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August 5, 2015

MaryEllen Elia, Commissioner  
New York State Education Department  
89 Washington Avenue  
Albany, New York 12234

Dear Commissioner Elia:

As you are aware, Martin Luther King Elementary School in the Utica School District has been identified as a “struggling” school by the State Education Department. As a result of low test scores over the past several years, King School has been placed into receivership under the authority of Utica School District Superintendent Bruce Karam.

As Superintendent Karam prepares to review what actions might be necessary to improve King School’s performance, I would respectfully encourage the State Education Department to create a School Empowerment Assistance Team to collaborate with schools like King. I would also ask the Department to postpone the receivership’s two-year timeframe until such a team can be created and assigned to King School.

Schools such as King may be considered under-performing for many reasons, but any remedy – whether state-imposed or locally conceived and implemented – must take into account local conditions in order to be successful. Without an understanding of the socioeconomic conditions and pressures, cultural and language barriers and high concentration of students with disabilities, any such remedy will prevent the real and meaningful progress our educators want and our students deserve.

Like each and every school district across the state, the Utica School District faces its own unique set of challenges, particularly involving a significant refugee population that speaks several dozen different languages. I have seen how bright and successful students from diverse ethnic backgrounds can be in our district, but language barriers and cultural differences still serve as significant obstacles in the education of many refugees.

The State has provided additional attention and resources in the past in an attempt to turn around King School, but still more can be done. While more funding in itself will not solve all the problems of any troubled school, these funds can be vital if they are utilized according to each school’s unique needs.

That’s why I am urging the State Education Department to establish a statewide School Empowerment Assistance Team that could work side-by-side with the superintendent of each struggling school in a collaborative way, rather than as a perceived adversary. This team – comprised of master teachers, principals, educational leaders and retired superintendents recognized by the state – would listen to superintendents as

they identify the school's most urgent problems in order to develop a strategic Plan Of Need to improve student achievement.

Modeled similarly to the New York State Comptroller's Fiscal Stress Monitoring System, this SEAT team would evaluate all factors and circumstances – both internally and externally – that might impact a school's performance.

After discussing these issues with the existing superintendent, the School Empowerment Assistance Team would then report this agreed-upon Plan Of Need to the Education Department detailing exactly what should be provided to those struggling districts, including additional funding, additional teachers or additional services. The result would establish a series of assessment measures – such as AIMS Web, student portfolios, local benchmarks and assessments – that could be used as alternatives to the state Common Core assessments that are currently the sole measure of academic achievement.

This way, superintendents will remain an active voice as the state assesses the unique needs of a struggling school to develop the most appropriate and focused improvement plans within their district.

I believe a School Empowerment Assistant Team as I have proposed would be the most constructive and cooperative approach to help struggling schools like King improve their performance. Our students can, and are, making progress, and I encourage you and the State Education Department to develop and exercise the flexibility to support their academic growth.

As I welcome you to your important role as Commissioner of the New York State Education Department, I also welcome the opportunity to further discuss this proposal with you and other partners in our goal to improve the education of our children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph A. Griffo". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Joseph A. Griffo  
Senator