



CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION-
PUBLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

**CREATING EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS :
LEARNING FROM THE
CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT**

SPEAKER:

SHEILA EVANS-TRANUMN

**ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER
NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

FEBRUARY 28, 2006

Luncheon Series

ABOUT CEI-PEA

The Center for Educational Innovation – Public Education Association (CEI-PEA) is a New York-based nonprofit organization that creates successful public schools and educational programs. Our staff of experienced leaders in public education provides hands-on support to improve the skills of teachers and school leaders, increase parent involvement, and channel cultural and academic enrichment programs into schools. The benefits of this hands-on support are multiplied through a network of more than 170 public schools in New York as well as work in other major urban school systems across the country and around the world. We operate in cooperation with, but independently of, public school systems, providing private citizens the opportunity to make wise investments in the public schools.

ABOUT THE LUNCHEON SERIES

CEI-PEA's luncheon series provides one of the only forums in which the full range of stakeholders—parents, principals, teachers, policy makers, leaders of nonprofit organizations, funders, newspaper reporters—are able to meet and discuss critical issues affecting public education. Topics of the luncheons range from educational research on innovative instructional models, to analyses of educational policies, to practitioner models for effective school leadership.

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NOTE FROM THE CEI-PEA PRESIDENT

Since 1993, New York City has a major advocate for our public school children at the New York State Department of Education: Associate Commissioner Sheila Evans-Tranum. Herself a product of the New York City public schools, Sheila has a genuine and firm commitment to helping our public schools provide every child with a quality education. To Sheila, that concept is more than just the promise of a policy; it is an urgent social necessity.

Among the many aspects of education that Sheila is responsible for is accountability within the charter school movement. On February 28, 2006, Sheila spoke at the CEI-PEA Luncheon Series about the charter school movement in New York City and State. She encouraged attendees to learn from charter schools—both their accomplishments and challenges. Sheila, borrowing from Dr. Martin Luther King, reminded us that progress in education is neither automatic nor inevitable. She sees in charter schools the kind of proactive and innovative work necessary to effect meaningful change within public school systems. In order to realize that potential, she encourages us to look at the entire picture, including details of accountability data, practical challenges in staffing, and administrative challenges such as Board development, school facilities and funding patterns for charter schools. She offers some practical and sound solutions to these challenges, that could help move the charter school movement forward to the next phase.

What follows is an edited version of the transcript from Sheila's presentation. We have done our best to retain the power and insightfulness of Sheila's remarks. As you read it, I hope you will find in Sheila's remarks the same inspiration that many in the room felt during her presentation.

[SIGNATURE]

Sy Fliegel

INTRODUCTION

Sy Fliegel: Welcome. I want to thank Vice Chancellor Adelaide Sanford and Regent Harry Philips for being here. [Applause.]

You have a copy of Shelia Evans-Tranumn's biographical abstract. If this is an abstract, I'd hate to see the full bio. [Laughter.] When you read it, you will realize that she has an impossible job to do.

“Whenever I have a problem or I think something is wrong for youngsters, I go to Shelia because I know she understands what we’re talking about, and she is always there to help.”

Ms. Evans-Tranumn is a product of the New York City Public School System. That to me is very important, to have a State official who understands what the New York City School System is about and who can identify with youngsters in the New York City school system. She has won a number of impressive awards, and she hosts her own weekly television program on Saturdays from 12:00 to 12:30 on Channel 25. I was fortunate enough to be one of her guests, and I really got to know how she thinks and what she cares about.

Sheila is a person who really cares about what happens to youngsters. Look at the last sentence on her bio: “Building the capacity of institutions, communities, and individuals to better serve children is at the core of her personal and professional life.” I am not usually a major fan of State Education officials—except for the Regents, I have a great deal of respect for you. [Looks at Harry Philips; Laughter.] Whenever I have a problem or I think something is wrong for youngsters, I go to Shelia because I know she understands what we’re talking about, and she is always there to help.

I'm going to tell you a story that my good friend Colman Genn, who I miss a great deal, once told me. We used to drive to work every morning, when it was a day we were having a luncheon, and I would say, “Cole, what story should I tell today?” And he would tell me a story. He once told me the following story. It's about this master Sufi leader who, each year, would walk the countryside and take a two-week retreat with one of the poor farmers. There was tremendous drought that time of year in that period. He approached a farmer and of course asked, “May I spend two weeks with you and your family?” The farmer was honored and the Sufi Chief spent two weeks there. When he left at the end of the two weeks, the Sufi leader thanked the farmer and his family and he gave them a small bag of seeds. He said, “Plant these seeds with care, and your land will prosper.” And the farmer did that and sure enough, the crop grew magnificently. And this kept

going on for five years—he'd come to visit, and on the last day, give the farmer the bag of seeds. On the fifth year, the farmer said, "Great Sufi, can I share these magic seeds with my neighbors? They see my farm growing so well." The farmer called them "these magic seeds." And the Sufi leader said, "Certainly. Would you like to know where the seeds come from?" The farmer said, "Of course. Please tell me this great secret." The Chief said, "On the last day of each of my retreats, I would walk the land of your farm and wherever I saw a seed, I would pick it up and put it into the bag. And those are the seeds that you call 'magic seeds.' They are really seeds from your own farm and your own land."

Now you may say, why in the world would he tell us that story? Because I can on some occasions be Machiavellian. [Laughter.] You might say, "What does this have to do with Shelia Evans-Tranum?" It just so happens that there is a major Deputy Commissionership job open at the State, and like all great state organizations, they are holding a national search. It's been my experiences what national searches seem to find are candidates who have no knowledge whatsoever about the place they are being brought into. It usually takes them three years to find out where to go. I am suggesting—and it is my pleasure to introduce Shelia Evans-Tranum—as one of those magic seeds that the State Education Department, the Commissioner, and the Regents should recognize and acknowledge. So it is my pleasure to introduce Shelia Evans-Tranum.

[Applause.]

GUEST SPEAKER

Sheila Evans-Tranum: Thank you, Sy. Those of you who attend these monthly meetings as I do, you know how nervous I was sitting there because you never know what Sy is going to say about you. [Laughter.] So I certainly thank him for his kind words, and to all of you who are here, thank you for your presence today as we delve into a topic that is of tremendous importance to CEI-PEA as well as to many of you sitting here in this room.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge the work of CEI-PEA and thank not only Sy but all of his colleagues who have lived long enough, and live strong enough, to be able to say and do what they want and need to do. I am grateful that they do what they need to do for the children of New York City, so let's give them another round of applause. [Applause.]

And to two members of the Board of Regents—there are 16 members of the Board—and to first of all our Vice Chancellor, New York State Regent Adelaide Sanford, who certainly has children at her heart and has been on the Board for almost twenty years now, fighting for the underserved and the underprivileged and the under-funded, so please another round of applause for our Vice Chancellor. [Applause.]

And to Harry Philips, Regent Harry Philips, who represents areas in Westchester County, but has a heart in New York City. He also has a daughter in New York City who is a principal. He keeps his hand on the heartbeat of what's happening, and is constantly looking for ways to bring new ideas and new thinking to situations that are failing, so another round of applause for Regent Harry Philips. [Applause.]

When Sy asked me if I would come and talk today, I was overwhelmed and overjoyed and was certainly humbled by the opportunity to come and to speak here. We talked a little bit about what it was I might consider—as you see on my resume, my portfolio is extensive. When I came to the State Education Department in 1993, I came under Dr. Thomas Soebel to do a little job called “New York City.” [Laughter.] At that time, there was a press report that said, “The Commissioner of Education has an 800 pound monkey on his back,” and that monkey was New York City. And I remember in my interview with Thomas Soebel, he asked me how I was going to get that off of his back. That was my job; coming from the public school system after 20 years, understanding the politics in New York, understanding education, what was I going to do in order to make the State Education Department's name known in New York City, to handle all of the problems that came up, and to make sure when he and the Board of Regents came to New York City, no one wanted to run them out of town?

Well. It's been since 1993 and certainly I have seen a lot of changes. I've also seen a lot of Chancellors come and go, and have worked with each one. But, certainly we have seen a lot of changes, and as my staff is out in the field working with New York City public schools and working elsewhere, one of the things that people tell use when they actually leave the system (and even when they are in the system but they feel bolder to tell it after they leave the system) they say, “Thank you. In the State Education Department you gave us more help than anybody else in this city.” So to my staff, to everyone who has helped to make education what it is in New York and to carry this tremendous work on. Thank you. [Applause.]

In looking at my entire portfolio, I could have certainly talked about the ac-

accountability system, which my team developed. I could have spoken about No Child Left Behind, most of which comes under us, and we were honored by the President of the United States for leading the nation in No Child Left Behind. And regardless of whether or not you feel that that particular initiative has been funded—I don't believe it's been funded to the level that it needs to be funded—but we, as public servants, are given the responsibility to take federal and state law, and make it a reality and to make it work for children. I believe that in the State of New York we are working hard to do that. We've been named number one in accountability for several years now in the nation in terms of the work that we do. In terms of reading, bringing in over \$500 million in reading funds for the children of New York State, working with homeless parents, working with migrant students, working with reduced class-sizes—one of my big babies—early childhood education phased-in 69,000 four-year-olds over the past five years, receiving national acclaim for that.

So there is a whole list of things that I could have talked about. But I chose to talk about one of the initiatives under my office that is near and dear to me because I see it as being a part of the whole progressive movement in education that we need to have in order to improve education for all children. And that is charter schools. I remember several years ago when we had a discussion on SURR schools. Those schools also come under me; I have the job of naming which schools are on our schools under registration review list and determining which schools must redesign, which schools must close down. We were at the time under the leadership of Vice Chancellor Sanford in the Low-Performing Schools Committee. We realized at the end of the process that aside from making schools develop new plans, aside from doing dramatic changes like making them redesign or making them close down and reopen as new entities, we really had no teeth. We really had nothing to offer parents, children and schools in terms of a viable opportunity.

At that time, with the Low-Performing Schools Committee, we did propose charter schools as an outcome, as a process, a part of the continuation process for schools that have failed. With that Board of Regents at the time, there were not enough votes to move forward with charter schools. So when people sometimes come to me and ask me if I am supportive of charter schools, I always have to chuckle and tell them the story that we initially, in our work in school improvement, recommended charter schools to the Board of Regents at that time. Because this was many years ago, the Regents did not feel that that was where the State wanted to go. It wasn't until

the Governor proposed charters that we gained this wonderful vehicle to transform schools and the lives of children and families.

So we are thoroughly engaged in the charter school movement. I see myself as an active member of the fan club of creating more charter schools and creating not only more, but the best charter schools in this country. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Progress is neither automatic nor inevitable." Even when you look around at the wheels of social change, nothing has occurred, not even the smallest social movement has occurred, on the basis of inevitability. Sometimes I think we forget that in education. We think of it in terms of broader social issues, broader political issues.

"Progress is neither automatic nor is it inevitable. We must have a plan; we must have a strategy; we must have the political will; we must have the public interest; we must have leaders who are dedicated to a cause; and we must push together to make the change a reality. "

In education, we are faced with exactly the same dilemma. Progress is neither automatic nor is it inevitable. We must have a plan; we must have a strategy; we must have the political will; we must have the public interest; we must have leaders who are dedicated to a cause; and we must push together to make the change a reality. Then once we have the legislation or the regulation or the policy in place, our job is still not done because in order to make a success, we have to make sure that our execution is at its optimal point, especially

when it comes to changing the lives of children through this process called "schooling." So we, in the State Education Department, and the Board of Regents, do believe that charter schools can make a difference, are making a difference. And in the future, charters will make a difference as they impact on the general education of all of our children.

What is the official position of the Board of Regents and the State Education Department concerning charter schools? We want them to succeed. We believe that they are part of the educational mix. We are a strong authorizer state, and that means only the best applications get approved. That means we closely monitor the applications that come forth and we do not approve every application. We stand applications up against a strong test. We understand, however, that the paper process is just the beginning. So we are rigorous in our paper process because we feel that if we can get the paper right, then when it comes time to where the rubber meets the road, we will have fewer problems. But we certainly don't go forward with the understanding that there won't be any problems. We know that charter schools think we monitor too much, but there are real issues and real

needs of oversight. We take our position as public servants very seriously. When no one else represents the children, those of us who are in government must represent the children. When the families are silent, we must represent the families. The Constitution of the United States gives the authority of education to the hands of the State. We delegate that authority to the local education agency, but it does not exempt us from our Constitutional mandate, which is to make sure that schools and education work for the children of even the poorest families.

So why are we excited about charters? We are excited because they do bring a breath of fresh air. Because we are able to learn from them some interesting experiments. We are able to get some of the best minds thinking about how to create schools in a different way. For me, developing new schools is nothing new in terms of my professional career. I've been helping to develop schools in New York City for the past 25 years. I was a founding member of the New Visions Advisory Board. We had wonderful teachers and administrators and principals and business people come together and say, "Listen, we want to create new schools. We want to jump start this educational system." Even in my own capacity, I went from 27 sites as I worked for the New York City Department of Education, and within four years had opened up 87 sites through the five boroughs. That's a very aggressive movement. Seeing the increase of schools and knowing how to do it is pretty much something I've done all of my life, and I believe all of my professional life that there are lessons learned in that process and that we can use that new invigorating opportunity to get new minds at the table, to think about education in a different way, and to get people to back and support public education, for charter schools are public schools.

Are charter schools in New York a success? Well, having a bird's eye view of all the charter schools in the state, I tell you it depends upon how you define success. If success is defined in the number, if we have filled the cap, then we are 100% successful—or at least almost 100% because James Merriman just delivered his last group of charter applications to me. So when we go through the next Regents meeting to approve the SUNY charter application, we will have met our cap and we will have executed 100 plus charter applications as required by law. If you wanted to ask whether or not charter schools are successful based upon parent input and parent response, we know that parents are pleased by the education that they are receiving in charter schools, where they may not have been pleased with the education their children had been receiving in their local school district. The schools have a good reputation, and how do we know

that they have a good reputation and parents are satisfied? What piece of data do we look at? We look at the waiting list. Most of our charter schools have waiting lists. Parents want their children to come into charter schools despite the fact that they have limited space and limited capacity. And then certainly we do know from looking at all of the schools in the state that many of them have academic success stories that we can already talk about.

I want to share with you some exciting New York City charter school ideas that I think are worth watching. Now these may not be the charter schools that you read about in the papers, because sometimes the ones that hit the papers have good public relations people, but there are some people who are out there on the bottom line, working hard every day to make this movement a success.

First, I want to talk about single sex schools. The Girls Preparatory School of New York helps us to understand the question: Are single-sex schools one way to address a school population where the majority of students will spend at least some of their childhood in none- or one-parent households? The Girls Leadership School, not a charter school, showed us that Girls Leadership Schools can be successful, and The Eagle Academy showed us it can be successful. We're looking at those schools to see what policy and practice we can get from them.

Can a Carl Icahn Charter School and a KIPP Academy show us anything? I think they can show us how home-grown models can be successfully replicated.

Beginning With Children started within the New York City public schools. It was an anomaly to the regular school system because it was associated with the Chancellor of the New York City public schools as opposed to being under the direct leadership of a local superintendent. The KIPP Academy Middle School started in the Bronx, was its own little separate entity operating in a public school building as a public school. Both of them have now become charters. Both of them are successful in what they are doing. Both of them were incubated first in the New York City Public School System before going charter, and both of them have sustainability that I believe will help to make them even greater. Looking at schools like Beginning With Children, we must now ask the question: How much better can a good school get when it converts to a charter?

New York Center for Autism. This is one school that I think you should watch because it is just opening this year. This is a charter school just for

autistic children—a population we know is growing across the nation. There was a lot of controversy around its opening. But here are the questions I think this school leads us to: What results can an extraordinary, intense program achieve with a group of students who have been extraordinarily difficult to reach using traditional methods? What can we learn from this little charter school that's trying to beat the odds?

The Harlem Children's Zone, with Geoffrey Canada, up in Harlem. What happens if the whole village does come together to raise the standards? What happens when you do have the social services, when you do have the after-school programs, when you do have a state of the art school that Geoffrey has built on 125th St., when you do have community support and support from the faith-based community? What can we learn when the whole village is able to rally around children in a village called Harlem?

The Harlem Success Charter School. Can a modest amount of extra funding, used in a well thought-out and highly targeted way to support research-based programs, yield high levels of achievement? We're looking at that.

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“Virtually every single charter school has something to teach us. The idea is that we take those courageous leaders and those innovative ideas and we incubate them and then we expand them.”

Is there a reason for caution in declaring the charter school movement a success? I think there is. To this point, we can say that we have a phenomenal beginning. To this point we can say that we have some innovative ideas and practices at work. To this point, we can say we have enough fertile ground for research to be developed. To this point we can say we have the interest of philanthropists, who will come behind these initiatives and make it work. But there are some reasons for us to move forward with some caution in mind.

The first caution is that not enough test data is available to say how well many of these schools are actually doing. More than 100 schools have been chartered, yet very few have multi-year histories or state assessments. In addition, there have been some problems in collecting appropriate data. We do expect when we go into a charter school—any school—that we see beautiful little children. In uniforms or not in uniforms, we expect to see smiles on their faces, ribbons in their hair. We expect to see

some with their shirts hanging out and some with runny noses. We expect to see well-mannered classrooms. We expect to see dedicated, excited young teachers working. But what we also expect to see is at the end of the day when all of that has been executed, is that children are able to read and write and think critically. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the end result of this movement must be that academic achievement is performed.

We must be cautious in comparing charter schools with schools in the districts. Every time we bring a charter school report to the Board of Regents, we compare that charter school to how well the children are doing in the district. By and large, the children in the school do outperform the children in the local school district. However, when we further disaggregate the data, we see that the charter schools have fewer limited English proficient children and a limited number of children with disabilities. So we're almost comparing apples to oranges when we look at this because the way the lottery system seems to be falling out is that we're not getting the same numbers, percentages, that we would have in the traditional system. That can in fact bump your data picture up. We need to look at that a little more closely and figure out how we make an appropriate comparison. But we are happy with the fact that when we do look at the data, we are seeing that charter schools are doing better than most schools within their districts.

When we look at the profile of teaching staff in charter schools, it raises concerns. The average teachers in charter schools are less credentialed, have fewer years of experience, are paid less well, and turn over more frequently. Last year, 38% of New York City charter schools teachers had no certification. Fifty percent of New York City charter school teachers had five or fewer years of experience, and 32% turned over last year in charter schools. That creates alarming thoughts for us. We have to figure out how to stabilize the teaching force in charter schools. When we look at what creates a low-performing school, we have discovered that instability in the teaching staff will create a low-performing school because you can't have the professional development take hold if you're rotating teachers in and out on a yearly basis. We also know that part of the dilemma has been the fact that many times when charter schools come into existence late in the school year, all of the best teachers have already been assigned someplace else, so that charter leaders end up scrambling to get some good teachers and they get what they can find. We've significantly pushed the timeframe up, we've pushed hard to get our charter applications through in January so that the leaders for the new schools are able to compete with the rest of the city for the teachers that are out there and will be out there for September.

But we have to look at this whole issue of the impact of underpaying teachers in charter schools, and what is that going to have on the total movement? We don't want to have these great ideas and these great schools and lose the battle because we haven't figured out how to finance them appropriately. Research shows a steep learning curve for teachers, new teachers. We know that they need extra time and extra help. I used to love to wait for my Teach for America teachers, because I knew that I was going to get someone who was excited about learning, someone I could mold and I could make. But at the same time I knew I had to invest a lot of human capital and intellectual capital into making them exemplary teachers. We don't have that much time in charter schools. In five years you have to show results, so we need to figure this out quickly and we need to provide whatever it takes to make it happen in a faster mode.

Not all of the charter school movement is indigenous to New York. National organizations are coming into communities, about which they know little. We have to work with them to help them understand what New York education is about and how you work from the grassroots level up to make these schools take hold so that parents and communities will support you in your charter school movement.

What is the Board of Regents' position on the cap? I think everyone is interested in the cap, and I'm almost finished. The Regents have taken no official position. The Regents oppose, and the Commissioner in his report to the Budget Committee did oppose, giving the Chancellor or not-for-profits authority to approve charter schools without the Regents' consent. Until the cap is lifted, the State Education Department is focusing on improving quality of existing charters, not processing any applications for new charters. We want to make sure that it's not about quantity, but about quality. It is giving us time as the Legislature, as the advocates, as all of you work with the Governor and the Legislature to come up with the appropriate answer that will respond to the public will. When that public will has been inked, we will follow whatever the public and the Legislature has said.

What are some of the things that the Governor has proposed? He's proposed to raise the cap from 100 to 250 charter schools, not including conversions. Remember, let me just put a pin there. Although the cap was reached when we approved the SUNY trustee's last choices, the Chancellor of New York City can still convert traditional schools to charter schools. The Governor wants to allow 100 additional charters to be issued by SUNY or a SUNY designated authorizer, and the remainder to be issued by the Regents or school districts. He wants to allow SUNY to give authority to not-for-profit organizations meeting certain tests to become chartering enti-

ties. He wants to allow up to 50 charters to be granted by application of law if approved by the Chancellor and not approved by the Regents, and that's the relationship we have with SUNY. SUNY can present to us an application; if the Regents vote not to approve the charter, SUNY can then by application of law bring that school into effect in 30 days. The Governor wants to exclude from the cap any charters that have been revoked or have not been renewed. We sit with charters both at SUNY and at the Board of Regents where charters have not opened and we are not allowed to convert those charters into new charter schools that can in fact open.

He wants to make charters eligible for building aid and allow access financing and construction management services from the dormitory authority. To me, this is one of the most critical pieces of the Governor's proposal. Not only must we in our local area stabilize the funding support for teachers to do their job, but somehow or another, we have to figure out this facilities issue because charter schools don't open not because of will but because of facilities. The Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education decides to whom he will give space in a public school building, and the city will put in additional monies to help support a charter school. However, there are others that are out there looking for space, and if the space is temporary, as some of them are, then when you do get your permanent space, which may be miles away, you lose the children and the families that you started out serving in the first place. So we have to figure out a way to make sure that these schools are financed, to make sure that facilities are made available. We don't want to just talk about creating an opportunity, we want to give them a chance to succeed and you can't succeed if you don't have a home, and many charter schools do not have a permanent home.

The finances: The current system takes money away from the school districts without giving enough money to the charter schools. They need their own funding stream. Charter schools are public schools, and they need their own funding streams, and they need their own buildings.

We need to help Board of Trustee members of charter schools do a better job. Strong Boards of Trustees are the first line of defense in terms of school quality. We're trying to work with the boards, but I have met with boards that did not even understand what their responsibility was. We've had to change contracts because the contracts did not, would not, have allowed the board to function as a board. We have wonderful people serving on boards; they must be given an opportunity to operate under the law, by the law, for the children of this state.

In conclusion, I am a charter member of the charter school fan club. Success of charter schools is important. For me as an African-American female, a product of the New York City Public school system, when I look at the communities around this city—I happen to have gone to a wonderful school, Public School 133 in Park Slope (at that time it was called South Brooklyn). It was a wonderful little school that nurtured me. I recently went back to be principal for a day, and they were so happy to see me because the only other successful person, and I put that in quotes, that they knew who had come out of PS 133, was “Al Capone.” [Laughter.] He actually had a house on Degraw St., so I was more than excited to let them know there is another way—I’m not notorious, but I do always remember and I tell people when dealing with me, you know, there is the Shelia side, but then remember I went to school where Al Capone went to school, so there’s a little bit of that Brooklyn in me as well. [Laughter.]

But as I look around all of the communities, and I see these children and I see these families, and I work with families, I try to provide hope sometimes in a hopeless situation. I try to instill in them that you have to go out and fight for a better tomorrow, that you have to be active in the school even though your culture tells you that you don’t question a teacher, you don’t question a principal, you don’t question the administration, because that is your culture. I value your culture. My mother never would have come to PS 133 to fight for me because it was not a part of our culture. We respected teachers and we respected principals and we respected the school to do what was best for children. But when I travel in these communities, I have to tell them, “You have to fight. You have to come outside of culture and self, and you have to align yourself and your families and your communities with people who are doing a great job and want to improve life for the children.”

We have wonderful public schools in New York City. The story never gets told on the front page of a paper. But we also have schools that are languishing and are low performing and in those communities where schools are languishing and low performing, I see children who look like me. I see immigrant parents, I see poor parents, and it’s my heart’s desire, my professional desire—there’s a burning in me, there is a burning in me that while I’m here I do the job that needs to be done for the children of this city.

I hope if you remember nothing else about my talk today that you’ll remember that progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. That even when we look at social justice, no matter how small it has been, it has never ridden in on the wheels of inevitability, but it has ridden in because there were people like you who decided to take a stand when no one would take a stand.

There were people like you who were willing to put your money where your mouths are and put your mouths where action needed to take place. There were people like you who could look outside of their own selves, and say to somebody, “You have to do a better job for the children of this city. If this system isn’t working, why can’t we create a new and viable opportunity to give every child a better chance in New York? Don’t operate under inevitability. Don’t operate on automatic pilot.

My prayer is that I live as long as Sy Fliegel has lived. [Laughter.] And I live as strong as he has lived. So even when I am not Associate Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner or Commissioner, that I’m still on the battlefield doing the work for the children as you are today. Thank you so much.

[Applause].

QUESTION & ANSWER

Fliegel: Shelia mentioned the autism charter school. I’d like to mention that it took two years of battle with their own State Deputy Commissioner of Special Ed claiming that this school will open, “Over my dead body.” And yet Shelia recommended that that school become a charter school. [Applause.]

Michael Meyers: Commissioner, what I understand and know what I read in the press. And what I read on the press is that the Regents have imposed standards and then they have reduced them or waived them—passing scores on an examination are now 55. I don’t know how 55 became a passing score, but it’s okay now to have a 55 passing score. A math test that is supposed to be measuring student achievement, but the test has changed because it’s too damn hard. And I’m not quite clear if the Regents know, because in the 1970s Regent Kenneth Clark, who Regent Sanford replaced, he created or developed what he called a “possible reality,” a plan for improving all schools. He said that we don’t need gimmickry, we don’t need all girls’ schools, or all boys’ schools, all black schools, we just needed schools where teachers are effective. And therefore, he proposed a plan whereby you would have teacher accountability, but teacher accountability based on teacher effectiveness, and whether or not the children are learning.

Now, my question to you therefore is: Do the Regents have a plan whereby

they will measure teacher accountability in the way Kenneth Clark, more than 20 years ago, said that we've got to measure teacher accountability? Or are the Regents going to continue to engage in double talk, double standards, revising of tests, and gimmickry, trying to prove that students can learn in these different kinds of experimental schools, when we know for a fact, we can assume that as Regent Sanford says, "All children can learn." They are not learning because of other impediments in terms of teaching staff. So that is my multi-level question.

Evans-Tranumn: I think the Regents have, in fact, focused very strongly on accountability, although not in the same vein, and I'm not familiar with Kenneth Clark's plan, but based upon what you have said his plan was, that they have looked at accountability itself in a number of ways, so we no longer only hold children accountable. Regent Sanford's task force and her policy paper on performance standards said the only ones we were holding accountable were the children because they were the only ones that were being left back or dropped out as a result of Regents' policy, so we developed a state accountability system where we then held schools accountable. That's what Schools Under Registration Review do. Then we hold districts accountable for the student performance. A year prior to No Child Left Behind requiring the disaggregation of data, the Regents voted to do so and had in fact disaggregated the data by race, ethnicity, class, and gender to make sure that we really got at the heart of it.

We do not have—and there are some states that do—indicators that are tracked directly back to the classroom. Tennessee was one of the pioneer states in this effort. Tennessee also had grade by grade testing and a unique student identification system that could do that. We don't have those tools in New York, but beginning in September, we will have 250,000 students who will have unique identification record systems, and we have, in fact, moved to grade three to eight testing, and so we have tools in place that could, in the future, focus on teacher accountability. At this stage, however, we don't have those tools in place.

Audience Member (name inaudible): You mentioned the challenges and inadequacies in the selection of teachers. What are the factors you face in the selection of principals?

Evans-Tranumn: Being a state official I can't select principals, the hiring and the firing of school personnel are the authority of the local school district. However, when I was in the New York City Department of Education for 20 years, I wanted principals who had worked their way up through the ladder. They understand what good assistant principals should be, they

understand what good teachers should be, they are able to go in and demonstrate a lesson. They understand not only the management of schools, the organizational structure and the flow of communication, and the chain of command, and the policies and the practices and procedures, the management side, but they are also great leaders. Where they have an opportunity to think about the vision and the mission and pull people together and to inspire people to move forward, I think our great leaders, we have some great leaders who are not good managers, but they are great leaders anyway because they can inspire people who had given up a long time ago to get in there and do an even harder job today than they did yesterday.

So, for me, it's about management: can you manage this organizational structure, can you manage this business enterprise, at the same time are you providing the visionary leadership that is needed and do you know what good teaching and learning is all about? When I took my courses at New York University in administration, I did not have to take a course in how to teach reading. I did not have to take a course in how to teach math. I went there to be a district superintendent, a district leader. I think today we have to get back down to the nuts and bolts in content, making sure that principals understand how to deliver in the teaching and learning process and it's not just something that happens. You have to plan your way to success and how can you plan your way to success if you've never been trained in the content area specialties?

James Merriman: I grew up in Kansas, so I don't understand this complicated world of New York politics, but maybe you can explain something that I, for the life of me, do not understand. As you said, the State has authority over education ultimately, and that it gives that authority, it devolved it down to the local educational agencies or districts as they are known. Given that the Chancellor has the authority, therefore, really to teach some 1.2 million children in the system, what is it about the notion of him starting 50 charter schools without getting okay from the State that gets everyone upset?

Evans-Tranum: The authority of making sure that public schools meet certain standards, the authority to make sure that there are checks and balances in the system, the authority to hold all schools to the same standards is simply an authority that the Regents have chosen not to give up at this time. I think that certainly, as I've worked with the Chancellor, and I've worked with former Chancellors, the State Education Department has been that voice to say, "We have to treat everyone the same way," They want to make sure that we're not subject to the politics of a local Chancellor. He has many people pulling on him in all different directions. That makes his job one of the most difficult jobs in America, and so we stand, you know,

10,000 feet above and we provide the standards and we provide the continuity and when the Chancellor is gone, we continue with the work as a new Chancellor comes in. I will say to you that that's a discussion you would have to have with the Regents, but I will say that to this point today, the Regents have not decided that they want to give up their authority to do what the Constitution of the United States has given to them to do.

Mary Ellen Fahs: As someone who is working in a clinic in East Harlem as a psychologist, and all of the kids that I see for counseling are students in the public school system, most of them are perfectly bright children. They obviously have emotional problems, which is why they're coming to see me, but many of them have a lot of problems in school: getting along with peers, being teased, bullied, being in classrooms where they don't feel safe, and certainly a lot has to be done in the wider system to improve the climate of schools, but I'm wondering what is being considered for the charter schools in the area of health and mental health because what I have seen is perfectly bright children, when they feel scared and intimidated and uncomfortable, who cannot learn. I think with all of our emphasis in improving test scores, the reason we're not getting anywhere is we have children who are unable to learn because they are essentially very uncomfortable.

Evans-Tranumn: Thank you so much, Mary Ellen. I think that certainly Regent Sanford has been the champion of tying health to academic outcomes. We had a year's worth of meetings with the Chancellor and asked him if he would just go back to those children who were performing at Level 1 in the New York City Public School System that needed to go to summer school, if he would just test them in vision and hearing, let's see what gets us there. He did that and 80% of them needed referrals to ophthalmologists.

We've done a lot of work around health and children in New York City with Harlem Hospital and other hospitals and the number one reason children miss school is asthma. We know that if we put open airways programs in schools that we can take a school from being a low performing school with 72% attendance to 96% attendance in coming off of the SURR list in two years. Asthma, health issues are directly connected to academic outcome.

We are waging the war right now with diabetes. Children are showing up in elementary school with type 2 diabetes. Some of them have lunch at 10:30 in the morning and if anyone in the room is diabetic, you know you cannot eat lunch at 10:30 and then not eat again until 3:00; it's going to impact on your ability to function. Obesity and high blood pressure are similar challenges. Mental health is number four on our list.

We know that there are health and mental health issues that are affecting children and when we look at the low-performing schools, this is where we are finding it and we know we have to do something not just for charter schools. We're looking at working on an overall policy where people come to understand that you cannot separate the health of a child from the academic performance, especially not in an urban center like New York City.

Morty Ballen: My name is Morty Ballen and I am the Executive Director and founder of Explore Charter School. I just wanted to first say it was nice to hear the voice of the person we just submitted our renewal application to today. [Laughter.] But more than that, it's really helpful to hear that the State—and my experience over the last four years, echoes what you've been talking about—is talking about accountability in exchange for autonomy, and flexibility in exchange for very real results, so that our kids excel academically. I've seen, over that last four years, this office work with the New York City Department of Education, asking the right questions that I would expect our board members to ask, and not having us do things that take away from where we want to get to, which is academic achievement of our students. So, I want to thank you for putting your money where your mouth is in terms of how that office is run and what kind of questions you're asking us as we work to achieve our mission.

Evans-Tranumn: Thank you, and I'll remember Explore. [Laughter.]

Fliegel: I want to thank the Commissioner, and I want to ask you to do something. If you're one of those people who like to write letters, you ought to write the Commissioner and say you heard this exceptionally fine Associate Commissioner speak down in New York City, and you want to commend him for selecting and sending such a fine person to help the New York City School System because I know this is a magic seed. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

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