

Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

April 13, 2010

Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I applaud your purpose today of addressing the critical issue of failing schools in our nation.

My name is Beverly Donohue and I am Vice President for Policy and Research at New Visions for Public Schools, a non-profit organization that has focused on school reform in New York City for the last 20 years. Under contract to the New York City Department of Education, New Visions currently serves as a Partner Service Organization accountable for improving student performance for 35,000 students in 76 schools.

For the last 10 years we have been closely engaged in school turnaround work, almost entirely at the high school level, focusing on schools in the highest poverty neighborhoods in NYC. During that time we have created 99 new small high schools, tried and failed to turnaround three large, low-performing high schools, and successfully guided two large high schools with mid-level performance to restructure into small learning communities. These experiences have led us to think in terms of a continuum of school transformation, with different levers for change viable for schools at different levels of student performance.

For the persistently lowest-performing high schools, the only approach to turnaround that has been successful in NYC is school closure, implemented gradually over a four year phase-out period. The pioneering experiment in school turnaround was the Chancellor's district, which operated from 1996 until 2003, when it was folded into the broad-based reforms implemented by Chancellor Klein with the advent of Mayoral Control. While elementary and middle schools in the Chancellor's District showed improvement after implementing a "tight" model of reforms<sup>1</sup>, all five large high schools brought into the program were shut down with campuses of new small schools created in their place.

New Visions, with the support of the NYC Department of Education, undertook turnaround efforts in three large failing high schools from 2002 to 2003. School-level teams spent months developing turnaround plans using promising, research-based models. Despite heavy facilitation by New Visions and other partners, these plans were judged inadequate to produce significant improvement in student outcomes; the initiative was then terminated. Without changes in leadership, staff, and context, the preconditions for turnaround did not exist. These three attempts shared a "one-off" quality. There was no network or district structure to protect a clear focus on change against the daily distractions that derail progress. The embedded culture of these schools appeared too likely to reject the transplant of even the most promising school reform model.

High schools at mid-levels of performance have other options for improvement. In a New York context, this group included schools with four-year graduation rates between about 55% and 65% in the mid 2000's. New Visions supported two such large high schools in transforming themselves into small learning communities.<sup>2</sup> Each school started its improvement effort with a strong leader and a cadre of dedicated staff willing to take risks and participate in the hard work of change; each school has shown sustained, significant improvement in student outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Phenix, Deinya; Siegel, Dorothy; Zaltsman, Ariel; Fruchter, Norm, *Virtual District, Real Improvement*; Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University

<sup>2</sup> Both New Dorp High School in Staten Island and Hillcrest High School in Queens restructured starting in 2005 while remaining under the leadership of a single principal. Both schools have since seen significant increases in both attendance and graduation rates. On their annual NYC Progress Reports, the schools have moved over three years from a C grade to an A and a high B respectively.

By the time we began working with these two schools in 2005, our experience had led us to this conclusion: *without changing what classroom teachers do, modifying structure or curriculum does little to improve student outcomes*. As way to avoid “change that stops at the classroom door,” New Visions co-developed an inquiry team model called “SAM” to build teacher capacity and certify new school leaders<sup>3</sup>. In this model, teams of educators work together to identify a small group of struggling students who become the focus of on-going action research aimed at addressing specific skill gaps, accelerating the pace of learning, and moving these students into the school’s “sphere of success”. Through this work, teachers iteratively change their classroom practice to make it more effective and share the results. There are now about 60 inquiry teams functioning in the small learning communities of Hillcrest and New Dorp High Schools, meeting to review student data and drive improved teaching and learning. This model has now been spread throughout New York City, is being piloted in Boston and Oakland, and has become the core professional development strategy in New Visions schools. In every program and every interaction we have with schools, we base our work on the fundamental questions of SAM’s cycle of inquiry: What do we know about what our students can and cannot do? And, what are we going to do about it?

In our experience, low performing schools need to focus their efforts on a few critical problems at any one time to make headway. Schools with higher capacity or start-up schools without the friction of a status quo culture can take advantage of broader-based reform models. The small high schools created through the New Century High School Initiative<sup>4</sup> inform this conclusion. The New Visions’ New Century schools and similar schools developed by other non-profit organizations played an essential role in New York City’s high school reform work; they created the replacement seats needed to implement a broad “school closure” strategy. The New Century High Schools were required to adhere to ten principles of effective schools that were built into their initial design.<sup>5</sup> These principles comprised a “loose” model that resulted in huge variation across the first 89 schools. More recently, “tighter” school models for former drop-out students and for career and technical education schools have also resulted in schools that are unique and varied. Research-based models have provided the first draft; local adaptation and innovation have sustained the continuous learning necessary to a high performing school.

I would also point to several other features that have contributed to the strength of the New Century results. First, each New Century High School signed on for a target of “80/92” – an 80% graduation rate and 92% average daily attendance. That commitment created urgency and a focus on individual student data. Accountability to a specific goal has proved to be a powerful driver of improvement. Second, all New Century High Schools were approved for opening by the unanimous consent of a “Core Group” comprised of New Visions, the Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, the Principals’ Union and the foundation funders. All these stakeholders were committed to solve problems at the local level. Parents and students, along with educators, helped to plan each school in a competition for a limited number of grants. Many planning groups failed to

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<sup>3</sup> New Visions partnered with Baruch College’s School of Public Affairs to create the Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model (SAM), a capacity building program to create distributed leadership in schools and develop a culture of continuous improvement through the sharing of results by multiple inquiry teams. One version of this 18 month program provides a principal’s certification upon successful completion and has certified 115 educators as principals to date. Over a dozen of these graduates have stepped into principal or assistant principal roles within their own schools.

<sup>4</sup> New Century is a partnership of New Visions with the NYC Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers and the NYC Council of Supervisors and Administrators. The initiative was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation and the Open Society Institute. The 2009 New Century High School average graduation rate was 72.6%, as compared to New York’s City-wide graduation rate of 62.7 percent.

<sup>5</sup> The ten principles are: Clear focus and High Expectations; Rigorous Instruction; Personalized Learning Environment; Instructional Leadership; School-based professional development; Meaningful Assessment; Partnerships; Parent/Caregiver Engagement; Student Voice and Participation; and Integration of Technology.

meet the high standards required to open a school. The broad base of support and emphasis on quality, along with an extensive community outreach strategy, helped to defuse tensions as neighborhoods watched historic high schools begin to shut their doors. Third, all New Century High Schools were formed with non-profit partner organizations at the planning table. The strongest partnerships continue to contribute engaging classroom and out-of-school experiences, such as internships, to provide students with workplace skills and to connect them to their communities. Community Partnerships in many of these schools have expanded the toolkit of strategies to make students career and college ready.<sup>6</sup> There are several completed evaluation studies of the New Century High School Initiative available on the New Visions web-site ([www.newvisions.org](http://www.newvisions.org)) and others will be forthcoming in the near future. As these relatively young schools mature, we will continue to learn from their experience and challenges.

There is a limited body of research on what approaches are effective in turning around low-performing schools, particularly at the high school level. I would urge the Committee to support an approach to reauthorization that fosters continued local innovation and close evaluation of turnaround programs to deepen existing knowledge. Many districts and States have initiated turnaround programs and policies that could experience setbacks from too rigid an application of a set of models. Assessing school capacity to implement change is critical to guide the choice of an effective strategy. Finally, focusing exclusively on what must be done at the school level risks neglecting the important role that networks, community organizations and other external supports play in creating and sustaining the preconditions for success.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.

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<sup>6</sup> Reforming High Schools, Lessons from the New Century High Schools Initiative, 2001-2006, New Visions for Public Schools, <http://www.newvisions.org/node/313/10/1/49>.