



TESTIMONY

Partnerships between school districts and colleges and universities

Assembly Committees on Education
and Higher Education

October 11, 2023

Chair Benedetto, Chair Fahy, other members of the Assembly:

I am Robert Lowry, Deputy Director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

Thank you for inviting our testimony today. I also want to thank both Chairs for your participation in our statewide fall conference last week.

The need for constructive partnerships between schools and institutions of higher learning should be obvious—we, schools, send colleges and universities their students and they send us the teachers, principals, and other professionals who serve our students. We see at least three areas where effective partnerships are especially necessary now: improving transitions for students from high school to whatever they pursue next; ameliorating school hiring shortages; and diversifying the school workforce.

Transitioning from High School to What Comes Next

In November 1991, I became an education policy aide to Governor Mario Cuomo. I said then that one issue I hoped to work on was the transition for students from high school to whatever comes next, pursuing further education or beginning a career. Thirty-two years and three children of my own later, I feel at least strongly that this must be a priority.

Next month we will all see the recommendations of the Board of Regents' Blue Ribbon Commission on High School Graduation Measures. Media attention to-date has commonly focused on whether passage of Regents examinations will remain a requirement. But whatever the merits of those exams, a more essential question ought to be, how do we ensure all students have meaningful experiences that will prepare them for success on a chosen pathway beyond high school, whether that is college, or a career, or a combination of the two.

For most recent New York State high school graduates, pursuing postsecondary education has been the path they attempt first. While polls show declining public confidence in higher education and enrollments have dropped, it remains true that most young people will be better-off financially if they earn a four-year degree. This is partly because, fair or not, wages and salaries have tended to grow faster for jobs requiring a college education than for those in personal service and blue-collar occupations.

Schools can play a role in reversing now depressed higher education enrollments. This can start with giving young people—especially first-generation college students—a clearer picture of what to expect from higher education, how it differs from what they have known in their P-12 school careers, and how financial aid is available to help pay costs of attendance. Our organization annually collaborates in efforts to widen completion of the FAFSA student aid form, and we have supported State University efforts to connect with prospective high school graduates.

We support continued expansion and refinement of programs like P-TECH, Early College High Schools, and the Science and Technology Entry Program which give high school students structured early experiences with college academic work, environments, and expectations.

AP and International Baccalaureate courses do not put students into college settings but do provide them with exposure to the academic expectations of higher education, making them better prepared for the work if they do continue with formal learning. We recognize the value of the legislation sponsored by Majority Leader Peoples-Stokes and enacted this year to ensure families and students are informed of these opportunities and the advantages they bestow.

Dual enrollment courses, most often delivered through collaboration with community colleges, are the path by which many high school students gain their first chance to earn college credit. Research by Columbia University’s Community College Research Center found that high school students nationwide who took a community college course were more likely than their peers to finish high school, to enroll in college, and to earn a college credential within five years.

Unfortunately, we find wide frustration among school leaders with what feel like random, arbitrary variances in how colleges administer these opportunities.

There are disparities in tuition requirements and some counties will not allow their resident high school students to enroll in a course offered by another county’s community college, even if not offered by the college they sponsor. Districts also report inconsistencies within a college over which teachers may teach classes carrying college credit—that they must often negotiate separately with multiple academic departments within a college, each applying different standards to determine whether a high school teacher can teach a dual enrollment class.

Recounting a recent exchange with two college presidents, one of our members said to them, “You need students, and you need students. And I have students. This shouldn’t be so difficult.”

We have discussed these obstacles to mutually beneficial collaboration with officials at the State Education Department and will be contacting leaders at the State University to seek sensible solutions.

Hiring Shortages and Diversifying the Public School Workforce

Our school districts are struggling with teacher hiring shortages. Once these were concentrated by region or by subject area, now they are nearly universal. At the same time, as public school enrollments become more diverse, the priority we attach to diversifying our workforce must rise. These are different issues, but some potential solutions overlap.

It is common to turn to scholarships and loan forgiveness as partial responses. These help offset postsecondary costs with the hope that scholarships will expand the pool of people entering a field and that loan forgiveness programs might better allocate the pool among the subjects, schools, and regions that are hard to staff. Now we need to do both—expand the pool and ensure that the most understaffed schools are helped. But scholarship programs inevitably reward some people who would have entered a field without the incentive. Loan forgiveness after completion of a degree might be a weak incentive to drawing more candidates into a field. We need other strategies.

New York’s new Teacher Residency Program and the Labor Department’s Registered Apprenticeship Program for teacher candidates both link school districts, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, and institutions of higher education in models that can make teacher preparation more effective and

more practical for candidates to complete. They also provide early support which makes it more likely that new teachers will succeed and therefore persist in their profession.

“Grow your own” programs are a promising strategy to address both goals of reducing hiring shortages and diversifying school workforces. In these programs, schools identify paraprofessional employees, community residents, or district students who demonstrate attributes which might enable them to become effective teachers. Programs include collaboration between schools and institutions of higher education, providing access to coursework, practice teaching, mentoring, financial aid, and other supports.

Legislation was enacted this year to require the State Education Department to develop guidance for districts on designing and implementing “grow your own” teacher programs. We supported that bill. But we recommend state funding as well.

It is true that many districts have benefited from recent large increases in Foundation Aid. But over a third of districts received only a 3% minimum increase this year. Also, absent further formula changes, future increases will moderate—if current trends hold, next year’s statewide average Foundation Aid increase could be close to 4%. Federal aid which districts relied on to improve student services will expire in the next school year.

Most importantly, districts are not assured a return on their investment from grow your own programs, as successful candidates may choose to teach elsewhere. Financial aid to students could include a service requirement, with grants converting to loans to be repaid, if the service requirement is not met.

We also support expansion of the Teacher Opportunity Corps, a collaboration between schools and teacher preparation programs aimed at increasing representation of people from unrepresented and economically disadvantaged backgrounds in teaching. It should be expanded to promote diversity in school leadership positions as well.

Conclusion

The Council’s conference at which both the chairs spoke last week highlighted another area where school and college collaboration is imperative. Our conference included two sessions on the implications of the United States Supreme Court decision barring the use of race as an explicit factor in college admissions. Schools, institutions of higher education, and our state government must work together to ensure that student opportunities are not diminished as a result of that decision and that students understand the opportunities before them.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to your questions.