



New NY Education Reform Commission Public Hearing, Buffalo, NY

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Written testimony of Alfred J. Wright, Government Affairs Manager, Buffalo Niagara Partnership

Chairman Parsons and members of the panel, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is A.J. Wright, I am the Government Affairs Manager for the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, an organization that represents 2,000 member employers and works continuously for improved business competitiveness and expanded economic activity in Buffalo Niagara.

I am here today to discuss the Buffalo Niagara Partnership's unofficial public education reform agenda. The Partnership has a long history of attempting to bring about educational reform, be it involvement in Buffalo's school board elections, advocacy on behalf of education reform initiatives and legislation coming out of Albany and Washington, institutional and structural support of Buffalo Niagara's charter school movement, or, most recently, its involvement with Buffalo Promise Neighborhoods and Say Yes.

The Buffalo Niagara Partnership fully recognizes the importance education is to the economic future of our area, and the dire need for multi-faceted educational reform in New York State. The Partnership, on the micro level, has attempted to use the Buffalo School Board elections, held in May, to jump start some of those much needed reforms, with little success. In 2009, the last time the Partnership waded into school board election politics, we cited that nearly two-thirds of adults in Buffalo function at the two lowest levels of literacy, meaning they can't function at the minimum level of literacy employers in our region require for any job higher than entry level, and that thirty-five percent of Buffalo Public School children don't graduate high school.

Just as disconcerting, many of those students who ARE graduating are NOT prepared for postsecondary education and work, while 60 percent of the new jobs being created require advanced training or a college education. If our region's workforce can't meet employer needs, we will lose existing companies, and will not be able to recruit new businesses to invest in our region. The availability of high-quality human talent is a top issue facing businesses today. Nationwide, business leaders increasingly place improving public education at the top of their list of priorities because they believe the education system in the United States fails to produce graduates prepared to compete both locally and in a global economy.

Buffalo's young people deserve a better future, and our employers need them to graduate from public school prepared to contribute to the local workforce – in order ensure their own businesses have future viability in our community. Public education in the city is one place to start, and the Buffalo Public School Board elections will play no minor part.

Unfortunately, our efforts in school board elections have not led to necessary change. The dysfunction of the school board "system," infighting amongst members and administration, and extraordinary influence from special interests during the election cycle have led us to believe that the system, as is, cannot deliver results. With that, the Buffalo Niagara Partnership fully supports two separate initiatives that address the way school boards are selected and how the Buffalo School district is led. The Partnership has expressed its support for Senator Mark Grisanti's and Assemblywoman People-Stokes' bill, S.2478-A/A.10634, which provides for election of members of the board of education of the Buffalo city school district in November rather than May. This concept is being successfully practiced in Syracuse and Rochester, and not only does it help limit the influence of special interests by getting more voters out to vote when they are more accustomed to voting, it can save the district money. It is estimated in Michigan, which enacted standardized school board elections in 2011, the practice will save districts roughly \$7-8 million annually.

Another initiative the Partnership supports in concept, is Mayoral Control, akin to the efforts recently in Rochester.

The Partnership has also been supportive of legislation that can help with institutional reform of public education. It has been a long standing supporter of charter schools, and even employed a charter school advocate during the burgeoning days of charter schools in Buffalo. We also have actively supported legislation such as Senator Flanagan's and Assemblywoman Nolan's S.6687/A.8319, which amends the education law in relation to intervention in chronically underperforming school districts such as Buffalo.

Public education also faces structural issues in regards to funding and the ability to properly address budget shortfalls, with the largest culprit being the Taylor Law's Triborough Amendment. By allowing the public workforce, in this case teachers, the ability to avoid negotiating fair contracts while still supplying provisions like compulsory "interest arbitration," salaries are regularly increased while creative approaches to improving efficiency and reducing costs are hindered. Not only does this impact the fiscal cost to school districts, but also gives teachers the advantage when discussing educational reforms, as we have recently seen during the teacher evaluation debate. In Buffalo, the school district does not operate under a current contract, with the contract negotiated in 1999 expiring in 2004.

The Partnership is also proud to be a supporter and member of Buffalo Promise Neighborhood and Say Yes. As detailed in the beginning of this testimony, Buffalo Public Schools are in dire need of reforms on all levels, and BPN/Say Yes are doing the good work from the ground up. With the promise of secondary education available to inner city youth, parental engagement and student commitment have rekindled potential for real change and improvement in the health, safety and stability of Buffalo neighborhoods

while improving educational outcomes. The Partnership is pleased to see Ms. Schmitt-Carey on this Commission, and even more pleased to work with her and Say Yes on addressing the needs of the Buffalo educational system.

Often during the discussion of education reform, it is said that the employer community needs to be an active catalyst for that reform. The Buffalo Niagara Partnership has demonstrated that the employer community recognizes the need for involvement and stands ready to continue its involvement, and welcomes the chance to work with this Commission, the Governor, and the Legislature on addressing the needs of our public education system and working together on their solutions.

Thank you for your time.