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May 15, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12248

Dear Governor Cuomo,

As New York begins moving beyond the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis and looks towards a safe restarting of our economy and gradual return to a more 'normal' version of daily life, it is important that we review the lessons of the past two months and learn from them.

One lesson that most parents, teachers and students agree upon is that 'distance' learning isn't comparable in its effectiveness or quality to traditional classroom-based learning.

In the last two months, ambitious lesson plans of teachers across the state had to be shelved as schools quickly adapted to remote learning. Educational expectations had to be shifted drastically downward as both teachers and administrators acknowledged the difficulty of effectively teaching new concepts to students online, particularly for those who need extra support.

Against this backdrop, I was concerned to hear you state that our education system should be exploring "different alternatives with technology" to "reimagine education for the future." While no one disputes that technology has a place in education, it cannot and should not diminish the traditional in-person, classroom model.

In fact, if the past two months are viewed as an experiment in online learning, it has spotlighted the following issues and shortcomings which could never be accommodated through technology-centered education:

- School is the safest place in the lives of many of New York's at-risk children. Superintendents across my district have reported that once schools were closed, there were many children who effectively dropped off the map and were unreachable by email, phone or other means. For these children, their education effectively stopped and concerns about their safety and welfare increased.
- Many rural areas still lack adequate broadband access and some districts have not yet achieved 1:1 computer distribution which left many students without the technology needed to access lessons.
- Students with learning disabilities, an increasingly larger proportion of our public school population, cannot get the educational support and services they require through online means.
- Music, arts and physical education as well as skills-based, hands-on learning in trades, advanced manufacturing and other occupations cannot be delivered remotely.

Schools are the center of so many rural and suburban communities. In addition to educating our children they also provide vital socialization skills. That interaction promotes the importance of being an active part of a community. Our schools are so much more than just a vehicle for disseminating information; they are the foundation we use to build a civil society.

The deficiencies of online learning are particularly acute for students in rural districts. Many parents, particularly single-parent households, are unable to provide support for homeschooling and distance learning. Any move to rely more on remote learning in the fall would be detrimental to these children and may leave them at a permanent academic disadvantage and higher risk of dropping out. Students must return to the classroom this September. Otherwise, their futures, and ours, will be compromised.

I respectfully request and appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

George M. Borrello
57th Senate District

Andy Goodell
150th Assembly District