



## NYS PTA Testimony to NYS Joint Legislative Committees

January 27, 2016

Good afternoon. My name is Richard Longhurst. I am Executive Administrator of the NYS Congress of Parents and Teachers or NYS PTA representing 275,000 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.

While the education community in NYS continues to face significant challenges, we wish to commend the Governor and his staff for approaching education with a different tone than what we experienced a year ago.

- School districts across the state have access to 2016-17 proposed aid runs that are essential to their planning process.
- The Governor has accepted the report of his Common Core task force that developed a series of well conceived recommendations after only two months of data collection, review and deliberation that took them to every corner of the state.
- The NYS Board of Regents has proposed regulations designed to ease the negativity surrounding student testing.
- The state will have greater flexibility in determining how schools and educators will be held accountable as a result of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

On the other hand, New York State's education community finds itself confronted with serious challenges related both to current proposals and past legislation. NYS PTA's responses and recommendations follow three themes:

- Honor past commitments and constitutional obligations
- Consider whether past legislation and current proposals will improve learning effectiveness 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 that recommend a \$2.2 billion increase in school aid and support for struggling schools. I will address a portion of my comments to these issues but defer to ECB chair John Yagielski to explain specifics of those proposals in greater detail.

- 1. The proposed \$991 million school aid increase is insufficient.** The legislature needs to add at least \$1.2 billion to what the governor proposes. After years of state aid cuts, the imposition of a local property tax cap, increased student performance expectation and expanded demands for accountability, school districts have cut their staff, programs and financial reserves to the bare minimum. While the economy suffered, schools performed admirably to continue delivery of basic programs. Now, with an improved economy, even greater demand for increased performance and change and with billions of dollars proposed for new state initiatives, it is time for the state to not only provide

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funding that will avoid the need for additional program cuts but to honor commitments to schools that have been delayed or postponed for the past eight years. Here are some priorities that we have identified:

- a. **Impact of a zero increase tax cap.** If the state's priority is to maintain the property tax cap in its present form, we believe the state has a responsibility to fund the impact of caps that fall below what the public generally views as a 2% cap on local property taxes.
  - b. **Support for Community schools.** We strongly support the community schools approach to struggling school turnaround. If the state is serious about this effort however, \$100 million proposed to support both struggling schools and other high need school districts is inadequate, particularly for the 124 schools that are under the threat of receivership but receiving no additional support in the current year. Accelerated phase-in of the foundation formula for the districts in which these schools are located is a logical and necessary supplement.
  - c. **GEA elimination vs Foundation Aid.** The Governor proposes to restore \$189 of \$434 million owed to school districts in Gap Elimination Adjustments. Schools have suffered under GEA aid reductions for far too long. An improved economy doesn't justify its continuation. It has to go. At the same time, districts with the greatest need must be assured foundation aid that will result in total percentage state aid increases equal to increases in higher wealth districts. Simple equity demands at least that much. The proposed foundation aid increase of \$266 million can't come close to achieving that goal.
  - d. **Education Investment tax credit.** The governor again proposes a tax credit that would benefit those who contribute to non-public school support. The estimated cost of this program to the state would be \$150 million. When compared with the proposed \$100 million investment in community schools, it can be construed that the message is that tax credits for the wealthy are a higher priority than improving our struggling public schools.
2. **School and family partnerships proposed by the NYS Board of Regents must be adopted and supported with an office of family and community engagement within the education department.** Research consistently demonstrates the value of family/school engagement. It is an essential component of community schools and virtually every other reform initiative sought by the board of Regents. At the same time, the absence of ongoing family and community collaboration is believed by many to be a prime source of parent discontent and dissatisfaction with their children's education. The Regents family engagement requests represent valuable investments in educational improvement and must be funded.
  3. **State fiscal support for the NYS Education Department is inadequate.** Major studies conclude that the New York State Education Department is charged with supporting and providing oversight for one of the country's largest school systems with a staffing level that ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in the nation. Over the past 30 years, state support for SED has reduced program improvement assistance for schools to almost nothing, leaving compliance monitoring as its primary function. As the performance diversity of the state's pupil population increases, state leadership and local assistance become more important than ever before. Now, the legislature contemplates adding unfunded costs for administering educator evaluation programs, monitoring and providing support to struggling schools

and addressing the twenty one recommendations of the governor's Common Core task force. Without adequate staff and financial capacity, expectations demanded of the Regents, Commissioner and education department staff become unrealistic and lessen the potentially positive impact of school district aid increases.

4. **Regulation flexibility alone is not the long range answer to problems created by The Education Transformation Act of 2015.** While creative regulations that suspend the use of certain test results to judge performance of students and educators may offer temporary relief from the public outcry surrounding the Education Transformation Act, in the end replacement legislation will be needed. Time required to gather input and carefully consider more acceptable solutions, however, may require this form of temporary fix. Longer term, failure to respond legislatively to problems associated with this act is likely to have detrimental effects on teachers and students while it diminishes the confidence that students, parents and the public at large have in any form of student assessment.
5. **Early childhood programs must be consolidated and structured to offer greater predictability.** With the governor's request for additional funding to support pre-school for three year olds, at least five separate programs would fund pre-school education. At the same time, kindergarten would remain an optional program. The governor further proposes to replace Education Department oversight responsibilities with a politically appointed three member board and Office of children and Family Services staff. While we agree that it is time to consolidate and streamline pre-kindergarten programs to create a comprehensive early childhood strategy, we also maintain that effectiveness and consistency with K-12 programming demand that oversight and support responsibilities remain with the NYS Education Department..

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, our efforts must be collaborative with funding support adequate and predictable.

The crisis in confidence demonstrated most vividly through this past year's lack of participation in federally mandated student assessments raises the question of whether our state leaders have the will or the motivation to adequately meet our children's needs. State and Federal action of the past month, however, give us reason for optimism.

As NYS PTA members we stand ready to offer our help in responding to that optimism; but we need demonstrated resolve on the part of the Governor and of you, as legislators, to create an open and collaborative climate in which meaningful discussion is encouraged and investment in necessary resources is a priority.