



New NY Education Reform Commission Hearing, Buffalo, NY

July 18, 2012

Testimony of Hannya Boulos, Director of Buffalo ReformED

Mr. Weill and members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you. My name is Hannya Boulos and I am the executive director of Buffalo ReformED, a local education reform non-profit whose mission is to empower the community to put the needs of students first. We believe that every child in Buffalo, regardless of ethnicity or zip code deserves access to a high-quality public education and highly effective teachers. We are committed to making this vision a reality by fighting for an education system that makes students its top priority. Through grassroots action and high quality research, we empower parents and education stakeholders with the information and tools they need to become effective advocates for their children, and powerful change agents in our public schools. While our work spans many areas including parental engagement and student achievement, my comments today will focus on structural issues in NY's public education including spending and funding.

The Buffalo Public School system's current spending per student is over \$ 22,000 a year. Since 2005-06, that figure has increased by 46%, while overall enrollment has declined by 4%. This increase in spending has not contributed to an increase in student achievement. The Buffalo Public Schools have a 54% graduation rate; only 23% of eighth graders are proficient in English Language Arts, and only 28% are proficient in mathematics. These statistics are incredibly troublesome, not only for the students and families in Buffalo who deserve access to a quality education, but for the broader community, as it seeks to strengthen economically and socially.

This trend in increased spending and lower achievement rates is mirrored at the state level. Between 1995 and 2010, spending for non-instructional expenses increased in NYS by 114%, 2.5 times the rate of inflation. These expenses include among many categories, central administration costs which grew at an average rate of 84% and Board of Education costs, which increased by 99% in the same time period. 88% of school districts in NYS spend more than 20% of their budgets on non-instructional costs. NY spends more per pupil than any other state, and yet rank 35th in math. We cannot continue to throw money at the problem and expect results; when we spend more, it doesn't translate to increased classroom resources, it helps support a large and unwieldy

education bureaucracy.

In Buffalo and across New York State, we are in desperate need of a dramatic realignment of resources, and a rethinking of school spending to ensure that the funds allocated to districts reach the classroom, and contribute directly to measurable improvement in the quality of education offered to students. Closing the alarming achievement gaps in our public education system in Buffalo and across NYS will require effective investments grounded in the principles of greater accountability, greater flexibility and greater choices for parents and students.

Flexibility

In Buffalo and across the state, many charter schools are educating the same students with less than 2/3 of the resources of traditional public schools, and producing better result for kids. Charter schools in Buffalo, on average, are more successful than their traditional counterparts largely because they are given the flexibility they need to tailor their program to the unique needs of their student population. They allocate funds based on need, and invest directly in developing their staff, and enriching their programmatic offerings. The formula in charter schools is simple: increased accountability for increased flexibility.

This same formula can be applied to our traditional public schools by giving principals more direct control over their budget, and over the staffing of their schools. Principals in Buffalo are severely limited by the constraints of collective bargaining agreements; they are more akin to middle managers than to executives. 3 out of 4 turnaround models require a change of principal, and yet principals in turnaround schools are not given the necessary tools to create meaningful change in their schools. Through research of Buffalo's collective bargaining agreements, and discussions with Principals at low achieving schools, it has become clear that the current leadership structure does not provide principals with the autonomy and flexibility they need to address the challenges in their buildings. Implementing school based budgeting across the district, and allowing principals and school based governance teams more control and oversight over their budget would create an opportunity for a more thoughtful and strategic allocation of school resources. Empowering building based governance councils made up of parents, students, teachers, and administration to oversee the budget, and staffing concerns are two methods used to great effect not only in public charter schools, but also in some of Buffalo's most successful magnet programs. The top down approach to governance, staffing, and spending equates to a one sized fits all approach, marginalizes the role of individuals at the building level, and contributes to low academic achievement. Principals should be given more autonomy, and should be met with greater accountability. School based governance teams, which are underutilized and marginalized in this district, should be restructured and retooled in order to create an effective means of parental engagement and teacher buy in at the building level.

Another solution to inequitable funding, and ineffective allocation of resources is student based budgeting. The idea behind student based budgeting is that school dollars would be dispersed on a per-pupil basis and would follow individual students into schools where

the principals and school governance teams then determine how the money is best spent. Student based budgeting is a logical extension, or best practice derived from the charter school movement. This practice is currently at work in states like Louisiana and California. Assigning financial resources directly to schools allows for each school to have greater flexibility to make specific decisions in spending, which in turn improves student performance. Some tasks are better suited to economies of scale at the central office, but most duties associated with enhancements to learning are better dealt with at the school level. Student based budgeting would create increased transparency, heightened flexibility, and greater equity. This method, accompanied by building based budgeting would also work to overcome challenges of high need, low wealth districts, particularly if high need students such as English language learners, children living in poverty, and students with disabilities are weighted differently and receive more funds. This method would be particularly impactful in Buffalo, where the growth of criteria-based magnet schools has furthered the achievement gap by concentrating high needs students in low achieving schools without adequate resources to meet their needs.

Choice

Buffalo has 13 schools that are labeled as persistently low achieving. The school district has an opportunity to apply for up to two million in funds annually for up to 3 years to improve these schools through one of 4 federal intervention models. All currently funded schools are operating under the transformation model, which is the least aggressive form of turnaround. At 4 of the 6 persistently low achieving schools, the graduation rate has dropped to a range between 30-40%, even after a dedicated increase in school funding. This exemplifies the status quo approach in education funding in Buffalo and across the state. Rather than make thoughtful investments in staffing and training teachers, lengthening time on task for students, and increasing the school's capacity for turnaround, the district has simply hired more staff, staff that cannot be sustained once this stream of funding runs out. This approach to school turnaround does not work in the best interest of students. Further, in Buffalo, countless opportunities to submit turnaround plans have been squandered, relegating students to an unchanged school environment year after year.

Proposed legislation such as the parent empowerment act, can create a mechanism that gives parents the necessary tools to approach school turnaround with the urgency it requires. The legislation empowers parents or guardians whose children attend failing public schools to initiate one of four school intervention models by getting a 51% majority to sign a petition to reform that school. The Parent Empowerment Act forces school districts to undertake dramatic changes that education bureaucracy would otherwise oppose. A parent's primary interest is the best possible education for his or her children, while an education bureaucracy has divided and conflicting interests to serve parents and children, while also serving unions, other employees, and political overseers. By giving parents the power to initiate and monitor turnaround change, we ensure greater accountability, engagement and greater urgency in school turnaround.

In closing, principles of choice and parental empowerment can ensure smarter and more

effective alignment of resources in our schools. By increasing flexibility and autonomy in the budgeting process, and decentralizing the funding process, we can ensure that education funds are not wasted in an inflated, top-heavy system, but directly used to increase the quality of education in NYS schools. The question is not how much we spend, but how we spend it. Until policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels dramatically reshape the school funding process, we will continue to increase spending at an unsustainable rate while failing to provide students with the educational opportunities they deserve.