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Testimony from Julie M. Marlette, Executive Director of NYCAN, to the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Education

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Chairman Flanagan and Senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Julie Marlette and I am the executive director of NYCAN: The New York Campaign for Achievement Now. NYCAN is a nonprofit education policy and advocacy organization working to ensure every New York child has access to a great public school.

Introduction

I am here today to express NYCAN's support for many of the education policies enacted and implemented in New York in recent years.

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards and implementation of the related assessments and updated teacher evaluations are necessary steps towards ensuring that all students are prepared for college and the workforce when they graduate from a public high school in New York.

The Common Core State Standards

Setting high standards, not only for students, but also for educators, matters. It matters that we set standards for students that are meaningful. When students complete a unit, a course or a grade, they should have both the knowledge and the skills to move on to the next unit, course or grade, regardless of what school they are attending. However, it is also important to ensure that we do not just set high standards for students, but that we provide classrooms and schools that are set up to help them meet those standards. We must ensure that schools are providing programs and classrooms that support the work to attain those high standards, and that they are monitoring the progress of students against the standards. And it is equally important that educators are measured in their progress to deliver instruction that supports the standards,

For too long, many students have been allowed to move from grade to grade—and ultimately graduate—without developing the analytical skills they need to master

collegiate work and enter the workforce. That is why the shift to the Common Core standards in our classrooms was made with a sense of urgency.

The New York Board of Regents sets a score of at least 75 on English Regents and 80 on a Math Regents¹ as the benchmark for college and career readiness. In 2012, however, only 35.3 percent of New York's graduating students met this benchmark.² That so many New York students are graduating or leaving school unprepared for higher education or the workplace is, frankly, unacceptable.

New York's students deserve access to an education based on meaningful standards that prepare them for success in college or the workplace and that are uniform. No matter where you go to school, an A is an A, and eight-grade math competencies are eighth-grade math competencies.

The standards, adopted by New York and 45 other states, do not focus on teaching students how to memorize facts, or learn a little bit about a lot of things. Instead, they push students to demonstrate their ability to use and understand the information that is presented to them.

Adopting the Common Core State Standards was an important step in making this vision of great schools for all a reality, but it was only a first step. The next critical and urgent step is implementation. Schools must provide high-quality instruction of an aligned curriculum, and administer assessments that measure what we want students to know.

Making this change is hard. It means that the standards we are setting are higher, and therefore harder to reach. That means that the assessments used to measure progress against the standards are more challenging than they have been in the past, because the material and skills that students are being asked to learn are more complex. But that's not a bad thing.

We now have the ability to measure whether or not students are on track to have the skills they need to succeed when they complete high school, and we owe it to them to use it.

Telling students that they are doing well now, only to have them find out much later that they are not prepared for the lives they want, and the lives we want for them, will not help them or prevent disappointment. It will only push off the consequences to a later time when there will be fewer resources to help them to get back on track.

¹ "Setting Performance Standards on New York State Grades 3-8 Common Core Assessments," Board of Regents, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2013Meetings/July2013/StandardSetting.pdf>.

² "Setting Performance Standards on New York State Grades 3-8 Common Core Assessments," Board of Regents, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2013Meetings/July2013/StandardSetting.pdf>.

Educator evaluation

Setting high standards for students and giving them meaningful feedback is not enough. We have to do the same for the adults in our education system as well. The new teacher and principal evaluation system, or APPR, represents a significant shift from the historical two-tier satisfactory or unsatisfactory evaluations systems.

Moving forward, teachers and principals will be evaluated on a variety of factors, including, among others, measures of student performance and classroom observations. Rather than just receiving an up or down rating, teachers will now be given one of four new ratings: highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective. This four-tier rating system not only allows truly exceptional teachers and leaders to be recognized as such, but allows those educators who have mastered the fundamentals of their craft to be distinguished from those who may have the right foundation, but may also need extra support to master their craft and best serve their students.

Just like we owe it to kids to tell them honestly how they are doing, we owe it to educators to give them the same feedback and opportunities to grow and be honestly assessed on their progress.

Conclusion

It is important that New York stay the course and continue to faithfully implement the important reforms enacted in New York over the last several years. A comprehensive and cohesive education system comprised of both high standards and effective evaluation tools to assess student and teacher performance against those standards ensures that we are setting the students of New York up for success.

Creating a new baseline is overwhelming. But pushing off the creation of the new baseline until next year, or the year after, will not serve students, and there is no guarantee that time will make the shift more comfortable. This is our year one, and we at NYCAN hope that we will take this new starting line as a challenge, to move students forward in a meaningful way. I especially want to offer our strong support for moving ahead with full implementation of the Common Core and the scheduled alignment of all state assessments and educator evaluations, which incorporate student performance measures, without delay.

Thank you again for your time today.