



SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

SINCE 1896, THE VOICE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Educational Priorities

Testimony of David A. Little, Esq., Director of Governmental Relations
Governor's Albany Regional Hearing on Public Education
December 13, 2007

Empire State Plaza, Meeting Room One
Albany, New York
1-3:00pm

Good Afternoon:

My name is David Little. I'm the Director of Governmental Relations for the New York State School Boards Association. Our association, NYSSBA, was created by the Legislature to foster the efficiency of school districts and the improvement of public school leadership. Our charge is to help provide the most effective and efficient public educational programs possible while maintaining wise stewardship of public funds. This afternoon I will testify regarding the role of the real property tax in funding public education in our state. This morning, I will focus on the other most pressing concerns of the 5000 locally elected school officials that comprise NYSSBA.

Rather than merely listing our most needed legislative and regulatory changes, please allow us to frame the future of public education within our historic partnership of local and state officials; to show our state leaders the value of local school leadership in achieving the common goal of drastically improving the academic achievement of New York State's students. Both are vitally important in the effort to accurately reflect the expectations of constituents and then arrive at sound policy to meet those expectations. Accountability will be demanded at both levels and success rides on mutual support.

Here Is What We Both Want: RESULTS

(The shared priorities, goals and results required by both local school and state officials)

Our goals; those things that New York State must achieve if it is to succeed, if it is to take advantage of newfound political will, if it is to prevent the social consequences of exposing massive segments of this generation to educational neglect, are presented below. State leaders want this if for no other reason than to avoid the horrific alternatives of massive unemployment and crime, the exodus of the educated and the downward spiral of increased taxation. Local school leaders want it because we are stewards of much more than state and local funds. We are the guardians of the next generation's ability to reach its dreams. Together, these state and local

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leaders can work side by side to first determine our common goals and then assign the resources and policy needed to succeed.

Here Is What We'll Do Locally: RIGOR

(Prudent management of resources, accountability for results. Our part of the partnership)

More than merely listing our desire for improvement and recognizing the public's demand for programmatic, as well as financial accountability, NYSSBA will convey not simply what school boards want, but what school boards pledge to deliver. As the model for public accountability (standing for election alongside our most controversial work each year) school boards will strive to improve our state's dismal graduation rate. We will prepare the next generation for state and national citizenship and global competition. We will close the achievement gap.

Here Is What We Need Our State Partners To Do: RESOURCES

(The resources and authority school boards need to succeed in our shared vision. The state's contribution to our continuing partnership)

School boards will not shy away from the expectation of success when funding is no longer an impediment. However, more than just money, local school officials need the authority to meet local, individualized needs. We need the ability to merge resources not with statewide trends and tactics, but with approaches that adapt to the specific circumstances of each local district. We must have the authority and the means to truly correct deficiencies in our schools and when that is provided, we will be proud to stand publicly accountable. We need relief from the impediments to efficiency imposed on schools by the state. When it comes to mandates old and new, we need restraint. We need the commitment to the full four years of increased funding, but we also need the authority to allocate it efficiently and in the most educationally effective manner. If new funding comes with a state license to mandate the use of those funds, little will be gained and new problems will be created.

The Specifics

1. Funding

The new funding formula is a dramatic step forward to providing adequate state resources for public education, but it is by no means perfect and needs significant refinement. Some districts are much poorer in reality than the formula will recognize. More areas are highly taxed than receive high tax aid. Beyond these fundamental flaws, the formula itself will need to be defended from those who would change it in negative ways. For instance, the Regents have proposed including high cost special education in the foundation formula, rather than recognizing actual local expenses. They have also proposed reducing last year's 3% inflationary increase to 2% and reallocating funds directly from high tax districts to low wealth districts. All of this is taking place amidst calls to lower spending in light of economic stress on the state. Having embarked on a new approach, the state must keep its promise of adequate funding over four years. Contracts for Excellence are two party contracts and while districts have upheld their requirements, the state must not divert from its promises or expect unattainable results prior to fulfillment of adequate funding.

At the local level, school officials will be vigilant in making the best use of state, local and federal funds. They will advocate for additional federal resources and to keep the federal government from shifting costs to local and state taxpayers, thereby preserving local resources. They will oversee district finances to assure continued public confidence and they will engage the community in planning and policies to encourage its emotional and financial support.

At both the state and local level, officials will need to collaborate on a significant advocacy effort to reverse the trend in federal funding. Not only do federally mandated programs require a reasonable federal financial investment, but we must prevent them from actually withdrawing funding from such vital programs as Medicaid and IDEA.

2. Improving Teacher Quality

State leaders must recognize that in the midst of high demand for quality educators, our state trains and then exports an abundance of such teachers. State leaders must provide improved standards for teacher education programs and an environment where effectiveness is supported. Similarly, it must address the glaring problem of criminal behavior, ineffective methods and poor performance in the classroom.

NYSSBA proposes to improve the recruitment and retention of high quality teachers in our schools. We will soon present draft legislation, based on NYSSBA's Report on the 3020-a Teacher Disciplinary Process. We urge changes to the teacher's retirement system to better serve schools and their employees in a changing marketplace. We urge the legislature to impose accountability measures at all levels and not merely on school administrators and governance. We need to change teacher tenure from a three to a five year process, to better coordinate with state permanent certification requirements. More than merely addressing the narrow issue of teacher discipline, local school officials need the ability to recruit, assign, develop and provide pay incentives to educators.

3. Containing Costs

Our state partners must recognize the harm in their universalized approach to issues. School district must relieve school districts of existing impediments to efficiency, encourage shared services (both with other districts and other municipalities) by providing incentives and legal authority. State officials must respect the collective bargaining process by refraining from providing across the board benefits for which local districts receive no concomitant concession. They need to address the serious cost implications of the laws pertaining to school construction. They must refrain from imposing well meaning but ultimately costly new mandates. Local school leaders (with NYSSBA's help) will explore cost containment over a broad spectrum, including health care and liability insurance, energy, school construction, personnel and other major cost centers. From streamlining of reporting requirements to reducing mandated programs and expenses, all point to the need for innovative and locally implemented approaches. We will report findings to the legislature and advocate for needed change. Where

possible, NYSSBA will encourage districts to take advantage of existing incentives and cost saving measures.

4. Student Testing.

Together, our schools, state education department, governor and legislative leaders must arrive at an effective, flexible and affordable means of assessing academic progress. Our state needs appropriate testing models on both the state and federal level.

On the state level, officials must support a timely component re-testing program to encourage success and allow students and educators alike to focus on areas of need. Testing results must be provided in a timely manner to allow appropriate educational services, including summer school. State testing must be a state expense, pure and simple. Local taxpayers should not be subsidizing the administration and grading of state tests. State tests must be pre-equated to ensure both legitimacy and timeliness of results. Testing for students with limited English proficiency must be modified to account for those with less than three years of English as a second language instruction and testing for students with disabilities must be modified to account for students whose individualized educational plans are not congruent with material being tested.

New York State needs to expand the use of the value added method of individualized testing and for use of the data extrapolated to maximize the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

5. Supporting Local Educational Democracy

School boards are not only a necessary component of the state's ability to deliver on the promise of a brighter future, they form the foundation of democracy for the public's highest priority. Our state must keep public schools public by supporting the role of the board of education. To be effective partners in this critically important venture, school boards must be seen as the community representatives and leaders they are. Unfortunately, school boards find themselves in an increasingly hostile political environment, where frustration at perceived lack of improvement is focused on governance rather than root causes.

While NYSSBA has embraced the concept of accountability throughout the educational system, several new measures threaten the very heart of democratic public school governance. Board member removal, administrative removal, arbitrary placement of outside experts onto the board of education are all either already implemented or under consideration. Intensive state involvement in curriculum, methods and practices (which are the traditional purview of the board of education) are all an increasing component of the state's willingness to provide additional resources in struggling districts.

Sadly, increases in funding have come with extensive state controls over program and services. Districts unfortunate enough to be designated as needing a Contract for Excellence face additional threats to local discretion, including these ex officio board members and required programming. These are unwarranted intrusions into local board of education authority.

In addition, the state appears to be actively seeking to usurp local authority by imposing universal requirements on the sale of foods within schools, despite the lack of supporting scientific and anecdotal evidence that the school setting has any impact upon student health and obesity issues.

The State of New York must not remove the local community's right to annually determine its financial support of their schools by instituting artificial tax caps. Similarly inappropriate in a democratic undertaking is the presumption that mayors, rather than direct community participation are the key to urban school improvement. As an alternative, we urge adoption of the widely successful concept of independent taxing authority for urban school districts, retaining democratic representation in school governance and adopting the method that has led to near universal support for local school budgets. We also continue to oppose the erosion of support for public education through proposals to drain students and resources with private school vouchers and tuition tax credits.

Finally, each state mandate, no matter how potentially beneficial, is an intrusion into a decision that should be made at the local level. State required curriculum, state mandated health care services, state legislated bargaining issues and practices all erode the role of community elected school officials. Thus, we respectfully request that you do no harm, live up to prior commitments and then work cooperatively with local school officials to achieve an aggressive but workable agenda, for the betterment of our children and the future of New York State.

Thank you for your kind assistance in this critically important endeavor.

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