

TESTIMONY OF
THE UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
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BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE & ASSEMBLY
JOINT COMMITTEES ON EDUCATION & FINANCE

REGARDING GOVERNOR CUOMO'S
FY 2014-15 EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL

JANUARY 28, 2014

Good afternoon, and thank you all for this opportunity to testify about the proposed executive budget today on behalf of my union, the United Federation of Teachers, and its 200,000 members.

I particularly want to thank Senators Flanagan and DeFrancisco, along with Assembly Members Nolan and Farrell, for their strong leadership and advocacy on behalf of our public school students. Thank you also for supporting the educators who have dedicated their lives to helping equip those students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in today's world.

These are exciting but complicated times in New York City schools. Exciting because we have a new mayor and a new chancellor who seem intent on working with us and returning joy to the classroom, but complicated because the implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards and the new teacher evaluation system have both been fraught with problems.

We are encouraged by many of the provisions outlined in Governor Cuomo's proposed budget plan and support most of the recommendations in his Education Reform Commission report. Our schools need to make a paradigm shift if education is to move forward. The challenges ahead will require innovative thinking as well as collaboration and support at every level, including a broad public commitment. We need to make strong investments in our schools and come together behind holistic solutions that address the needs of children from their pre-kindergarten years through high school, college and beyond.

These committees have done important work to help put more rigorous standards into place, and there are opportunities to build on that work in the months ahead. I'm proud of the progress we made together last year to strengthen our school communities, and I look forward to working with you again this year.

School Aid

We are encouraged by Governor Cuomo's proposal to increase direct school aid this year by 3.1 percent, though with our schools still rebuilding and restoring their programs after years of budget cuts, we believe that figure should only be considered a starting point.

Too many school districts are struggling. With the tax cap that most districts in the state face, they have been unable to rebuild their school programs. The state is also now \$5.5 billion behind in its Campaign for Fiscal Equity funding commitments.

The lack of adequate funding has translated into huge losses for our schools. New York City alone lost 7,000 teachers during the lean years, and class sizes have risen across the board. Many buildings also remain in poor condition, with thousands of students stuck in trailers and other so-called "temporary" facilities that have become permanent structures.

What's more, many of our students are unable to get the academic intervention services that they desperately need, and schools still lack fundamentals such as science labs, music classes and other arts programs.

These problems are exacerbated by our city's significant income disparity, which has led to crippling poverty and record homelessness – issues that many of our students deal with every day. These inequities are holding them back and adversely affecting our school communities.

We applaud the state Legislature for having added to the governor's proposal last year and urge you to do the same this year. Even if Governor Cuomo's panel can get the transition to the Common Core standards back on track, it won't mean anything if we don't aggressively reinvest in our classrooms and restore the programs and services that teachers and students depend on.

New Yorkers are tired of watching their schools and municipalities struggle while corporations and wealthy citizens continue to enjoy tax cuts. That economic inequality is taking a huge toll on families, and outrage is growing as working families and the middle class struggle to get by. If we're going to fix our schools and strengthen our communities, the state needs to implement reforms that close corporate tax loopholes and require the rich to pay their fair share.

Fixing the Common Core

Among the most critical issues facing our schools is the failed implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards. The new standards, adopted by 46 states, still hold great promise as we try to create common educational benchmarks and teach our students higher-order thinking skills. The goal is to improve educational outcomes for students and ensure that they are college- and career-ready in our increasingly competitive world.

Unfortunately, the promise of the new standards is in jeopardy due to inaction and poor planning by the State Education Department and the NYC DOE. Thousands of New York City teachers began the school year without promised Common Core-aligned materials or training; they were left on their own to make the shift to the new standards.

Making matters worse, teachers found that many of the new materials that finally began arriving at schools later in the fall or winter were haphazardly written and produced. Some curriculum was untested, unrealistically paced or filled with errors, while the curriculum for K-3 students wasn't even age-appropriate.

It's been a trying year, to say the least, which is why the UFT applauds Governor Cuomo for recognizing the severity of the problems and proposing a panel to investigate the situation and recommend corrective action to get us back on track. It is our hope that the panel will ensure that every teacher will receive the materials and training they need.

Teacher Centers

Restoring funding for Teacher Centers that provide teachers with professional development would help make the transition to the new Common Core standards a success. Skill development is critical to a teacher's success in the classroom in front of 20 to 30 students who each have their own unique modes of learning. In many ways, it's not unlike the need for doctors to train on new surgical techniques or firefighters to train on new equipment and strategies. It's not enough to send out a manual or train a few people in a network office or via a webinar. It takes time and practice to make sure the knowledge and skills are passed down directly to the teachers in the classroom. That's where our Teacher Centers come in.

Every day, our Teacher Center staff is engaging educators on a variety of topics to help them expand their knowledge and skills. For the Common Core alone, we've held 1,650 different meetings and workshops just since July, reaching nearly 11,000 teachers in the process – and we're only just beginning. Workshops in other areas such as literacy, math, special education, English language learners and instructional technology are always going on around the city, either in our UFT conference locations or one of our 125 school-based centers.

What's more, our Teacher Center staff and our school-based partners are helping mentor and coach more than 12,000 teachers so far this year. They're providing in-classroom support, professional study groups and work sessions.

We're very proud of the work that our Teacher Centers are able to perform on a very limited budget, but in many ways, we're just scratching the surface. We have more than 80,000 teachers and staff in our schools. If we want that paradigm shift to take place, we need to reach all of them, and we can only do that with additional funding.

Thanks to the leadership in the State Assembly, New York City Teacher Centers were able to continue this important work in FY 2013-14 on a reduced allocation of \$6 million. That's half of what the allocation has been in previous years. For FY 2014-15, we propose increasing that New York City allocation to \$15 million. We urge the governor and both houses of the Legislature to recognize the importance of Teacher Centers and commit to that increased level of funding this year.

Enacting a Moratorium on High-Stakes Testing

While the governor's panel does its work and until the new Common Core standards can be properly implemented, we strongly urge the governor and the Legislature to issue a moratorium on the use of standardized tests for high stakes.

As you know, state tests aligned to the new Common Core standards were first introduced last spring, and because students were not familiar with the material they were tested on, we saw a dramatic drop in scores statewide. The tests themselves were poorly paced and questions were confusing or badly worded; the exams were being field-tested even as they were being given. Given the rollout problems noted above, our students – through no fault of their own – may not perform any better on the tests this spring.

The problem, of course, is that this year those scores are supposed to factor into everything from student promotion decisions to school grades and teacher evaluations. Parents and teachers are outraged, and for good reason. The idea that students and teachers will now be held accountable and judged on test results even though they did not receive the support or tools needed for the students to do well on those exams is akin to educational malpractice.

It's bad enough that meaningful teaching and learning has long been held in abeyance to make room for mindless and stressful test prep, but it's even worse that the high-stakes tests are now threatening the future of the higher standards that we're trying to meet in our classrooms.

If we're going to embrace the Common Core and move our schools forward by raising the bar on academic achievement, the new standards must be implemented properly – but until the problems with the rollout have been fixed, students and teachers should not bear the brunt of SED's and DOE's failure. That doesn't mean that we stop doing assessments and evaluations. It means a moratorium on the high stakes associated with tests aligned to the Common Core standards until this mess can be sorted out. That's the only fair solution.

Support a Ban on High-Stakes Testing in Pre-K – 2

The UFT also applauds the governor for supporting a ban of standardized testing for children in kindergarten through 2nd grade. The UFT, along with NYSUT, the Alliance for Quality Education and other education advocates, mounted a statewide petition campaign this fall to call for a "Recess from Tests." So far, some 12,000 UFT members alone have signed the petition. We believe, with the call for universal pre-K, that we must ban these tests in pre-K as well.

Bubble tests aren't even remotely age-appropriate for young children who are just learning their numbers and letters, nor can they give teachers any useful insight into a very young student's problem-solving skills or thinking. Teachers have plenty of other ways to assess K-2 students without causing anxiety or putting their love of learning at risk at such a young age. The ban is simply common sense.

Early Childhood Education/Universal Pre-K

The time is definitely right to shine a spotlight on the need for universal high-quality, accessible early childhood education for each and every child, and we commend both Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio for their strong commitment to expanding access to universal pre-K. It's an initiative that will have far-reaching social and economic benefits for our communities, and Mayor de Blasio has put forward a comprehensive plan to make that dream a reality.

While it is tempting to move quickly, we risk the entire initiative if we move forward haphazardly without properly analyzing the mayor's plan or creating a dedicated revenue stream to support these programs.

The UFT supports the mayor's call for home rule so New York City can create a new funding stream that will ensure stability of its pre-K programs. A broad coalition of unions, business leaders and parents have all joined together behind this issue, and voters have already shown a willingness to accept a tax on the wealthy as a way to implement UPK. The mayor's proposal also includes the creation of afterschool programs for middle school students, an initiative we strongly support.

The idea that we create a new revenue stream for these programs is key. With so many districts around the state still reeling from layoffs and budget cutbacks, Albany's first priority should be to use existing state revenues to adequately fund K-12 in high-needs districts.

It's also worth mentioning that the lack of a new dedicated funding stream has proved to be a serious obstacle to pre-K expansion in the past. When Speaker Silver first proposed the "Ladder" program, an earlier attempt at achieving universal pre-K, the intent was for funding to expand each year, but it never reached "universal" funding amounts because of budget constraints. And many districts that had seen funding for previous projects dry up during lean years were hesitant to create UPK programs for fear that they would meet the same fate. There's a lesson to be learned there.

The case for UPK is undeniable. Providing families with access to universal, high quality, full-day pre-K is among the most important things we can do to help prepare young children for school and beyond, especially for those living in poor communities. These programs can play a pivotal role in laying the foundation for a child's social, emotional and intellectual development, including critical thinking, the ability to concentrate and transition from one activity to the next, and verbal and written communication.

With that foundation in place, research has proven that a child will grow up more ready to graduate high school, attend college and become a productive citizen in the workforce. What's more, studies have also shown that investment in early childhood education pays enormous dividends in years ahead through cost savings on everything from unemployment to incarceration.

Community Schools

Few strategies have had as positive an impact on our schools as the "community" school concept, and the UFT is pleased that Governor Cuomo and the Legislature support our efforts to continue this important work.

While the community school model is designed to be tailored to each school according to its own individual needs, the bedrock concept is rooted in strengthening a school and its surrounding neighborhood by bringing additional community resources, services and programs into the building. The school essentially becomes a community "hub" where students and their parents can take advantage of resources such as tutoring, mentoring, food and exercise programs, health, dental and vision clinics, social and mental health services, and much more.

The UFT's own Community Learning Schools Initiative, now in 16 schools, is designed not only to help schools develop and seamlessly integrate programs into their daily operations, but also put these schools on the road to financial self-sustainability. Our work is giving administrators and teachers a host of new options to better engage students and their parents and improve academic outcomes by addressing the school community's

needs in a holistic way. More funding would allow us to not only do more in our 16 current schools, but also expand the program to other schools that are eager to apply this approach.

School Technology

Most careers that our students ultimately pursue will require some sort of technological know-how. Despite that necessity, many of our schools aren't equipped with the 21st century technology that students should be learning, nor do they typically have the bandwidth to utilize the equipment in a meaningful way.

That's why the UFT supports the governor's proposal to borrow \$2 billion to help enhance technology in schools, including wiring and Wi-Fi upgrades as well as the purchase of tablets, computers and other hardware. Students need exposure to a variety of technology, and they also need opportunities to use that technology in a hands-on way to learn new skills. Their teachers need training, too, in the use of the more advanced applications. Without that professional development, new technology will not be used to its full potential.

What's more, as teachers adapt their classroom teaching to the new Common Core learning standards, they should have the opportunity to integrate more technology into their lessons. Used properly, technology can support and enhance student learning in ways far beyond just teaching basic computer skills. Just the simple act of going online can transport classrooms across the globe and expose children to text, photos and videos on practically any topic they're studying.

A Career Ladder For Teachers

The governor's plan to reward teaching "excellence" with \$20,000 "bonuses" could finally be the funding that we have long been seeking to create a true career ladder for teachers, so that we can help them develop their classroom skills, share their knowledge with colleagues and hopefully stem the tide of attrition.

As he has outlined in his proposals, the governor's program would require collective bargaining. We look forward to having those conversations. Our union has long supported initiatives that help move our profession forward. Teachers are always looking for ways to improve their skills and help others do the same. Likewise, teachers welcome opportunities to grow professionally and move into leadership roles that don't require them to leave the classroom.

Initiatives such as the Lead Teacher and Master Teacher programs are designed to allow teachers to split time between teaching students and mentoring colleagues, but these programs are limited in scope. A true career ladder would allow gifted teachers throughout the city to assist their colleagues by providing laboratory classes for colleagues, share lesson plans and materials, help fellow teachers improve their own lessons and classroom management skills, and help administrators with instructional and other decisions. It could be the beginning of a real transformation in school climate, while providing exciting career opportunities for teachers.

Support Expanding Access to Specialized High Schools

Competition is steep for a coveted seat in one of New York City's specialized high schools, and with good reason – gaining entry to one of these highly regarded institutions can open doors of opportunity usually reserved for students in private schools.

Admission to one of these prestigious schools is based on just one factor: scoring high enough on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT). But while approximately 45% of students who took that exam last year were black and Latino, only 12% of those accepted into one of the specialized high schools were black or Latino. The imbalance means our specialized high schools do not reflect the city's diversity and deprives the students who do gain admission from exposure to lives, cultures and backgrounds different from their own.

In a time when income inequality across the city has reached levels not seen since the Great Depression, these schools, in essence, have become the province of students whose families can afford to pay for intensive test-prep courses aimed at increasing their child's score on the specialized exam. Children who must overcome more barriers in their lives should not be put at a disadvantage. It's a substantial problem that needs to be fixed, and we are working closely with Assembly member Karim Camara to develop legislation to address this issue.

Halt Implementation of the inBloom Contract

The State Education Department is working with the company inBloom to store sensitive student information, including grades, test scores, disabilities and incarceration, suspension and attendance records, on a cloud database. Supporters of the initiative claim that centralizing student data will allow individual educators, districts and the state to better target the needs of individual students and schools.

The UFT is not opposed to gathering data on public school students, but we strongly oppose this plan. Major computer security breaches over the holiday season allowed hackers to steal millions of credit card numbers. Imagine if that same scenario played out with the personal information of our students?

What's more, parents are rightfully concerned that private companies would use their access to student data to develop their own products. Once a child's data is uploaded into the "cloud," a parent or school has no way of knowing with whom that information is being shared or what it's being used for.

Public schools have a responsibility to protect the privacy of students, including guarding personal information regarding students' disabilities, academic performance, discipline records, individual test scores, addresses and phone numbers. New York State should develop and maintain control of its own statewide student-data system, and that data should not be shared with or sold to private companies.

Closing Thoughts

Education is the greatest and most critical investment we make in our people, our economy and our future. Children deserve a well-funded, high-quality education from preschool through high school and beyond.

We as a state are just starting the recovery process after years of budget deficits and there are many competing priorities, but education is in many ways the one priority that underpins all the others. Committing ourselves to improving public schools will pay off for decades to come.

The challenges confronting our schools are among the greatest we have faced in our lifetime, but working together, I believe we can overcome those challenges and move our school system forward.

We look forward to working with you in the months ahead on these initiatives and on making New York the education state. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify before you today.