



Testimony to the NYS 2013 Joint Legislative Hearing on Elementary and Secondary Education

January 29, 2013

Senator Flannigan, Assemblywoman Nolan and Education Committee members and staff. My name is Richard Longhurst. I am the Executive Administrator of the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers or PTA speaking on behalf of more than 300,000 members whose sole mission is to provide a voice for New York State's children and families. Given today's economic challenges, this is a critical time to recognize priorities that will permit us to maintain our commitment to public education. In his Executive Budget, Governor Cuomo lays out a series of concepts and proposed funding that, given current economic challenges, we applaud. We also appreciate the governor's efforts to listen to constituents through his Education Reform Commission and to take initial steps to implement their recommendations. Our comments in reaction to the Executive budget proposal follow three themes:

- NYS must be accountable for assuring that every student has an excellent teacher
- We support adequate, predictable funding that is required to assure each student's right to a sound basic education
- A true, effective partnership between schools and families is essential to achieving educational excellence

Accountability. The governor has declared the evaluation plan which links educator Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) to school aid eligibility a success. Additionally, he proposes stipends for master teachers of math and science, expanding practice teaching experience prior to formal entry into the classroom, and a rigorous "bar" type examination to qualify for certification. We understand the intent underlying these concepts and offer several thoughts for consideration.

1. If agreement on a professional evaluation model is to be a condition for aid eligibility, then that evaluation model should be thoroughly evaluated to assure it is accomplishing its intended purpose. We ask that the legislature fund periodic and thorough independent evaluation of the State's APPR requirement.
2. Rather than focus on a high stakes "bar exam" as the essential gateway to a career in education, we suggest a clinical approach that not only provides for expanded practice experience, but also asks the essential question, "Can this person teach or lead?" and invests in multi-pronged strategies to assess that question accurately at both the pre-service level and for ongoing in-service.
3. Master teachers who possess the skills required to inspire and inform their colleagues are an essential component to a quality education strategy. We would welcome a discussion of a broad range of possible incentives that would not only establish such strategies but assure their sustainability.

Adequacy, Equity and Predictability. When the NYS Court of Appeals ruled that funding for New York City Schools failed to meet state constitutional guarantees, there was no qualifier regarding affordability. Similarly, while the Executive Budget promotes stability and predictability in support of a number of state services, we conclude that these initiatives fall short in the area of public education. We offer the following:

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1. We applaud the governor for seriously considering initiatives proposed by the Education Reform Commission and proposing to fund them outside the cap placed on increased state resources.
2. For new initiatives such as pension support, community schools, expanded school hours, full day pre-K, and master teachers, it is essential to answer the question, "What happens when the money runs out?" If the intent is for such costs to be locally funded, will such funding be exempt from caps on local property tax increases?
3. Growth in state support of Medicaid, as one example, is based on a ten-year rolling average of service cost increase while increases in school aid are based on a one-year increase in personal income. School districts would be far better able to make efficient use of state resources if they could count on the predictability offered by a multi-year standard that avoids sharp year-to-year fluctuations.
4. We appreciate the creativity of stabilizing retirement system cost increases by providing relief for one year outside the aid cap and setting a single rate that schools and municipalities could voluntarily adopt in future years. We must ask, however, if the longer range program might be more attractive to school districts if the state adopted a band rather than a single contribution rate such that minimum and maximum contributions would only apply if actual system requirements fell outside those bands.
5. While the Executive Budget channels new state funding to the highest need districts, the method builds on the Gap Elimination Aid (GEA) model that in the 2012-13 school year produced somewhat different results for a number of average wealth school districts with similar needs and still removes the most dollars from school districts most heavily dependent on state aid. Additionally, where we once had one foundation formula to distribute basic operating aid, under the Executive Budget proposal, we would now have five. Perhaps foundation aid, GEA, GEA restoration, high tax aid and a total of \$100 million proposed for competitive grants should be combined into a single formula that more equitably distributes general aid but that avoids methods which shift aid from one district to another in doing so.

Engaging Parents and Families. Again, we thank the governor for making parent and family engagement a key component of his charge to the Education Reform Commission. To promote a real and effective partnership between families and schools, we urge the governor and legislature to support Board of Regents action that would require no additional funding and that would:

1. Adopt research-based family engagement standards and assessments developed by PTA at the National and State level.
2. Require teacher and leader preparation programs to include pre-service instruction in effective family engagement techniques.
3. Require ongoing family engagement instruction as part of continuing in-service education.

In conclusion, the governor and his Commission on Education Reform have recommended important strategies to assure New York State students access to a world class education. By considering actions we have suggested, we can achieve this vision in spite of the economic challenges we have and will continue to face.