



TESTIMONY

TO THE
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON
CHRONICALLY STRUGGLING SCHOOLS
AND SCHOOL RECEIVERSHIP

OCTOBER 14, 2015

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*REPRESENTING MORE THAN 600,000 PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE
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**TESTIMONY OF
STEVE ALLINGER
DIRECTOR OF LEGISLATION
NEW YORK STATE UNITED TEACHERS
TO THE
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
CHAIRWOMAN CATHERINE NOLAN
ON
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My name is Steve Allinger, I am the Director of Legislation for New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT is a statewide union representing more than 600,000 members. Our members are pre-k to 12th grade teachers, school related professionals, higher education faculty, and other professionals in education and health care.

I would like to thank the chair of the Assembly Education Committee and members of the committee for the opportunity to address you today regarding chronically struggling schools and school receivership.

With me today are educational leaders from around the state: Pat Puleo, Yonkers Federation of Teachers; Kevin Ahern, Syracuse Teachers Association; Seth Cohen, Troy Teachers Association; and Juliet Benaquisto, Schenectady Federation of Teachers. My comments will be brief since we want you to hear directly from these educators in the field.

NYSUT strongly supports collaborative strategies to turnaround struggling schools through engagement of all stakeholders and school communities. NYSUT strongly opposes the enacted receivership law; it scapegoats educators who teach in these schools and overrides local control and collective bargaining in an effort to turnaround persistently struggling and struggling schools. Receivership is not a model that will lead to turnaround in these schools. We must provide comprehensive services for students and families in struggling schools.

FUNDING CONCERNS

I would like to begin by thanking Assemblywoman Cathy Nolan and Senator Hugh Farley for passing A.7013/S.4921, and renaming these schools “struggling” and “persistently struggling.” These schools serve our most high-need populations and have a large number of undocumented students, English language learners, students with special needs, students living in poverty and homeless students. Our students who attend these schools and dedicated educators that teach in these schools are not “failures” and we thank you for your leadership in recognizing their challenges.

Although these schools serve our most vulnerable population, the reality is the state hasn’t provided the adequate funding required in order to provide these students their constitutional right to a sound, basic education.

The enacted Executive Budget would give 20 schools that have been struggling for more than ten years, only one year to show “demonstrable improvement” and only two years to allow another 124 struggling schools to show “demonstrable improvement.” These schools have suffered from years of chronic underfunding. Moreover, it takes time and commitment to build truly collaborative relationships between management and labor, parents, and the wider community.

School districts facing receivership are owed more than \$94 million in Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) and more than \$2.6 billion in Foundation Aid – more than a combined \$2.7 billion. This amount totals more than an astounding half of the \$4.6 billion owed to public schools statewide in GEA and Foundation Aid. (See chart below.) This amount is what is currently owed and does not take into account the past years these school districts were inadequately funded.

District	Persistently Struggling Schools	Struggling Schools	Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) owed	Foundation Aid owed	Combined GEA & Foundation Aid owed
ALBANY CITY SD	1	2	(53,606)	(37,448,134)	(37,501,740)
AMSTERDAM CITY SD	-	1	(8,722)	(11,289,070)	(11,297,792)
BUFFALO CITY SD	5	20	(86,989)	(96,133,048)	(96,220,037)
CENTRAL ISLIP UFSD	-	1	(46,688)	(48,156,069)	(48,202,757)
HEMPSTEAD UFSD	1	1	(18,346)	(82,390,492)	(82,408,838)
MT VERNON SD	-	1	(933,691)	(22,379,989)	(23,313,680)
NEWBURGH CITY SD	-	1	(153,483)	(38,524,502)	(38,677,985)
NEW YORK CITY	7	55	(87,281,046)	(1,959,214,202)	(2,046,495,248)
POUGHKEEPSIE CITY SD	-	2	(26,900)	(9,308,578)	(9,335,478)
ROCHESTER CITY SD	4	10	(97,541)	(105,270,937)	(105,368,478)
ROOSEVELT UFSD	-	1	(15,342)	(26,447,371)	(26,462,713)
SCHENECTADY CITY SD	-	2	(23,954)	(59,915,486)	(59,939,440)
SYRACUSE CITY SD	1	17	(50,991)	(63,070,711)	(63,121,702)
TROY CITY SD	-	1	(23,464)	(9,434,108)	(9,457,572)
UTICA CITY SD	-	1	(17,063)	(46,934,039)	(46,951,102)
WYANDANCH UFSD	-	1	(10,862)	(16,728,269)	(16,739,131)
YONKERS CITY SD	1	7	(5,530,703)	(39,924,179)	(45,454,882)
TOTAL	20	124	(94,379,391)	(2,672,569,184)	(2,766,948,575)

Due to years of inadequate funding, school districts with persistently struggling and struggling schools have had to make difficult financial decisions regarding staffing, programs and services - impacting both the school and students' academic performance. The Utica City School District, has been forced to cut over 350 positions (including 23 administrators, 192.6 teachers, 41 teaching assistants, 46 support staff, 52 clerical workers and 10 custodial staff) due to funding gaps. The Poughkeepsie City School District has eliminated 115 staff positions in the last three years due to budget deficiencies. The school district has also reduced the kindergarten program from full-day to half-day due to lack of funding.

NYSUT appreciates that the Legislature allocated \$75 million to persistently struggling schools. Yet, our members in persistently struggling schools still do not know what their state grant levels are or what they will be used for, even though we are over a month into the new school year. SED has indicated the grants will likely be spread out over two years. NYSUT is extremely concerned that SED has indicated it will be holding back \$7 million of these funds to potentially pay for an external receiver. The Legislature should compel SED to fund these schools as the Legislature intended.

While the Legislature allocated \$75 million to persistently struggling schools, there was no allocation for the 124 struggling schools, which means they cannot invest in additional programs and services for their students needed to increase student achievement. New York must make a financial commitment to these schools. We need comparable funding for these struggling schools.

TEACHER TURNOVER CONCERNS

The botched implementation of Common Core standards and the inappropriate use of high-stakes testing of students and educators have driven down the morale of our teachers and staff.

Instead of removing dedicated and effective teachers, we need a substantial infusion of funding to provide extra instructional and support services for economically disadvantaged and diverse populations. We need an influx of services such as: wrap around services, mentoring programs, sustained professional learning, afterschool programs, and health care services. We need to support the whole child and their families.

There is no evidence that suggests firing educators has anything to do with raising student achievement and there is no rational argument for it. This harmful provision in the law will strongly discourage educators from working in persistently struggling and struggling schools since these schools serve large high-needs populations.

Research clearly demonstrates that it is important to retain effective teachers and, conversely, a waste of resources to encourage a revolving door of teachers by removing them. Moreover, teacher candidates have dropped nearly 40 percent, and new teachers are leaving the profession nearly 50 percent of the time in their first five years.

In addition, collective bargaining contracts should not be unilaterally amended or changed in these school districts. The ability for a receiver to unilaterally change a collectively bargained contract is very problematic. These contracts that cover low performing schools, cover high-performing schools in the same school district.

We must create a stable structure in these schools instead of a punitive one with constant disruptions that will not attract highly qualified educators and will encourage them to leave as soon as they possibly can to teach in other schools.

NYSUT strongly supports proven initiatives to attract and retain qualified educators to work with our most disadvantaged student populations. We need to ensure that we have embedded standards based professional development tied to a rich curriculum that all children need and deserve.

BEST MODELS FOR TURNOVER SCHOOLS: CHANCELLOR'S DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

To improve struggling schools, everyone from labor to management to parents need to be working collaboratively. I will discuss two local examples which have proven to close the achievement gap and turnaround struggling schools.

CHANCELLOR'S DISTRICT

The "Chancellor's District" was established in 1996 and continued until 2003 and involved nearly 60 schools. The UFT worked closely and negotiated with the NYC Chancellor to create this initiative for its struggling schools.

Schools entered the district in June and were ready with new programs in place by September. Schools in the Chancellor's District were given additional funding — spending an average of \$2,700 more per student than at comparable schools. These extra funds were spent on curriculum materials and literacy initiatives to help bring students up to speed, additional teachers to help lower class sizes, academic after-school and summer programs to get struggling students the extra help they needed and school-based professional development that helped teachers constantly improve their skills and share best practices.

The collaboration, additional funding support and services worked: In the three school years studied in a comprehensive report, the portion of students meeting standards on the statewide fourth-grade reading test rose 17.7 percentage points, while scores in other struggling schools rose 11.9 percentage points.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

The second strategy proven to work to turnover struggling schools is community schools. Poverty impedes a child's ability to learn. The state needs to adequately support public schools and equip them to fully meet the needs of our most vulnerable students that go beyond a typical school day. Over half of the state's students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch and approximately 1 million children are living in poverty, which includes over 100,000 homeless students. New York state should address these issues and adequately fund our public schools and support our students so their serious needs get addressed and they can focus on learning. Community schools help to mitigate inequity and poverty and provide students the tools needed to learn and grow.

A Community School is a strategy for organizing the resources of the community around student success. It is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities

leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone —all day, evenings and weekends, year round.

These schools have been successful in: closing the achievement gap; reducing chronic absenteeism especially due to inadequate health care; reducing grade retention; reducing dropout rates; decreasing issues and truancy rates; increasing graduation rates; and increasing student participation in afterschool and summer programs. These examples show that the best decisions are made locally by those that know the children best and have a direct stake in their well-being... parents, school leaders and educators.

We urge you to support a community schools model of learning and engagement for struggling schools and fund community schools on a need basis, as opposed to the competitive grant process the state has in effect. We also urge you to significantly increase the funding for these schools which is currently at \$15 million.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The enacted law on receivership attempts to centralize power, privatize public education, and strip away local control from parents and their local, democratically elected school boards.

Lawmakers should enact policies that provide a realistic research based time to turnaround these schools properly and research based solutions and tools that have been proven to close the achievement gap and accelerate student learning - not more gimmicks from reformers who have never taught in a classroom.

Students in persistently struggling schools and struggling schools deserve to have the resources and programs they need to turnaround their school. We ask that you listen to public school students, educators, and education administrators who are with students every day and know first-hand what is needed to improve student achievement.

NYSUT looks forward to partnering with the Legislature to ensure our students receive the necessary resources, programs, services and tools for a 21st century high-quality education in order for college and career readiness.

Our recommendations are:

- Replace punitive provisions with incentives that help to attract and retain promising teacher candidates and career educators;
- Restore local control and collective bargaining rights;
- Provide robust funding for community schools independent of receivership law;
- Provide funding for 124 struggle schools at least comparable to the funding for persistently struggling schools;
- Provide adequate time to build collaborative models including parents and community partners;
- Provide funding for embedded standards-based professional development;
- Use multiple measures of school improvement including attendance, improved school climate, and increased parental engagement;
- Provide increased and adequate professional support to educators in struggling schools; and

- Recognize progress made in existing local turnaround programs.

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