

Testimony of Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker
NY Education Reform Commission, July 18, 2012

Thank you for inviting me to speak before the Governor's Education Reform Commission today.

I am Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, one of many community partners that last year brought Say Yes to Education to Buffalo. The goal of this effort is to ensure that all students – regardless of means – have the strong academic preparation, the socio-emotional and health supports, and the scholarships they need to attend and succeed in college.

We are grateful to Governor Cuomo for his foresight in establishing the commission and to Chairman Parsons and members of the Commission for addressing the crucial issues we face. Your charge is our challenge here in Buffalo. We are working to introduce innovative strategies to ensure that all young people are ready for college and the global workforce.

In Buffalo we are working to put aside polarizing arguments about what it takes to successfully educate urban youth. We recognize that both in-school and non-school factors have a significant impact on student achievement. We also recognize that we need to commit to unprecedented levels of accountability, transparency, and quality assurance.

Think for a minute about what we as parents must do to effectively raise a child.

Parents must provide good nutrition and make sure that our children have regular checkups with doctors and dentists. Parents must ensure that their children have emotional support and nurturing. They must provide extra enrichment, exposing children to books and culture, sports and games, new ideas, experiences, and opportunities. They need to work with educators to help strengthen their children's academic success. Sometimes they need expert counselors to turn to in times of crisis.

But for parents in communities such as Buffalo, these opportunities have not always been readily accessible. Finding counseling and support, or even public services like health clinics, can seem like an Easter egg hunt. The services—and resources to provide them—are out there, but few know where to find them. County dollars for health, mental health, crisis, and prevention services are significant, but rarely coordinated with school-based services or sufficiently targeted to children and family need.

Our community effort in partnership with Say Yes to Education will provide universal access to crucial supports. These include: enriched school day programming that aligns with the common core standards, extended-day programs, summer camps, academic enrichment, cultural and recreational opportunities, tutoring and mentoring, social and counseling supports, legal aid, and ensure access to health and dental care services. It will also provide a common platform for all school and community partners to monitor student progress and ensure student success.

Equally significant, we are raising money to ensure that every student has a tuition guarantee for a post-secondary degree or certificate so that pursuing education beyond high school is possible for all. To date we have raised more than \$16 million to help create a new generation of scholars who can support the economic success of Buffalo and New York State.

To make this happen is no small lift. It requires the hard work of everyone in the community. Our decision to approach Say Yes – with the goal of becoming the second city in the state – came after a comprehensive review of college access programs around the country, including Kalamazoo and Pittsburgh. We had to mobilize the same kinds of leaders who comprise this commission around a strategy to dramatically change outcomes through wholesale government, school, and community restructuring. We are bringing together CEOs and heads of community based organizations, educators, union leaders, and government officials in partnership with Say Yes experts to critically analyze every dollar invested and program selected to support youth development and education and then to reallocate resources to the programming that will strengthen our education system and drive unprecedented results.

This is a comprehensive solution that helps improve educational attainment, reduce social services costs, and build a stronger tax base by giving people reason to stay in cities—and others to move into them. We see this as the center of our plan for economic growth. In the western region of New York State, I am proud of the work and results we achieved in the Regional Economic Development Council awards. The Governor’s commitment of \$1 billion of economic stimulus has brought energy and great potential to our city. What I would like to suggest today is that New York State design a comparable program where regions are asked to develop strategic education plans that allow us all to compete and collaborate with the goal of coming up with the most effective approaches to dramatically increasing both high school and college attainment rates. In the absence of this, we know the western region will not be able to revitalize and thrive.

Beginning this fall, our effort and that of a similar movement in Syracuse will help all 21,000 students in Syracuse and all 37,000 students in Buffalo. The national organization behind these efforts—Say Yes to Education—also has served thousands of students in other major communities, including Cambridge, Harlem, Philadelphia, and Hartford for more than 25 years. Results from its longer-term initiatives are promising:

- More than 75 percent of all participating students in Say Yes chapters have graduated from high school. Additionally, over 50 percent of all participating students achieved a postsecondary degree.
- In Cambridge, where the program began with students in 3rd grade, almost 90 percent of participating students completed high school, over 72 percent of the cohort completed a postsecondary degree program, and fully half received a four-year bachelors (BA or BS) degree.

- In Philadelphia, Say Yes 9th graders who began with the program in kindergarten all finished their freshman year in a district where nearly one in five 9th graders drop out.
- Say Yes students have attended over 140 different higher education institutions across the nation, including Brown, Colgate, Cornell, Fordham University, Morgan State, NYU, SUNY Albany, and University of Pennsylvania.

The citywide partnership in Syracuse, launched in 2009, is helping send thousands of students on to college and is showing strong positive signs of educational and regional recovery. Already, Say Yes Syracuse has given out or leveraged more than \$11 million in scholarships, helping nearly 2,000 students enroll in 2- and 4-year colleges (public and private) since the fall of 2009. The number of students leaving after 9th grade decreased by 44 percent from 2009 to 2010. While test scores are still low, 31 percent more 9th grade students have passed algebra Regents exams than in 2009.

Equally significant, students and families in Syracuse are taking advantage of new services. For example, over 60 percent of SCSD elementary students are enrolled in extended-day programs. The district reduced the ratio of students to social workers from 500:1 to 200:1 in all elementary and K-8 schools and will have one mental health clinic in every school by 2013. Seven legal clinics are now open to all students offering free legal advice, free service, and referrals to families.

For Syracuse, Buffalo and for other cities to be able to do what we are doing will require:

- Encouraging new funding approaches, such as state incentive grants, to help cities reallocate existing resources and greater intergovernmental cooperation among states, counties, and cities. Grants can be used to facilitate regional approaches that also make spending more transparent and ensure efficient use of school district and other public dollars that result in college and career readiness.
- Supporting school improvement/student achievement efforts that have broad-based community involvement and leverage resources to make college possible.
- Providing matching funds for city-wide and regional efforts that dramatically increase college-going rates among low-income students. State and Federal matching dollars can help leverage private resources to support lower costs to college for the students most in need.
- Developing grant programs to support higher education participation in K-16 reform compacts that include tuition guarantees and university-sponsored support for students and local school systems.

We are leveraging municipal-county collaboration to encourage coordination of health, education, and wellness supports for students in Buffalo and Syracuse. The state can play a significant role in ensuring that efforts like these can ensure college- and career-readiness and success for students in other cities across the state.