

**NYS PTA Testimony to NYS Joint Legislative Education Committees**

**February 3, 2015**

Senator Flanagan, Assemblywoman Nolan, Committee members, colleagues and friends. My name is Richard Longhurst. I am Executive Administrator of the NYS Congress of Parents and Teachers or NYS PTA representing nearly 300,000 parents, families, teachers and students throughout NYS. I wish to thank you for this opportunity to directly discuss our association's sole priority, the future of our children.

This year is unique. The Governor is holding hostage information critical to school district budget planning in nearly 700 communities pending legislative action on his education reform agenda. That agenda itself will require in-depth discussion and modification before it can be rationally considered for implementation. We have urged him to release state aid information immediately and restate his obligation to do so.

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NYS PTA's reactions to the current year's State budget development process follow three themes:

- Honor past commitments and constitutional obligations
- Ask if proposed reforms will improve the teaching/ learning experience for our children
- Implement reforms that strengthen family / school partnerships

As a member of the Educational Conference Board (ECB), NYS PTA strongly supports ECB policy statements addressing key educational issues including a \$1.9 billion state aid proposal. I will defer to ECB chair John Yagielski to explain specifics of those proposals in detail.

I will focus my comments on the Governor's reform agenda and other Executive proposals not covered in the ECB position statements.

**1. Governor's Reform Agenda.** Governor Cuomo demands adoption of a unilateral reform agenda as a pre-condition for discussing or sharing details of a school funding proposal. We view that strategy as potentially damaging to schools, offensively heavy handed, and geared more toward addressing issues of adults than improving the learning environment for children. As an alternative, we offer our own views on teacher preparation, tenure, assessment, professional development, reward and incentives.

- a. **Teacher preparation.** Every student deserves a teacher who is highly qualified from the first day he or she assumes primary (as opposed to substitute or supervised) classroom responsibility. For NYS PTA, this means a teacher who is fully certified, having demonstrated content competence and participated in a closely supervised clinical internship prior to being assigned primary responsibility for a student classroom. Additionally, we have proposed that teacher preparation include culturally competent family engagement instruction and field experience. By carefully attending to preparation, our state will both improve the effectiveness of teachers entering the

profession and reduce the large number of teachers who choose to leave the profession within the first five years.

- b. **Tenure.** Earned tenure is a guarantee of due process in any disciplinary hearing, not an assurance of lifetime job security. If a teacher is fully and adequately prepared prior to being assigned primary responsibility for student performance, then we must ask what we will learn about that teacher's performance in five years that we could not learn in three. Further, by requiring five consecutive years of effective performance as the governor proposes, might we be creating a system where new teachers never achieve tenure?
- c. **Student Testing as a Component of Teacher Evaluation.** The Governor proposes that 50% of a teacher's annual performance rating be based on growth in student scores on state tests or for teachers in non-tested grades or subject areas on unspecified growth measures. We believe that assessment is a valid and a valuable aspect of instruction, but recent experience has led us to conclude that directly linking student assessment on single subject test scores to educator rating has damaged the professional evaluation system and the quality of instruction it was designed to improve. Teacher effectiveness ~~and student progress are more than a single test score linked to a teacher.~~

The original ESEA/ NCLB intent of collecting annual 3-8 assessments, Regents exams and graduation data was to identify gaps in education across schools, across districts and among identified sub-groups that would permit comparison of schools with similar demographics across the state, not to link single student, single state test results to individual teachers. The role for standardized State and National tests should be to preliminarily assess the effectiveness of the school community as a whole (teachers, principals and others). A more in-depth assessment should then follow to identify promising intervention strategies. The NYS Education Department and others have developed excellent models such as the Diagnostic Tool for School District Effectiveness (DTSDE) for this purpose.

For individual educators, *NYS Teaching Standards and Performance indicators* adopted by the NYS Board of Regents in 2011 suggest that the most appropriate role for testing in judging individual educator performance is to focus on how each teacher or principal uses diagnostic assessment data to improve instruction. What is important in teacher evaluation is how the teacher uses assessment data to alter, inform and enhance instruction.

We test students far too much; our tests are far too long, and we use test results for too many purposes unrelated to the improvement of classroom instruction. Administer standardized tests where they serve a valid identification purpose, but employ the alternate models that have been adopted by the NYS Board of Regents and that we support to improve the teaching/ learning experience; improve these models and continuously seek to make them more valid and objective.

- d. **Professional Observation as a Component of Teacher Evaluation:** The Governor proposes that 50% of a teacher's annual performance rating be based on at least two classroom observations: one by a principal or local administrator that contributes 15% to the total rating, the other by an outside, independent evaluator that contributes 35% to the total rating. As described, this proposal ignores the multiple aspects of the Regents teaching standards, some of which may not be evident within a classroom observation. Additionally, by proposing that 35% of APPR be judged by an outside evaluator, the Governor makes a mockery of local control, implies questionable confidence in local school leaders, and leaves unanswered, questions of who trains outside evaluators, who pays for their services, who holds them accountable, by what standards and how many will be available to perform the many teacher observations.
- e. **Professional Development:** National PTA asserts that the primary purpose of educator evaluation is to "inform and support ongoing teacher and principal professional development." We agree. This can't be done effectively if every educator receives the same assessment score or if every educator receives the highest score possible. As such, the evaluation strategies must be capable of distinguishing relative strengths and weaknesses that impact student success in multiple ways. Every educator, not just those ~~judged ineffective or developing, can improve and has a professional obligation to seek~~ to do so. At the same time when the purpose of the system is viewed as primarily punitive, the professional development potential of a differentiated rating system is lost.
- f. **Teacher Reward and Incentives:** If we seek to motivate and improve our teachers through rewards, we must first ask what motivates them and whether our goal is to inspire future performance or merely to recognize past performance. Finally we must ask if financial "bonuses" incentivize teachers to collaborate or to compete. If competition is the answer, does such competition lead to more effective instruction and greater student outcomes? We don't believe financial bonuses can be the only answer. There are many other alternatives that can be at least as effective and must be explored.

**2. Education Investment Tax Credit.** Tax credit legislation was adopted two weeks ago by the State Senate and proposed by the Governor moments later. Until this state honors its past fiscal commitments to public education, we must strongly oppose such legislation since it would divert funding from traditional public schools to support priorities and agendas selected by individuals and corporations, rather than the elected and appointed officials constitutionally responsible for assuring equity and adequacy in the use and distribution of State dollars. Additionally, tax breaks for individuals who provide alternate funding potentially ignores the value of participation by local communities and families in public education.

**3. Charter Schools.** When Governor Pataki first proposed charter schools as potential "incubators of innovation and creativity" whose experiences would benefit all public schools, we embraced the concept with two caveats. Public funds must not be diverted from traditional public schools to charter schools, and charter schools must be accountable to boards of education in the districts where the students they serve reside. Before supporting expansion of charters, we must ask:

- a. Have the innovations of present charters benefitted public education?

- b. Are current charters being held accountable to the State and to local community taxpayers in the same manner as traditional public schools?
- c. Will creation of new charters divert additional funds from traditional public education?
- d. Does it make sense to expand the number of charter schools while we at the same time seek to reduce numbers of traditional public schools through mergers and consolidation?

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts. If we are to succeed in the effort to prepare our children to thrive in a competitive, global society, parents and families must have a voice in shaping and implementing that effort. The Governor claims to be the only advocate for NYS's children while indicating lack of confidence in teachers and local school leaders. NYS PTA maintains that there is a crisis in confidence over uncertainty whether our state leaders have the will or the motivation to meet our children's needs adequately. As NYS PTA members we stand ready to offer our help in changing that perception, but we need to see a resolve on the part of the Governor and of you, as legislators, to create an open and collaborative climate in which meaningful discussion is not only tolerated, but encouraged.

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