



Thomas L. Rogers
Executive Director
tom@nyscoss.org

Robert B. McClure
Superintendent-in-Residence
mcclure@nyscoss.org

Barbara Nagler
Superintendent-in-Residence
barbara@nyscoss.org

Robert N. Lowry, Jr.
Deputy Director for
Advocacy, Research and
Communications
boblowny@nyscoss.org

Kelly O. Masline
Senior Associate Director
kelly@nyscoss.org

Michele V. Handzel
General Counsel
michele@nyscoss.org

Theresa A. Wutzer
Associate Director
theresa@nyscoss.org

2008-09 OFFICERS
Clark J. Godshall
President
Orleans-Niagara BOCES
4232 Shelby Basin Road
Medina, NY 14103
800.836.7510

L. Oliver Robinson
President-Elect
Shenendehowa

Robert W. Christmann
VP/Treasurer
Grand Island

Henry L. Grishman
Past President
Jericho

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Constance R. Clark-Snead
Westbury (2009)

Barbara A. Deane-Williams
Lyndonville (2010)

Mary Beth R. Fiore
Elmira Heights (2010)

James T. Langlois
Putnam/Northern
Westchester BOCES
(2009)

Neil F. O'Brien
Port Byron (2010)

Mary Alice Price
Pittsford (2009)

Maria C. Rice
New Paltz (2010)

Marilyn C. Terranova
Eastchester (2009)

August 31, 2009

Dean David M. Steiner, Commissioner-Elect
School of Education
Hunter College
695 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10065

Dear Commissioner-Elect Steiner:

Once again, congratulations on your selection by the Board of Regents to lead the State Education Department and the University of the State of New York.

Today I am writing on behalf of the over 700 superintendents and other school leaders who comprise the membership of the New York State Council of School Superintendents. I want to share some of the hopes they hold for your leadership of education in our state.

I will begin by offering some more general observations, however.

First, superintendents endorse many of the policy goals sought by the Regents and are encouraged by your early comments. For example, even while we challenged the details of some past policies, superintendents broadly embraced the goal of standards-based reform – ensuring that all students receive a meaningful education. In fact, roughly 100 districts had implemented an all Regents-curriculum before it was mandated by the state.

Now superintendents are committed to the Regents' goals of closing achievement gaps and updating state learning standards, and commend their efforts to build growth model accountability systems and to move the Department toward becoming a high-performing service organization.

Superintendents also share the priority you put on ensuring all children highly effective teachers. Further, they have been encouraged by your remarks pointing toward an expansive vision of what becoming educated ought to encompass.

Put simply, superintendents want the priorities expressed by you and the Regents to be implemented and to succeed.

Second, superintendents and policymakers are uniquely connected – or should be.

Superintendents must do what policymakers should do – balance what schoolchildren need with what taxpayers can afford. Also, superintendents play the pivotal role in translating statewide policies into practices that can work in the

NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Seven Elk Street, Third Floor • Albany, New York 12207-1002 • 518.449.1063 FAX 518.426.2229 • www.nyscoss.org

diverse communities they serve all across the state. Teachers and other frontline professionals may provide whatever services become mandated, but superintendents are at the front of the line in being held accountable for assuring those mandates are faithfully executed.

Accordingly, obtaining the practical perspective supplied by superintendents should be a step in all policy development exercises.

Third, “one size fits all” policies clearly do not fit all. New York is an uncommonly diverse state, and becoming more so. We have the largest school system in the nation and some of the smallest. We have public school districts which offer learning opportunities probably unmatched in any other state, yet our poorest district (Salmon River, on the northern border with Canada) can raise only \$18,000 with each 1 percent increase in local taxes. Beyond physical distinctions, school districts also vary sharply in their impetus and capacity for innovation, held back sometimes by the aspirations of the communities they serve.

Of course, variations across districts are dwarfed by those among schoolchildren, who are themselves becoming more diverse. The population of English Language Learners is dispersing ever more widely beyond the boundaries of our largest cities, for example.

State policies must ensure all students the opportunity for a meaningful education. But they should also permit schools more flexibility in how to satisfy that imperative, now especially at the middle and high school levels. Too often in the past, all districts have been required to operate under policies prescribed to accommodate circumstances which arise only in New York City.

Fourth, it is impossible to overstate the preoccupation of financial concerns for school district superintendents. You will take office with the state facing its gloomiest fiscal outlook in decades. Yet we foresee a confluence of even more alarming forces within a year or two: a loss of federal stimulus aid, a weak recovery in the state’s capacity to offer its own assistance to schools, a surge in employer pension costs, a continuing pile-up of obligations for retiree health insurance, and the loss of off-setting “turn-over savings” due to a slowing of teacher retirements.

School districts are uniquely democratic institutions in New York State. Outside the Big 5 cities, schools must seek voter approval for their operating budgets every year. Counties, cities, towns and villages are not required to do this, nor are school districts in all but a handful of the other states. Responding to voters’ worries about property taxes and their families’ economic prospects, school district leaders worked very hard this year to hold down spending and taxes. The budgets they presented to voters this year proposed the lowest average tax increase in seven years, despite the weakest state aid increase in six years. But already clear trends threaten to confront both school leaders and voters with much more dire budgeting choices in the years ahead.

Now for our hopes.

New Standards

We called for updating state learning standards before it was mandated by law in 2007. To our members, that effort should encompass exchanging some breadth of subject matter coverage in favor of greater depth in key concepts, shifting some emphasis from content to skills, and promoting the development of skills which cut across disciplines – the agenda commonly cited as “21st century skills.” Our members do not yet sense that the Department’s current effort at updating state standards will lead in those directions.

Superintendents also hope that, in addition to defining minimum expectations, new standards will put forward aspirational goals. We cannot advance support for education in New York solely on the basis of minimum standards, no matter how high they are set. The rest of the world is trying hard to make their students as well-educated as possible, and so are many districts across the state and the nation. But none of that is now reflected in our state goals or assessments. It should be.

New York should be a leader in the ongoing debate over common national standards. But we agree with Chancellor Tisch: if the standards which emerge are too low, we should set our own. In the same spirit, school districts within New York which opt to pursue goals above those set by the state should have the flexibility necessary to do so.

Better Assessments

Standards are a starting point but state tests are what truly signal priorities to schools and teachers. The state must develop new assessments which reinforce the priority that all students need to develop “21st Century” higher order thinking skills and that all teachers and school leaders must bear responsibility for helping them reach that goal. Teaching to the test is inevitable, so we need tests worth teaching to. Assessments should be more skill-based; mastering subject matter knowledge alone should not be enough to earn a passing grade.

Tests also need to generate data that is more instructionally useful. We are looking for a broader, deeper assessment process that actually produces the information that schools need and policymakers want. The technology of testing must change as well – like other states, we should move toward more online, on-demand assessment.

Equity in Opportunity and Outcomes

We share the Regents’ sense of urgency over closing achievement gaps and raising graduation rates. The Regents have been aggressive champions of school finance equity and we hope you and they will continue on that course. Too often children who begin life with the fewest advantages are sent to learn in schools with the fewest resources. The challenges of fiscal equity do not solely afflict urban districts. Poor rural and suburban communities strain to offer their children the same opportunities as their better-off neighbors, and to maintain services matched to their needs.

We concur with your statement that, “Nothing is more important ... in finally closing the achievement gap than putting highly effective teachers in every one of our classrooms.” We agree that teacher preparation needs to take on more practical dimensions. Professional development must be more systematically aligned with the goals set for schools. Performance standards and better mechanisms are needed to remove teachers who cannot or will not perform. But we also have a duty to ensure that all teachers and their students have a fair chance to succeed. Teachers – and administrators – working in a supportive environment should be prepared to be held accountable.

Last, it needs to be acknowledged that dysfunctional schools nearly always exist within dysfunctional districts. So we applaud the direction set by the Regents project management group to make school districts the focus of the Department’s school improvement efforts.

“Re-imagining Education”

In your first news conference as Commissioner-Elect, you spoke eloquently of the need to do “some re-imagining about learning for the 21st century,” to make better use of technology, to better engage children, and to excite their energies in learning.

We are excited by this thrust. As you embark on your new service, we recommend you confer widely with New Yorkers within education and without, toward the aim of putting before us all a vision and concrete plans to answer the question, “What would education across New York look like if our schools were the absolute worldwide leader in advancing all children toward educational success preparing them to thrive in the world they will inherit?”

Just as we must re-think how instruction is delivered and assessed, the financial pressures described above compel us toward the same exercise in how school systems are operated and funded. In both venues, your voice will be crucial in leading both education professionals and community members to understand that there are some practices we just can no longer afford – they cost too much, or they impede essential instructional change, or both.

On the instructional side, we should diminish reliance on seat time mandates to define whether learning has occurred and provide more flexibility in how school calendars are constructed.

Part of what must be done is to move beyond the localism which has always been such a prominent feature of New York’s education structure. Whatever extent actual consolidation of districts takes in that process, much can be accomplished through regional cooperation which would allow communities to maintain their distinct identities. Regionalism can save costs for taxpayers, as when districts share administrative functions, and preserve or improve educational opportunities, as when regional high schools and distance learning programs are launched.

Expanding regional strategies can begin by “unleashing BOCES” – Boards of Cooperative Educational Services. The BOCES superintendents have already put forward recommendations to enable schools and others to make wider use of the capacity their institutions offer. Here, the Education Department itself has sometimes been an obstacle, being slow or resistant in approving innovations.

Special education warrants specific attention. It has emerged as a cost area of high concern among superintendents. Also, there is clear information indicating that our practices put our costs far out of line with those of other states. For example, we rank second among the states in the share of instructional salaries devoted to special education; if we were at the national average we could free \$1.3 billion per year for other uses. We also rank third in special education staff-to-student ratio, fourth in the percentage of special education students spending less than 40 percent of their time in general education classrooms, and fourth in the percentage of those students served in separate schools. It cannot be said that our exceptional practices are resulting in exceptional outcomes – we rank near the middle of states in high school graduation rates for students with disabilities.

Based on past experience, our members are skeptical of the Department’s and the Regents’ willingness to seriously consider reforms in special education. But tough choices cannot be evaded; given the democratic nature of school governance, *school costs will be contained*. State policies can either restrict the choices available to school leaders, or enable them to make better choices. For example, between 1989 and 1992 – another desperate fiscal era – special education absorbed 84 percent of the overall increase in school spending outside New York City. With special education more protected by mandates in a period of austerity, support for general education lagged.

Concluding, it would set an encouraging tone, if the Department could take some prompt, visible actions to help schools save money.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are now receiving considerable attention in national education policy debates. The Council was alone among statewide education groups in not opposing New York's 1998 charter school law. We did raise concerns about the potential fiscal impact of charter schools upon school districts and experience has justified those reservations. Experience has also pointed to a need to grasp how differently charter schools affect New York City compared to other districts.

The current charter school financing mechanism virtually assures an adversarial relationship with school districts: every dollar of regular operating support going into charter schools comes out of district schools. In addition to the immediate financial impact charter schools impose on school districts, the charter law also places a constant financial threat over their heads. Districts are effectively expected to continuously maintain some excess capacity to take in students who abandon charter schools, or when charter schools close or deliberately contract in size.

Absorbing the immediate fiscal impact of charter schools is much easier for New York City than for most school districts, and so is maintaining the space to accommodate students moving from charter schools back into district schools.

We will be making a more formal review of our positions on charter schools. But traditionally we have supported a cap limiting the number of charter schools which may be approved. A cap promotes quality and viability by forcing charter authorizers to be more focused on approving the most promising proposals and ensuring that the schools they do approve do succeed. We have supported exempting charter schools endorsed by New York City or any other district from the cap, however. Such an endorsement would presumably signal that a district is prepared to manage both the immediate and potential financial impact. We have also supported incentives to encourage the development of charter high schools. Currently most charter schools are elementary schools, but the need for alternative school models is more compelling at the secondary level.

SED of the future

Another direction of the Regents project management group which we support is the effort to make the Education Department a "high-performing service organization."

We respect that SED has essential regulatory and monitoring functions to exercise. Yet we harbor the hope that it might move toward more performance-based regulation and oversight and apply a customer-service outlook as much as those responsibilities can allow.

When presented with a new approach by a school district, the Department's first responses should not be, "Does this conform with past practice?" or "Would this undermine our control?" Instead, the questions should be, "Is this a good idea; will it help schoolchildren and taxpayers?" and, "How can we make this happen?" This approach is already applied in some SED offices; we hope it will become standard throughout the Department.

Over the years, we and other statewide groups have advocated for additional resources for the Department itself. We expect to continue to do so. Yet we all know that, for the foreseeable future, state resources will be hard to obtain. Further, it is not assured even if the Department had the money, it could hire the expertise it needs. Fortunately, there are many talented educators – including superintendents we serve – who would willingly volunteer time to help the Department develop and evaluate plans and provide some assistance to colleagues. Also,

collaboration with professional organizations, like the Council, can help extend the impact of both partners' resources.

Here too, some quick, visible steps in these directions would be encouraging.

Conclusion

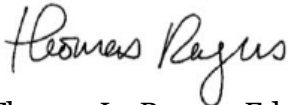
The ascension of a new leader is nearly always a time for renewed hopes. Yet you will assume office in time of deep worry over financial matters. We will all need more reasons for hope.

One of our hopes is that you will be a “compass,” pointing educators and all New Yorkers through the financial storms toward a vision of what our schools must become, if we are to ensure all young people opportunities for meaningful and productive lives in a turbulent world. Another is that you will celebrate the diversity of our state’s regions and its people.

In assembling and refining your vision, conferring widely with educators and others would help build confidence and commitment in the field. Superintendents have regularly stepped forward to assist the Department in meeting past challenges. They will do so again. Teaching and school leadership in New York should be recognized as exciting, challenging, and rewarding work. The directions you pursue can make them more so.

Finally, we hope that you will help convey to the public that countless superintendents, principals, teachers, and others work hard every day to ensure every child receives a meaningful education. Your efforts can help reassure families that, even with all the financial worries, our schools remain places where children will continue learning and receiving opportunities that will move our society forward.

Sincerely,



Thomas L. Rogers, Ed. D.
Executive Director