have an opportunity to bring more resources into schools and improve student outcomes.

That's why the UFT, working in collaboration with the City Council, the Partnership For NYC and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators has just begun a pilot program to help six schools begin to create these kinds of strategies for themselves and seamlessly align community resources in their buildings.

We call it a 'community schools' model, and we will be working closely with these schools over the next year to help them assess the needs of their students, engage their communities and integrate service providers to help expand and enhance the academic work they are already doing.

It's worth noting that this community work stands in stark contrast to Mayor Bloomberg's practice of abandoning and closing schools.

CURRICULUM & SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

A great deal can be done even before children reach school age. Over the past two years, a team of UFT curriculum and professional development specialists have developed and written a comprehensive, wide-ranging, research-based curriculum for children under the care of our 22,000 home-based child care providers.

Designed to teach language and early literacy skills, the curriculum takes children through a series of themed lessons that includes topics such as animals, transportation, weather and music. It provides a foundation for learning vocabulary and mathematical concepts and gets children talking, questioning and thinking — all of which are critically important for closing the achievement gap.

What's more, the curriculum, which is specifically geared for children between the ages of two and four, also helps build confidence, self-esteem and social skills with units that teach them about themselves, their families, friends and neighbors. The activities are interactive and fun, so that children are engaged and learning throughout the day.

The UFT offers the curriculum and a set of corresponding books and activities to child care providers free of charge. Providers can also take advantage of ongoing professional development opportunities, as well as coaching right in their own homes, also for free, thanks to our Teacher Centers. Instructors at the Teacher Center teach providers both how to better instruct the children in their care and also how to share the skills they've learned with other providers, creating a growing network of providers capable of training each other in best practices for early childhood education. It's all research-based with proven instructional strategies, which means students are getting a solid head start in lifelong learning. Along with our partners, we are working to align the curriculum with assessments for both students and teachers.

We undertook this project for three reasons: Providers told us they wanted this kind of support to enhance their programs. Helping providers develop new knowledge and skills is an important step in moving the early childhood profession forward — the services that providers offer are not babysitting; it's an important learning environment, in fact a child's first learning environment outside the home. Most of all, we undertook this project because we know the value of early learning in a child's life. Everything that we do for children during their early years has a direct and lasting impact on their academic success, which is confirmed by research time and again.

PUBLIC / PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO ENHANCE SCHOOL OFFERINGS & PROMOTE BEST USES OF TECHNOLOGY

Public-private partnerships can also be important components of our work. Companies such as Apple and LEGO Education offer terrific ways to engage students. Our professional development workshops are consistently "sold out" whenever we offer Apple's "Ipad in the classroom" training; LEGO's "STEM" Symposium this past spring was a huge hit with educators, too. Other companies are working with our Career and Technical High Schools to help students learn the culinary arts in a professional events setting, learn in-demand computer networking skills, TV production skills, and more.

IMPROVING TEACHER RECRUITMENT & PERFORMANCE: INSTITUTING CAREER LADDERS & EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Closing schools is not the only destructive policy that has wreaked havoc on our system. The pervasive practice of denigrating teachers has become a huge obstacle in our efforts to recruit and retain quality educators. Teachers' motives and skills are blamed, rather than the budget cuts, misguided policies and managerial mismanagement that undermine the system. One can't rightfully expect people to enter — and more importantly to stay and making a lasting contribution — in our profession when there is a lack of respect and support.

To improve student achievement, graduation rates and college readiness, we need rigorous standards for teacher preparation and equally rigorous hiring practices. We also need to encourage support and mentor teachers, and provide them with ongoing professional development that allows them to improve their knowledge and skills.

The UFT strongly supports efforts to mentor new teachers and create a career ladder for teachers as they grow in experience, skills and responsibilities.

There should be mentor teachers paired with new teachers in every school — and if not, the UFT will help link them up. Our Teacher Centers are located right in some school buildings, and for everyone, there are courses, seminars, conferences and a website with necessary resources (including classroom management and lessons plans) available for all.

As important as it is to provide new teachers with a solid induction into the teaching profession, it is equally important to provide more experienced teachers with career opportunities that allow them to utilize their skills and experience on behalf of the entire school – without leaving the classroom. The UFT supports the development of a master teacher position to provide that opportunity. As seen in the pioneering work of the New American Academy in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, a master teacher embedded in the life of the classroom and working with teams of teachers on actual instruction and assessment can have a transformative effect on a school's program.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I want to again commend this commission for bringing together stakeholders and doing this important work, and for this opportunity to testify before you. Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature have set the right tone to move us forward. Just like the ad campaign says, "Today, there's a NEW New York State."

That's exactly the right attitude and leadership to bring about positive change. Great things are happening, but we can always do better. We need to create a school system that works for the students, the families and the communities that we serve. Working together, I know we can achieve that.

UFT members are already helping to strengthen their schools and communities and you can count on our unwavering commitment and dedication. From the teachers who answer our Dial A Teacher homework helpline every day after school and the \$1 million in scholarships we award every year to deserving high-needs students, to the Be BRAVE anti-bullying campaign we've introduced to schools throughout the city and the backpacks full of school supplies we deliver to children living in city homeless centers each fall, UFT members are making a difference in the lives of children every day.

We are willing partners in this important effort, and we will never stop working until our school system is the best school system in this country.

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