



SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Written Testimony of Sharon L. Contreras, Superintendent
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to the Senate Standing Committee on Education Public Hearing
The Regents Reform Agenda:
“Assessing” Our Progress
October 1, 2013

Good morning, Senator Flanagan, members of the Education Committee, elected officials and colleagues. My name is Sharon L. Contreras and I am the Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District. I want to thank Senator Flanagan for inviting me to discuss the New York State Regents Reform Agenda today.

In Syracuse, our ultimate goal is an educational community that graduates every student as a responsible, active citizen prepared for success in college, careers, and the global economy. We are just beginning our second year of implementation of a 5-year strategic plan, *Great Expectations*. Our plan is closely aligned with the tenets of the Regents Reform Agenda. We are implementing the Common Core and aligning our curricula and assessments to the standards. We are building instructional data systems to inform teacher and principal practice. We are working to recruit, develop, retain and reward effective teachers and principals. With our Innovation Zone, we are turning around our lowest-achieving schools.

Most districts across New York saw much lower proficiency rates this year when student achievement was measured for the first time against more rigorous standards, which are at the center of the Regents Reform Agenda. Of course, no one likes to see the lower numbers that many districts, including my own, saw this past summer.

Forced to face the reality that we are not yet preparing enough of our students for success in college and careers, I might come to you to ask to step back from the reform agenda, but no – it is too important for us to stay on this path. As I noted this past summer in an op-ed that I co-wrote with fellow superintendent Corliss Kaiser, change can be difficult, but movement to embrace the Common Core Learning Standards is vital and necessary to the success of our students. We want our students to enter college and the work force prepared to succeed without the need for remediation. I truly believe that these standards will benefit all students.

We realize that the 2013 assessments serve as a new baseline, a more accurate starting point in preparing our students for 21st Century success. In the past, many students who scored proficient on New York’s tests were, in fact, unprepared for college and career success. Students and families deserve to know where students actually stand against college-ready standards.

Syracuse has taken significant steps to transform teaching and learning to implement the rigor of the Common Core State Standards. We have engaged in efforts to provide tiered, targeted professional development aimed toward increasing our deep knowledge and mastery of content, curriculum and pedagogy. For example, this summer our teachers participated in over 35,000 hours of professional development, an increase of 33 percent over 2012. This included more than 100 courses covering Common Core Learning Standards, instructional strategies, and our District’s Teaching and Learning Framework. At the same time, our teachers and administrators have spent hundreds of hours developing comprehensive curriculum and assessment frameworks in English Language Arts, mathematics, and social studies that are aligned with the Common Core.

Meanwhile, we are implementing talent recruitment, support and retention systems. As we sought new administrators for one-third of our schools this year, we found talented leaders for Syracuse schools from 8 districts in 5 states. And we filled more teaching positions than ever this year with mutual consent hiring because we know that teachers are more effective and more satisfied when they can choose where they teach and they know the school leaders have chosen them. New York State can help us by holding teacher preparation programs accountable for the quality of their graduates, and by allowing more flexibility for districts to hire staff who provide evidence of effectiveness but may not yet meet the State's strict requirements for certification.

With our Teaching and Learning Framework and Leadership Framework, we have defined effective instructional and leadership practice in Syracuse. After piloting new teacher and principal evaluation systems in the 2011-2012 school year, we fully implemented APPR last year. Because we now have meaningful evaluation data for teachers and principals in all SCSD schools for the first time, we are more able than ever to plan and provide great, targeted support. All of this work is consistent and with the Regents Reform Agenda.

Another aspect of the agenda that the district has focused on is turning around the lowest-achieving schools. The launch of the new Innovation Zone in Syracuse made up of seven schools that have been given more flexibility to make decisions and drive instruction at the school level. In these schools, principals are able to select staff who choose specifically to work at their schools, teachers receive extra professional development, and instructional time for students is increased by nearly 20 percent.

In some cases, New York State has provided funding on a competitive basis to support these initiatives. Syracuse, for example, was awarded \$31.5 million to support our Innovation Zone. Without this support, some initiatives underway in Syracuse would not be possible. Districts must be adequately funded to fully implement all of the necessary components of the Regents Reform Agenda. State funding has not been adequate to fund this Agenda and is diminishing already scarce resources in the Syracuse City School District. In fact, State funding has also been inadequate to fund other programs designed to prepare engaged citizens, creative and critical thinkers and life-long learners ready for college and careers. I have said this before and I must reiterate that funding should be divided **equitably** among the districts to ensure poor urban and rural students are given the same access to high-quality educational program as their more affluent peers. When so many of our students are entering school less than prepared and our district supports the learning of large numbers of struggling learners, the current funding formulas do not advance a program designed to address weighted needs. In fact, achievement gaps persist in part because we cannot fully bridge opportunity gaps with the current resources available.

While our district supports the Regents Reform Agenda, the agenda is expensive to implement. Syracuse is the second poorest of the Big 5 Districts. We have been categorized by the State Education Department as a High Need Resource district. Our combined property and income wealth is less than one third of that of the average New York State school district. In 2011, it cost the district 1.2 million to rollout the Common Core and 2 million on the design and implementation of APPR. We spent another 9 million dollars on the Common Core initiative and 6 million on APPR implementation in the next year. These figures include costs related to the development of Common Core aligned instructional materials, purchasing new Common-Core aligned instructional materials, development and purchase of new assessments to measure student growth, APPR data systems, and professional development on APPR requirements.

We are focusing spending on student achievement, while at the same time striving to become economically efficient. To meet these goals, we believe districts should be provided with additional economic support.

Next, even as standardized assessments give us vital information to measure gaps in student learning, we have to ensure that there is not an over-reliance on standardized testing in the State's accountability systems. Yes, achievement data and growth data based on State standardized assessments are important indicators of performance, but they are most meaningful when considered alongside other measures as well. As an example, my district has approximately 1,600 English Language Learners and 2,100 refugees – many of whom come to the US and Syracuse with little or no formal schooling. Elements of state accountability systems that rely on

proficiency at one point in time – without considering the trajectory – can penalize school districts and individual schools that serve large groups of refugee and immigrant students. Thus, I ask you to support a consistent focus on multiple measures of student learning and school quality and to continuously review the methods for evaluating teachers, principals, other staff, and schools to ensure fair and equitable systems that truly benefit students. In Syracuse, we have identified and created dozens of performance tasks to assess student performance beyond just multiple choice exams, but this work takes time and resources. I hope that the State will support and coordinate efforts to build these other types of assessments collaboratively.

When we developed our 5-year strategic plan in Syracuse, we said it represented a long-term, collective investment in our students and their future. The level of reform detailed in the plan has required and will continue to require innovative partnerships among all members of the Syracuse and education communities. We need the support of New York State to ensure we can achieve our shared goals and ultimately improve the lives of generations of students and their families. Transformation is not easy, but it is essential.

I have no doubt that given the will to educate all children, a focus on instructional improvement and the serious commitment to adopt and implement a fair funding system in New York State, we can produce high achievement by all students.