

Chairman Marcellino and members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am Robert Lowry, Deputy Director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents. Our membership includes Community Superintendents and other superintendent-level officials within the New York City Department of Education. We also offer professional development opportunities for leaders within the New York City Department of Education.

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony on the subject of mayoral control for the New York City public schools. Thank you also for all your support in the new state budget.

No one should desire a return to the school governance structure which preceded mayoral control in New York City. We say that despite the fact that our organization lost all its New York City members for a time when the 2002 mayoral control law was first implemented.

Under the prior law, the City schools were overseen by the central Board of Education comprised of seven members, with two members appointed by the Mayor and one each by the five Borough Presidents. That structure was inherently unstable and unaccountable. In addition, each Community School District within the City had its own elected board, providing inconsistent guidance to its schools and contributing to inequitable outcomes for children across the City.

In the 20 years preceding mayoral control, 10 different men served as Chancellor, an average of one every other year. The system was denied stability in top leadership essential for sustained, effective implementation of school improvement strategies.

At the same time, the central board, with seven members appointed by six different authorities, was accountable to no one, not to the Mayor nor to the voters.

Under the prior system the central board members received compensation, employed staff, and sought to indulge in day-to-day supervision of school operations. This also impeded effective administrative leadership. The system needs continuity and consistency in support for schools, as well as equity across the system of over 1.1 million students.

The 2002 mayoral control act created a 13 member board, now referred to as the Panel for Educational Policy. The new law expressly stated that the panel members should receive neither compensation nor staff, and expressly excluded them from day-to-day school supervision. The Mayor now appoints a majority – eight members – with the Chancellor as a non-voting member. The Chancellor exercises sole final authority to appoint Community Superintendents, establishing clear accountability.

Under the old structure there was also diffusion of accountability and authority below the central board level. The Community Superintendents answered to locally elected boards. Reports of

corruption and mismanagement due to community board influence were common. Less dramatically, but also very harmful, was the sense that the dispersion of authority made it impossible to establish or advance citywide priorities. Nor was the system able to address concerns about equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within the districts.

In the years since mayoral control was first enacted, there have been ongoing adjustments in the role and responsibility given to intermediate levels of district administration. Initially, the Community Superintendents were replaced with 10 Regional Superintendents and 110 Local Instructional Superintendents. These officials were focused on instructional matters and lacked broad authority over schools. Later, these offices were abolished and principals were required to select a "school support organization" from among a dozen or so options. This structure also omitted a strong intermediate level of administration.

The latest iteration restored the position of Community Superintendent, with clear responsibilities over selection of principals and all school operations, including accountability for student achievement and parent and community engagement, while retaining the capacity for appropriate central direction. This model strikes a sound balance that places focus on what matters most – students.

Since the enactment of mayoral control there have been various systemic improvements, with funding changes to direct more resources to schools enrolling high concentrations of disadvantaged students, as well as improvements in human resource practices covering how teachers and principals are recruited, hired and managed.

The new universal prekindergarten initiative has increased the number of full-day pre-k seats from 19,000 to 69,000. Now there is an effort to convert chronically struggling schools into community schools, offering families services to help their children with out-of-school issues that impede in-school success. These kinds of large scale initiatives would be hard to effectively implement without the central authority provided by mayoral control.

Most importantly, there have been unprecedented gains in student achievement in the time since mayoral control was first enacted.

Sixty-seven percent of students in the most recent high school cohort earned diplomas within four years, up from 46.5 percent for the cohort that entered school in the last year before mayoral control (these figures represent the graduation rate through June; including August summer school graduates, over 70 percent earned diplomas within four years). Notably, this includes gains across all ethnic groups, with those for black and Hispanic students more than twice as great as those for white students. Also, under mayoral control, the performance of New York City students on state assessments is now essentially the same as that for students in the remainder of the state as a whole.

Of course, many factors contributed to this progress, including specific policy initiatives. But here again, strong central authority is essential to achieve effective implementation and satisfactory outcomes.

Adequate and equitable funding also matters, and having the Mayor accountable for school results has led to greater and more equitable distribution of funds across the schools. Since the enactment of mayoral control, New York City has increased local support for its public schools at more than double

the rate for the remainder of the state. In the years prior to mayoral control, growth in City funding often lagged behind what other districts were realizing.

Citing the virtues of mayoral control for one city might be seized on as indicating support for that proposition for all cities. But New York City is utterly unique. It is nearly twice the size of Chicago and enrolls more than 20 times as many students as Buffalo, the next largest district in our state. The smallest of the five boroughs, Staten Island, alone enrolls nearly 50 percent more students than Buffalo.

Yonkers has had a form of mayoral control even longer than New York City. Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse have school boards directly elected by the voters. Albany is led by an elected board and must annually submit its budget for voter approval. Also important to note is that the state's other large urban school systems have not been divided into sub-districts governed by separately elected boards, as New York City was.

Our members are employees of the communities they serve. Accordingly, our basic position is that any changes in the design of school governance for our large urban districts, including mayoral control, should reflect the consensus sentiments of the communities they serve. Changes should not be imposed by the state that are contrary to those prevailing sentiments.

When the New York City mayoral control law was enacted, there was a strong and widespread sense that the governance model in place at that time was not working. Today, in contrast, public sentiment toward the state of New York City's schools is impressively strong. Results from the City's most recent annual school survey show very high levels of parent satisfaction with the education received by their children and with responsiveness when they contact their schools with questions or concerns.

For all the foregoing reasons, we strongly urge extension of mayoral control of the New York City schools.