



**Teachers Network Leadership Institute  
2005 Five Point Education Platform  
A Proposal for Funding the CFE Remedy  
To Provide a “Sound, Basic Education”  
Executive Summary\***

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## **Introduction**

In the last few years, education has seized the center stage of public policy discussions. Nationally, debate over the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation and ongoing controversies over standardized testing, charter schools, privatization, and vouchers occupy the headlines of America’s newspapers. In the wake of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity decision, New York State is struggling with the issue of how to provide and pay for a “sound basic education” for *all* of its students. Here in New York City, education promises to be at the very hub of the 2005 municipal elections, now that the mayor has direct control over – and thus, responsibility for – the public school system.

But for all of the additional scrutiny and attention given to education, there is a lack of thoughtful attention to what works well and what needs fixing in our schools, and there is widespread failure to grasp the nitty-gritty details of what is required for the development of schools in which all students learn. Simplistic solutions and magic bullets abound.

It is classroom teachers, grounded in the daily realities of teaching and learning, who can provide the deepest insights into what works and what needs fixing in their schools, and the most realistic and practical ideas on how to improve the achievement of their students.

The Teachers Network Leadership Institute [TNLI] exists to nurture, organize, and advocate for the teacher’s voice in education policymaking. We took as our call to action the first national education summit, organized in 1989 by then former President Bush and then Governor Clinton, to which not one classroom teacher was invited. Since then, hundreds of classroom teachers meeting in twelve affiliates around the United States have studied the educational challenges faced by teachers and students in their schools and cities, and developed policy proposals for surmounting those challenges.

Building on those years of work, the New York City affiliate of TNLI has prepared an “education platform” as our contribution to a public conversation that moves beyond simplistic solutions and magic bullets. As New York City enters the 2005 mayoral campaign, it is our hope that the proposals and programs contained within this platform will become the basis for a deep discussion and broad understanding of the issues that confront New York City schools.

## **Achieving Equity**

Over a century and half ago, when he was advocating free public education in the United States, Horace Mann held that public schools should be “the great equalizer.” More than 150 years later, Mann’s vision is still far from being fully realized. Inequalities are as stark and severe in New York State, one of the richest of the 50 states, as anywhere in the United States. The disparities among public schools serving the wealthy and public schools serving the poor and working class in our state currently rank us near dead last in terms of per pupil spending between rich and poor school districts and predominantly white

and predominantly minority school districts. A number of wealthy Westchester and Long Island suburban districts are able to spend close to twice as much on the education of one of its students as New York City does on one of its students, over \$21,000 as opposed to \$11,627. Yet New York City public schools have more students living in poverty, more English Language Learners and many more students with special needs, all of whom require substantial educational supports and services. To those with the greatest need, we invest the least.

As the Campaign for Fiscal Equity court case has so powerfully demonstrated, this gap in funding leads to radically unequal experiences in schooling. When compared to her suburban counterpart, a student living in a poor New York City neighborhood will, on average, be taught by a poorly paid and inexperienced teacher who is often teaching out of license. The city student will often read and work with more outdated books and equipment in a larger-sized class in a school that is more likely to be overcrowded and located in an older building in a state of greater disrepair.

Given this inequality of resources is it any real surprise that New York City public schools graduate only a little more than half of their high school students in four years, compared with a statewide average of 75%? Or that the city's official dropout rate is nearly four times the average in the rest of the state, 8.2% to 2.5%? At the heart of these disparities lies a dysfunctional system of school financing.

Given the successful resolution of the CFE case, we have identified the following priorities for achieving the courts mandate of "a sound, basic education." Our proposals realize the historic role of New York City's public schools in ensuring that the vitality and prosperity of our city remain strong.

**We propose that the \$9.2 billion for capital improvements be used to:**

- Alleviate overcrowding and make class size reduction possible by expanding school facilities.
- Renovate and modernize schools to include up-to-date science and computer laboratories.

**We propose that the \$5.6 billion be used to:**

- Lower class sizes to 15 in grades K-3, 18 in grades 4-8, and 20 in high school. (These are the same limits that North Carolina has set for its low-performing schools.)
- Reinstate a system entirely focused on turning around low performance schools.
- Structure activities that engage parents as partners in their children's academic success.
- Fully fund universal Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten.
- Offer programs in academics, athletics, and the arts during summer school and in after-school programs.
- Provide teachers with a full complement of up-to-date curricula, resources, and materials, including hardware and software, and extensive staff development on integrating technology into classrooms.
- Ensure that all schools are clean and safe, by providing custodial, security, intervention, and family outreach services necessary to maintaining a climate of orderliness, in which every student and staff person feels safe and secure.
- Fund complete support staff at each school, including social workers, psychologists, and counselors for students and their families.

## **Closing the Achievement Gap**

Fifty years after the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, America is still struggling to realize the promise of that historic ruling. While de jure segregation by race has been eliminated and other progress toward racial justice has been set into motion, far too many of our schools are still separate and still unequal. Too many of our students of color attend schools where they never share their classrooms with a single white student and are rarely taught by a teacher of their own race. Children of color are more likely than their white counterparts to be children of poverty, and they're also far more likely to suffer from the inequities of a watered-down curriculum presented by unprepared teachers with out-of-date resources and technologies in overcrowded classes and out-of-repair school buildings.

On a number of key indices predictive of educational and economic success, there is a growing performance gap between white students of New York City and African-American and Latino students. From pre-school through post-secondary education, there are growing score differentials on standardized tests, and vast disparities in attendance, drop-out, and graduation rates. In the class of 2001 in the New York City public schools, for example, 32.2% of African-American students, 30.1% of Latino students and 57.9% of white students graduated high school on time, in four years. (Significantly, there is a gender differential among students of color: African-American girls graduate at a 9.9% rate higher than African-American boys, and Latina girls graduate at a 6.1% rate higher than Latino boys.) Achievement gaps become opportunity gaps that limit the chances for poor and minority children to go on to college and acquire gainful employment. They are far more likely to end up in prison, on welfare, or in the military. We propose dealing with this serious problem by taking critical steps in a variety of areas described below.

- Adequate, government-funded, pre-and postnatal health care and intervention services including asthma, diabetes, eye and dental care targeted to the neediest communities.
- Aggressive inspection, elimination, and treatment programs for lead paint and its victims.
- Community centers connected to schools in low-income neighborhoods enabling families to receive health, housing, and employment services and resources.
- Opportunities for accelerated study and advanced placement classes like the High Schools Initiative in all schools to prepare students of color for the entrance exams of high schools like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science.
- Develop a diversity plan to increase integration in the student and staff populations in each region so that each school more closely resembles the demographic mix of the city.
- Provide professional development to enable teachers to recognize and value various forms of cultural capital from a variety of races, cultures, and socioeconomic classes.
- Work to include families from diverse backgrounds.
- Develop culturally diverse curricular and extracurricular activities that expose students to a rich array of experiences.
- Small advisory groups (no greater than 12 students) to insure every student is known by at least one adult in his/her school.

## **Improving Assessment Policy**

We endorse the goal of having all students reach high academic standards, and we embrace opportunities to be genuinely accountable for the teaching and learning that takes place in our

classrooms and schools. However, we know that the current obsession with high-stakes examinations is counterproductive to those ends, and profoundly destructive to quality education. Policymakers at the city, state, and national levels would do well to remember the old farmer's adage—"You don't fatten cows by weighing them."

As most psychometricians note, the higher the stakes and the more pressure placed on the student, the more unreliable the results become as an accurate measure of a student's knowledge and skill. Further, it is misleading to use a single type of exam as a measure of a teacher or a school. A variety of measures for assessing student achievement will make it possible to see how much, and at what rate, a teacher or a school is adding to the skills and knowledge of the students.

Last year's decision to end "social promotion" at the end of the third grade was based on the assumption that promoting students unable to do the work was only setting them up for future failure in school and life. To hold students back and have them repeat a year of school simply puts them through another year of the very same academic program that had already proved unsuccessful and has harmful effects down the road: Students who have been held back are more likely to drop out of school than those who have not been held back. We propose correcting these problems by implementing the following proposals.

- Intervention programs—starting in Pre-K— to identify and support children who are in danger of failing to meet standards. Additional training and personnel to provide regular and informal diagnostic assessment; small group instruction with literacy, math or ESL specialists; smaller sizes for at-risk students; and after school and/or summer tutoring.
- Develop performance-based assessments that measure qualities valued in the workplace: creativity, oral presentation skills, teamwork, and the ability to sustain performance over time.
- Create tests that incorporate teachers' input and reflect curriculum and standards.
- Adequately prepare exam scores with established guidelines so they can evaluate tests with consistency.
- Additional resources and targeted interventions for children and schools performing below satisfactory levels. Withdrawing funds and supports from a school simply guarantees that it will never improve.
- Reform retention, placement and graduation policies so that these decisions are never predominantly made on the basis of a single standardized test score.

## **Creating Collaborative Learning Communities**

Relationships are at the heart of good teaching in excellent schools. Students are better served when their teachers work together assessing their progress and strategizing as a team about how to best meet students' needs. Furthermore, when new teachers are inducted into a community of collaborating teachers, they not only become effective teachers more quickly, but they are also more likely to be retained.

Collaborative relationships must be forged between schools and the neighborhoods they serve, between teachers and administrators, and between staff and parents. Schools that excel are organized in ways that encourage and sustain such relationships at all of these levels.

In recent years, the New York City Department of Education has determined that large, impersonal high schools do not work well for at-risk students. It has undertaken a massive restructuring effort to replace

unsuccessful schools with smaller learning communities. Creating successful collaborative learning communities takes more than reducing school size. Developing a school culture based on respect, caring, serious work, and intellectual engagement does not happen automatically when big schools are turned into small schools. We believe the following proposals are crucial.

- Conduct impact studies to show how restructuring and opening schools will affect the communities they are intended to serve.
- Provide time, space, and money for teacher collaboration (i.e., study groups, lesson study meetings, grade level and department meetings, as well as cross-grade and cross-department meetings).

### **Ensuring Teacher Quality**

As recent statistical studies have demonstrated, a qualified, experienced teacher, expert in pedagogy and subject material, has more of a positive effect on a student's learning than any other factor, including class size, quality of the academic program and curriculum, and school mission and size. This research also makes clear that students who have two successive years of unprepared and inexperienced teachers lose ground and rarely recover. Qualified teachers are particularly important in the education of struggling students, and in closing the achievement gap for African-American, Latino, and poor students.

Quality teachers are members of a profession that has: [1] a well-defined body of knowledge and skill; [2] standards of acceptable and best practice; [3] mechanisms for professional development and peer evaluation; and [4] collegiality and independence. Below are proposals that we believe are critical to the development of teacher professionalism.

- Improve teacher quality by raising teacher salaries to a level competitive with surrounding suburbs, and invest in on-going, collaborative, teacher-driven professional development.
- Hire teachers who know how to integrate theory and practice and have subject area mastery.
- Provide intensive apprenticeships (with experienced teachers) for student teachers, and provide skilled mentors for all novice teachers.
- Provide all teachers with quality professional development that is ongoing, collaborative, relevant, and teacher-driven.
- Institute career ladders, similar to the Lead Teacher Pilot Program begun in the Bronx, that promote teacher leadership without requiring that teachers leave the classroom.
- Expand intervention programs to support struggling teachers.
- Streamline teacher evaluation and disciplinary procedures that place a six-month time limit on dismissal processes and a one-month time limit on the adjudication of teacher grievances and complaints.