

Testimony Before
Assembly Standing Committee
on Education -
Chronically Struggling Schools
and School Receivership

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Presented By:
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and
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Honorable members of the New York State Assembly, my name is Willa Powell and I am presently serving as Chairwoman of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts. Because the largest number of struggling schools are in the Big 5 districts, we are significantly impacted, as Ms. Ascianto has stated.

I wish to keep my remarks brief but memorable. To that end I wish to share with you that I am a 21-year veteran of and retired officer from the US Army Reserves, which in my opinion offers some of the best leadership and decision making training in the world.

During my training on the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) I was taught that the commander must be presented with at least three options, and one of them can be "do nothing." After all, it is possible that doing something - anything - can actually be more destructive than constructive, but we cannot know without the comparison. I ask you to hold that paradigm in mind throughout my remarks just as I exercise that paradigm in my capacity as a Decision Maker.

Timing is everything. When the cry goes up to "Just do something!" it is always wise to look first at what has already been done. So what has been done? We already had a law that calls upon Boards of Education to engage an Education Partnership Organization to transform schools with the most serious performance issues.

That legislation affected Buffalo first. As with all untested strategies, this EPO model had a hard time finding its legs. The Buffalo Board of Education had trouble finding a partner and eventually one was assigned to them by the State Education Department. That partner - Johns Hopkins - has since walked away from their commitment.

As the requirements of the EPO legislation touched Rochester, we aggressively pursued the University of Rochester as a partner, and were refused twice before they agreed. From this experience come the logical question: where do we think educational partners, or independent Receivers are going to come from to serve all the schools identified in this new law?

The State Education Department repeatedly articulated its hope that the Rochester experience would become the model for future EPOs when it provided extension after extension to allow us time to negotiate a workable proposal. We were initially told we had six weeks. In the end it took a year just to negotiate a plan. So the next logical question is: what makes us think that the Superintendent as Internal Receiver will be able to achieve any significant results – unless that Superintendent already had a plan prior to the passage of this law?

Next question: how do the requirements of this new law aid or impede that Superintendent's efforts? I will not use my remaining time to discuss how this played out in Rochester, but I invite you to ask me.

The Rochester Board of Education's experience tells us that we must start looking now for Receivers of our two-year designated schools. These two-year schools are not eligible for any grant monies as are the one-year schools, so we don't expect to find enough willing agencies or vendors to satisfy the demand.

Add to this the stated mandate that the External Receiver convert these schools into Community Schools. I am a huge supporter of community schools, with partnerships designed to meet the non-educational needs of students so that they are better prepared to succeed when they are in school. But community schools cost more. Our cities must commit resources beyond the MOE for their maintenance, and our counties must be committed to delivering social services such as childcare. Even not-for-profit Receivers will balk at this charge if the infrastructure is not already there.

In summary, I understand that this Receivership law came about because the Governor said "we've waited long enough, we must do something." But I postulate that this was not the time to do anything. This was the time to wait and see whether the last legislative mandate could work under the most favorable circumstances. We know that it was not very effective under the severe distress and duress that Buffalo endured. We do not know whether it will work in Rochester with a proactive Board of Education and a willing partner.