

Testimony, Dr. Pamela C. Brown, Buffalo Public Schools Superintendent

New York State Senate Standing Committee on Education

Public Hearing: "Assessing" Our Progress

Tuesday, October 16, 2013

Senator Flanagan and honorable members of the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity today to discuss such a critical issue in education: assessing our progress as we implement the Regents Reform Agenda and the Common Core Learning Standards. When I first came to Buffalo in July of 2012, my vision was for a school district that provided a world-class education for all students. That is now the vision of the Buffalo Public Schools and is at the core of our short-term and long-term strategic planning, which is resulting in the implementation of numerous reforms to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready. I agree with the Commissioner of Education and the Board of Regents on the need to measure our students' progress, and thus our own progress at every grade level, as we strive toward this goal.

Like many urban school districts, our students face many challenges. Eighty-six percent of students in our district live in poverty, and the consequences of that cannot be overstated. Poverty is unquestionably the number one predictor of how a student will perform in school, and the achievement gap between children from poor families and children from more affluent families continues to grow. Just last year, Stanford University's Sean Reardon found that, in the past 50 years, the gap in standardized test scores between rich and poor families has increased a staggering 40 percent, and that gap continues to grow.

That's one challenge. Another challenge is Buffalo's growing population of immigrants and refugees from nations like Burma, Bhutan and Iraq. In one of our high schools, 45 languages are spoken, and two-thirds of students are enrolled in English as a Second Language classes. Not only do these students arrive in our communities with the immediate need to learn the English language, but in many cases, they also have a need for accelerated progress to make up for years of lost instructional opportunities.

We as a District and a community are rising to meet these challenges. First and foremost, we are promoting continuous improvement in Common Core-aligned, data-informed instruction in every classroom. In order to further accelerate our students' progress, we are expanding opportunities for extended learning time. This year, through partnerships with eleven community-based organizations, we are offering after-school and extended-school-day instruction at nineteen schools and four agency sites through the 21st Century and Extended School Day programs. We are also expanding these opportunities at other Priority and Focus

Schools through the use of Title I, Title III and School Improvement Grant resources, and collaboration with Say Yes to Education.

In addition, we are expanding our credit recovery and accrual opportunities. We have just launched the STAR (Student Transition to Academic Recovery) Academy, which is designed to serve up to two hundred overage and at-risk students in order to guide them to graduation and prevent them from dropping out or failing to earn their diplomas.

We are using state-of-the-art data systems to guide instruction and intervention. We are implementing a new Multi-Tiered System of Support to replace outdated academic and behavioral intervention systems to provide better wrap-around supports for students who need them. We have implemented a new Code of Conduct that focuses on prevention and proactive intervention. We have a new Office of School Leadership to provide stronger support for schools and coaching for administrators and teachers. We have created a new budgeting model that gives individual principals and School-Based Management Teams the opportunity to align resources to their schools' unique needs, combining autonomy and accountability.

We are making progress in Buffalo Public Schools. Attendance is up and we have seen a significant decline in chronic and severe absenteeism. Fewer students are being suspended from school. We have seen a significant decline in the drop-out rate. The percentage of students receiving diplomas has risen sharply, though it is well below our target. But we have much work ahead of us, as a District, a city, a state, and a nation. We all know that the U.S. is lagging behind other nations in educating our children, and there are critical needs that must be addressed if we are to prepare all our students for success after graduation.

First and foremost, we must expand opportunities for pre-kindergarten instruction. In no uncertain terms, data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD, shows the U.S. lagging in reading, math, and science. This is in large part because the U.S. is well below many other nations in the percentage of students who enroll in pre-kindergarten. The OECD identified the U.S., at seventy-eight percent, as twenty-fifth among thirty-three developed nations in the percentage of students who were enrolled in an early childhood or primary education program by age four. Of the twenty-four nations that offer more comprehensive pre-kindergarten programs, eight outrank us in reading, twenty outrank us in math, and thirteen outrank us in science. The OECD also identified the U.S. as number one when it comes to funding for college education as a percentage of GDP, but tied for fourteenth when it comes to elementary and secondary education. Consistent with a resolution that was recently approved by the Buffalo Public Schools Board of Education, I urge the State Legislature to consider lowering the compulsory age of attendance to age four in the City of Buffalo and to provide more resources for pre-kindergarten programs so that all children can get a head start on their education.

We must also provide more resources for expanded learning time and extended school year programs. We are making tremendous strides in expanding opportunities for students to participate in extended school year programs. However, more resources are needed to lengthen and strengthen our programs. We need only look at the success of the Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative to see the value of these programs. According to the National Center on Time and Learning, over a period of three years, Edwards Middle School in Boston was able to boost the percentage of students who met or exceeded state standards in ELA by 31 points and math by 44 points through expanded learning time opportunities facilitated by the Massachusetts Department of Education. With additional funding for expanded learning time along with measures to hold districts accountable for how they utilize those resources, we can do the same in New York State.

Specific to the Common Core state assessments, we welcome any information and data from the State Education Department to support the full implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards at Buffalo Public Schools. The State Education Department has already provided valuable information on individual test questions, including an analysis of why a student might have chosen the incorrect answer and the connection of the question to the Common Core. Providing more comprehensive data from the state tests at a deeper level and connecting that data to instructional strategies and professional development could be of even greater benefit. Here, there is the potential for data-driven instruction on a level we might never before have thought possible. For instance, this data could help us identify a group of students in an individual class who may need a boost in one very specific area of the curriculum. Likewise, it could help us provide even more meaningful training, support, and online resources for individual teachers based upon an analysis of how their students performed on certain questions and what that might tell us about the instructional strategies being employed in the classroom.

Thank you, Senator Flanagan and all of your distinguished colleagues, for the opportunity to speak with you today. The implementation of the Regents Reform Agenda and the Common Core Learning Standards was a turning point for education in New York State. We want to see the full and effective implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards and Data-Driven Instruction in all of our classrooms and by having the right tools and continuous feedback from the State Education Department, we can maximize our success in this very important venture.