



Partnership for New York City

From: **Partnership for New York City**

Rubenstein Communications, Inc.
Contact: Bud Perrone (212) 843-8068

TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY **COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**

RENEWAL OF MAYORAL CONTROL OF NEW YORK CITY'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

KATHRYN WYLDE
PRESIDENT & CEO

PARTNERSHIP FOR NEW YORK CITY

NEW YORK, March 20, 2009 – Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the renewal of mayoral control of the New York City public school system.

The Partnership for New York City represents the city's business leadership and its largest private sector employers. The Partnership works together with government, labor and the non-profit sector to promote economic growth and job creation in New York. An outstanding public education system that prepares young New Yorkers for jobs in the global economy is a top priority of our members. We have been a long-term partner in development and implementation of school governance reform and have actively supported corporate investment in the schools, improved school leadership, enhanced compensation for teachers and principals, and industry collaboration in career and technical education.

Since mayoral control was enacted in 2002, a renewed focus on public education has brought significant new resources into the system and restored the confidence of the business community in how these resources are being invested. Prior to mayoral control, the quality of public education in the city had deteriorated to the point where high school graduates often lacked the skills for employment in even entry-level jobs. Education debates focused on politics

and ways to get children out of the system – such as vouchers and aid to private schools. There was little attention to student performance, which slipped miserably over the previous forty years. The widely known, distressed conditions of the education system made it difficult for business to recruit or retain employees with children. Any family that could afford it, headed to private schools or the suburbs. The schools were identified as the primary reason for middle class flight from the city.

Today, conditions are very much better. The business community is actually excited about the progress and has shown it by contributing more than ever through philanthropy, school partnerships and support for innovative initiatives in support of the schools.

I served on the task force that helped the Legislature develop the mayoral control statute and on the commission that worked on the statute to reverse school decentralization. For the most part, I believe that Mayoral Control has achieved the goals that we set out in those panels: the Mayor is held accountable, the focus is on the children and the schools, and student performance is improving.

I agree, however, with former Education Committee Chairman Steve Sanders who testified before you last month, that some of the expectations of those involved in framing the current governance system have not been realized. The Panel for Education Policy has not been as effective a forum as we had hoped for open public discussion of major policy changes. Community School Districts and their superintendents have not filled their expected role as liaison with parents and the community and in oversight and support of principals and other school professionals. The Community Education Councils are not uniformly engaging parents and the community in support of the mission of their schools.

Unlike Steve Sanders, however, I do not believe that these shortcomings require legislative intervention. I think that most are management issues that can be corrected administratively, and that the Chancellor and Department of Education have gone a long way in the past year to begin addressing them. And I think they are prepared to do more. The past seven years have required revolutionary transformation of a school culture that was failing students. It has meant shaking up a system in which many educators and school leaders were demoralized and performing at a very low level for many years.

The Chancellor is the first to admit that figuring out how to turn around the schools and introduce new and more effective ways of leading, teaching and learning has involved many trials and some errors – all of which have been particularly difficult on teachers and parents. But the transformation is now well along and we are seeing results. We see a greater degree of enthusiasm, excitement and unity of purpose emanating from schools across the city every day.

I am a founding member of a new Research Alliance for the New York City Schools – an independent institute of the New York University Steinhardt School of Education – which has

been established to evaluate, analyze and inform the public. This institute has hired a highly respected director, Dr. James Kemple, and will shortly have complete access to original data from the Department of Education. The Alliance will then begin conducting applied research that will inform future policies and programs. Through the Research Alliance, scholars will be able to provide the public with independent validation and verification of what is happening in the schools. I believe that this new source of solid information and feedback will make for a much more rigorous public debate of education issues and will help transform the Panel for Education Policy into a far better forum for community and parent input into school programs, policies and resource allocation.

Like everyone else who is interested in the education system, I have ideas about how I would tweak the current governance law. But I think it is wise to resist that temptation because no one can be sure what the impact might be and how it might disrupt the good things that we know are happening in the schools. It is not worth the risk of a setback, especially if we can fix what isn't working without amending the governance law. Lets try it - even if it involves extending the current law for only a year. Everything else in our city and country is in a state of uncertainty today as a result of the world economic crisis and the fiscal challenges confronting our state. Let's agree to maintain stability in our school system during this difficult time.

The Partnership for New York City (www.pfnyc.org) is a network of business leaders dedicated to enhancing the economy of the five boroughs of New York City and maintaining the city's position as the center of world commerce, finance and innovation.

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