



NEWS RELEASE

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Superintendents Call for Next Generation of Education Reform: Education is a Civil Right

ALBANY, NY – February 27, 2007 – New York’s school superintendents today outlined their plan for the next generation of education reform in the state.

Les Loomis, President of the New York State Council of School Superintendents and Superintendent of Bethlehem Central School District in Albany County, explained, “We’re calling for recognition of education as a civil right for the twenty-first century.” He added, “The civil rights movement of the last century challenged Americans to live up to what is best in our heritage by assuring equal treatment before the law. Now it is time for a new campaign – to assure all children have access to the educational opportunities we all want for our own children.”

Loomis went on, “The education reforms of the last decade have produced real progress, but it has not been broad enough or fast enough. Too many children are still being left behind, and we fail our children and our communities if we do not prepare the next generation to succeed in the rapidly changing global economy. These challenges require more dramatic steps and an ambitious reform agenda for the next decade.”

Loomis stated, “Our plan is built around three straightforward promises that the state and schools must make to schoolchildren”:

- We will assure all students what they need to know and be able to do to succeed throughout life beyond school:
 - *by renewing and upgrading the state’s standards and assessments;*
 - *by focusing on depth and understanding, not breadth and coverage; and*
 - *by emphasizing and assessing for higher order thinking skills such as creativity, problem solving and innovation.*
- We will make sure that all students have the best teachers and school leaders possible:
 - *by strengthening the incentives for people to work in the schools, especially schools that struggle most to attract and retain highly skilled, qualified and certified staff;*
 - *by rewarding exceptional qualifications such as National Board Certification for teachers;*
 - *by ensuring targeted quality professional development and effectively using currently funded and mandated efforts;*
 - *by rigorously improving teacher preparation in our colleges and universities; and*
 - *by pursuing more innovation in how teachers are compensated.*

more...

- We will assure all students the programs and resources they need to succeed:
 - *by finally resolving the resource inequities highlighted by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit;*
 - *by providing more instructional time both during and after the regular school day;*
 - *by resolving inefficient duplications of service at the state and local levels and promoting interagency collaboration;*
 - *by establishing a strong, fair accountability system for student performance with consequences for adults as well as students, and*
 - *by leveraging the resources of schools and other agencies to overcome the effects of poverty.*

Loomis explained “First, the state’s standards and assessments define what we try to accomplish for the children we are trusted to educate.” He added, “Second, to succeed at that mission, we must draw and keep the best people we can get in teaching and school leadership.” He concluded, “Third, poverty among schoolchildren is the biggest obstacle in our path and inequities of fate are compounded by failures in public policy.”

Council President-Elect Henry Grishman, Superintendent of the Jericho School District in Nassau County, observed, “We have an historic opportunity to remove the archaic impediments that have kept our current standards-based reform effort from realizing its true potential: the next state budget will significantly increase investment in schools and remove inadequate resources as a reason for failure for many districts. Simultaneously,” Grishman noted, “the federal No Child Left Behind Act is up for reauthorization, creating an opportunity to reconsider the accountability system that defines some of the goals schools must pursue.”

Orleans-Niagara BOCES Superintendent Clark Godshall, the Council’s Vice President and Treasurer, noted “Superintendents have a particularly important perspective. We have a duty to balance what students need with what taxpayers can afford. That is exactly the same perspective that state policymakers should apply.”

Peekskill City Schools Superintendent Judith Johnson, a Council Executive Committee member and Co-Chair of its Curriculum and Instruction Committee, explained, “New York’s standards get high marks in comparisons with other states. But they are geared to the economy of the past, not the future. To prepare young people for work that can’t be done cheaper by someone abroad or faster by machines,” Johnson explained, “students need to develop the capacity for creativity, initiative, innovation and problem solving. That means making connections across subjects, working in teams, taking personal responsibility for work, as well as mastering content,” she said.

An outline of the Council’s recommendations follows. More detailed explanations will be released throughout the legislative session.



Education is a Civil Right

The Next Generation of Education Reform

Three promises to all schoolchildren

The civil rights movement of the last century challenged Americans to live up to what is best in our heritage – by finally assuring all people equal treatment under the law.

Now it is time for a new campaign – to guarantee all children the educational opportunities to develop their talents as far as they can, the same opportunities all parents want for their own children.

In the emerging global economy, our common good demands that we honor three promises to all school children:

- We will assure all students learn what they need to know and be able to do to succeed throughout life beyond school.
- We will assure all students have the best teachers and school leaders possible.
- We will assure all children have the resources and programs they need to succeed.

First: Assure students learn what they must know and be able to do

To sustain a competitive economy, Americans will need to work at jobs that cannot be done faster by machines or cheaper by anyone abroad. Americans will need to be continuously leading in conceiving and designing new products and processes. So our schools must help students develop their talent in such areas as creativity and innovation. That goal must be reflected in the standards our schools are expected to pursue and the assessments used to gauge their progress. Within classrooms, we must use strategies that allow students to place learning into “real world” contexts. Our goal should be to prepare all students to complete at least two years of post-high school education.

1. **Review and revise standards and assessments for all subjects.** Except for mathematics, the current standards have been in place for a decade. The current standards and assessments tend to drive schools toward an emphasis on shallowly covering wide content rather than developing deep understanding of key ideas – the approach of most of our prime economic competitors. National experts should be convened to identify the skills and understandings needed to succeed economically, socially, culturally and politically in the 21st century. We must develop new standards and assessments that reflect those new skills and understandings. If we are to know whether we are meeting these goals, the next generation of assessments must measure what matters, rather than just what is easy to measure.



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2. **Target literacy skills by revamping and revising the English Language Arts as the first standard area to be reviewed.** Students must achieve literacy to succeed in any other subject. Weak literacy skills undermine too many students' chances for success in all subjects. Literacy instruction must improve at all grade levels and *all* teachers must be trained and committed to teaching reading and writing across the curriculum, not just in English classes. Students must read better, write more, and think and speak with clarity. Science and global studies should be among the priorities for early review as well – to assure that the science curriculum draws more students into science careers, and to teach young people about the challenges and opportunities they will encounter from abroad. Further, all students should learn to fluently speak a second language.
3. **Expand instructional time and use existing time more effectively.** Over the past decade, we have raised standards, adding breadth at the expense of depth, and we have more than tripled the volume of standardized testing, yet the school calendar has changed little, if at all, in most districts. Studies have shown that poor children learn at the same rate throughout the school year but lose more ground during summer months away from school.
 - Seat time requirements in middle school and high school make no sense once students have learned what state standards expect. They should be replaced by content exams.
 - High poverty schools should receive funding to extend the school year into the summer to prevent losses in learning.
 - Alternative programs should be an option for students who are over-age and under-credit.
 - Time not spent teaching should be devoted to common planning and professional development. Most teacher contracts require between 3.5 to 4.5 hours a day of classroom teaching.
4. **Develop a value-added accountability system.** Ultimately schools and students must be judged against absolute standards, but value-added performance measures provide important insights into the effectiveness of schools, gauging how much impact a year's instruction has on each student's learning. The current practice of "post-mortem" assessment does not advance accountability of teachers and leaders for raising student achievement or provide information to guide help to particular students.
5. **Move toward on-demand administration of the high school Regents Exams with immediately available results.** Students should be allowed to take sections of tests as they and their teachers deem them ready, and not at an arbitrarily established date in January or June. Learning goals must be constant but the time students take to attain them should be determined by their pace of learning and effort. Current comprehensive, single-event tests are obsolete and disconnected, and are often out of sync with how material is taught and learned.

Second: Make sure all students have the best teachers and school leaders possible

To improve results, we need to improve instruction. That starts with getting the best teachers and school leaders we can. New York is producing an adequate supply of new teachers in total, but not in all subjects and not for all schools, and certainly not a racially diverse pool of candidates. Also, schools have a hard time retaining all the good teachers – about one-half quit after five years. Teaching must become a more attractive option for our ablest young people.

6. **Require innovation in teacher compensation as a condition of new state aid.** Teacher salaries and benefits comprise by far the largest share of school spending, but are disconnected from student needs or achievement. Traditional salary schedules typically reward teachers for earning more college credits and serving more years. Yet after the first few years, the connection between longevity and effectiveness is tenuous; and few contracts require courses to align with district goals, student needs or teacher weaknesses.
 - **Require districts to establish career ladders for teachers.** Studies show that one turn-off from teaching for young adults is that there are limited opportunities for advancement and leadership.
 - **Require districts to offer incentives for hard to staff schools or subject areas.** Schools shouldn't have to raise everyone's salary in order to attract a handful of teachers in shortage areas.
7. **Provide incentives for teachers who complete formal programs to improve their skills and knowledge, for example, by earning National Board Certification.** The state should use settlement funds from the CFE lawsuit to provide additional salary stipends for Nationally Board Certified teachers, with greater rewards for service in high poverty schools. North Carolina provides a 12 percent salary bonus to teachers who have earned certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.
8. **Improve the strength and diversity of the teaching workforce by creating scholarship and loan forgiveness programs for promising students, especially from high poverty backgrounds.** More should be done to attract the very best students into teaching, by offering scholarships and loan forgiveness to high performing college students. To promote a more diverse teaching force, the state should remove the financial barriers to teaching that disproportionately affect students in poverty.
9. **Create accelerated alternative certification procedures for people willing to change careers into teaching in shortage areas.** Schools struggle to fill teaching jobs in math and science. The pool of candidates in those subjects should be expanded by encouraging professionals in other fields to bring their practical experiences into the classroom.
10. **Require all state and local funds invested in teacher training to be directed by a district strategy to raise student achievement.** Through targeted grants, BOCES aid, and salary credit for additional education, taxpayers invest huge sums in developing teacher skills. That investment should be directed by a district plan aimed at improving outcomes for students. The emphasis should be on school-based coaching for principals in improving leadership skills and classroom-based strategies for teachers to raise student achievement. Mentoring and other support for new teachers should be prioritized.
11. **School leader and teacher preparation programs must establish advisory committees comprised of practicing educators from the field.** Especially as state standards are revised and updated, teacher and leader preparation programs must be engaged thoroughly engaged with the field to ensure the currency and effectiveness of their offerings.

Third: Assure all children the programs and resources they need to succeed

On every measure children from poor families have less success in school than their better-off peers. Why? They are more likely to suffer disruptions to learning that come with having uncorrected health problems, changing homes or schools, or living in unsafe neighborhoods. Also, they are more likely to attend school in over-crowded classes, in worn-out buildings, with inexperienced teachers, and limited or out-dated textbooks, libraries or computers. Inequities of fate are compounded by failures of policy.

12. **Enact a comprehensive, statewide resolution of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity dispute this year.** The state's current school finance system does not deliver enough help to the communities whose children need the most help. Also, the system is preposterously complex, making it impossible for more than a handful of people to grasp, for school leaders to plan, and for voters to hold either state officials or local school leaders accountable for spending decisions.
13. **Implement evidence-based strategies for school and district improvement.** Schools may fail because of a lack of resources or expertise or both. Yet there is an abundance of proven programs and practices that have been used to turn around low-performing schools; others are a waste of time and resources. The State Education Department and educators across the state must identify, disseminate and implement proven practices for school improvement.
14. **Authorize interventions in persistently failing schools to spur all local leaders to work together to improve outcomes for children.** With adequate resources, real-world standards, and value-added performance measures, applying tougher accountability becomes a logical and fair next step. When students fail, they are denied a diploma. There should be more consequences for grown-ups when schools fail. State and federal policymakers need to be accountable as well – for assuring the resources that schools need to achieve success. State takeovers have proved ineffective. In chronically unsuccessful schools or districts, the Commissioner should be authorized to approve leadership appointments, require boards to face special elections, and waive tenure protections to facilitate replacement of school staff, as warranted.
15. **Expand prekindergarten opportunities, targeted first at economically disadvantaged children.** Researchers have found that children from very poor families start school far behind in language development: children in professional families accumulate experience with 45 million words by age 4, while children in families on public assistance experience only 13 million words on average. Prekindergarten gives them a chance to catch up. Governor Spitzer has called for expanding the current half-day program to serve all four year-olds within four years. Districts should have the option to use state aid to target full-day programs at the neediest children.
16. **Leverage all state and local resources to improve the chances for children.** Schools can't succeed alone, they need help from families and some families need help that schools cannot provide. State government should do more to spark cooperation between schools and community agencies – by offering funding to put child care centers and health and mental health clinics in school buildings, by clearing away obstacles that impede collaboration, and by turning to BOCES to help broker new partnerships.

School superintendents across the state are committed to honoring these promises. As we move forward with our commitment, we urge the Governor, the Legislature, the Commissioner and the Board of Regents to join in guaranteeing the essential civil right of a quality education to every child in every school in our state.

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