

TESTIMONY
OF THE
UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

CARMEN ALVAREZ, VICE PRESIDENT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING

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Good afternoon, Chairman Jackson and members of this committee. I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before you on the Department of Education's special education reform. My name is Carmen Alvarez, and I am vice president for special education of the United Federation of Teachers.

In preparation for coming here today, I reviewed my testimony before this committee on June 12, 2012. I am sad to report that the alarms I sounded about the reform – then just getting under way -- went unheeded. While we still believe in the goals of the reform, the implementation has produced just the results we predicted: students with disabilities trapped in schools that can't meet their needs, IEPs changed – often en masse – to reflect the services the school is willing to provide, school staff without the professional development they need to help students succeed, and no way to hold schools accountable for not providing services. With fewer than 6 percent of students with disabilities demonstrating proficiency in ELA and just over 8 percent demonstrating proficiency in math on the most recent state exams, the needs of these students are enormous and the DOE, far from helping these students, is putting up more obstacles in their path.

To be clear, Corinne Rello Anselmi, the current deputy chancellor for the Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners, inherited a mess. To her credit, she reached out to us and to the parent and advocacy community soon after accepting the position and she continues to meet with us regularly. Based on my own experiences, I can tell you that she listens and she is willing to work to

correct many of the problems she inherited. Unfortunately, her efforts to clarify the horribly muddled and misguided message delivered under the prior administration have been stymied by a broken system.

With one exception, my thoughts on what needs to be done to put the reform on the right track really haven't changed. The one new issue I bring before you involves the networks: they have got to go. They are too expensive, and they are ineffective. The whole operation is run like a game of telephone. Every message that is delivered by central – usually by webinar and not face to face – is filtered with concerns about budget, personnel, space and other issues at the network and then at the school levels. And, by the way, for the networks, it's okay not to answer the phone or put the call on hold. It's unconscionable to run a school system responsible for 1.2 million students in this fashion.

We need a structure that addresses placement and budget responsibly, holds schools accountable for providing IEP-mandated supports and services, and ensures that schools receive the professional development they need to improve school climate and student achievement. Schools must be stopped from gaming the system when it comes to money. As a transitional measure, I urge the next administration to go back to discrete funding for special education services. With regard to professional development, webinars should never be used as stand-alone training and professional development on the implementation of systemic initiatives cannot be optional.

To reiterate my views regarding the special education reform, I still believe that 1) parents should not be forced to send their child to his or her zoned school if the school is not able to provide the programs and services on the student's IEP; 2) the first priority of schools should be implementation of IEPs as written, not changing the IEPs to match available services and maximize budget flexibility; and 3) school administrators and school personnel responsible for implementing student IEPs should be required to participate in professional development in research-based strategies for addressing the needs of students with significant learning and behavior challenges. Lastly, while fewer students with disabilities are in self-contained classes, those who are in self-contained classes are more likely

to be in educationally unsound bridge classes. In such bridge classes, these students are less likely to be making the educational progress they need to make to reach, or even approach, grade-level proficiency.

The Department of Education provides more funding for integrated co-teaching classes – which have one special education teacher, one general education teacher and as many as 26 students – than self-contained classrooms, where there are 12 students, one special education teacher and one paraprofessional. This has created a financial incentive for cash-strapped principals to close self-contained classrooms and open up more integrated co-teaching classrooms regardless of the needs of the students. Many parents have told us that their children are floundering after the principal at the child's home school pressured the parents to agree to switch the child from a self-contained class to an integrated co-teaching class because the home school does not have any self-contained classes.

A similar pattern of depriving students with disabilities of needed support is apparent with respect to students whose IEPs call for integrated co-teaching services. Many parents and our members have reported to us that children with disabilities who need full-time integrated co-teaching services are this year only receiving ELA and math instruction in integrated co-teaching classes; these children are being put in regular classes with just one general education teacher for all other subjects.

I want you to know that we at the UFT have done what we said we were going to do when we last appeared before this committee. I told you that the UFT is committed to closing the achievement gap and that we would demonstrate that commitment by increasing our professional development offerings for staff. I am pleased to report that we have provided 13 professional development days for more than 400 teachers on effective practices in implementing integrated co-teaching services. The content of these sessions is based on the work done by Marilyn Friend, a nationally recognized expert. Just this week we provided members with an overview of Response to Intervention. We are planning to expand this offering to include workshops in the five pillars of reading. Last

December, the UFT sent eight staff members to Cornell University in Ithaca for a week to become trainers in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention in Schools. When they returned, they immediately began providing this training for school staff, including paraprofessionals.

I've saved the good news for last. The UFT, the Department of Education's Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners and Cornell University have partnered to form a consortium that we call the Institute for Understanding Behavior. The purpose of the Institute is to provide schools with a systemic approach to understanding, assessing and supporting positive student behavior. Our goals are to improve student achievement by reducing suspension rates, increasing student attendance and enhancing the social and emotional competence of staff and students. This is not a one-shot, turnkey training. The Institute will provide the support to build sustainable practices.

Collaborations of any kind between the Department of Education and the UFT have been very rare during the Bloomberg administration. I have to acknowledge Deputy Chancellor Corinne Rello Anselmi for stepping up to the plate on this one.

We are hopeful that the transition to a new administration in January will provide an opportunity to reset the mission for teaching children with disabilities. In this next chapter, we need to reengage parents, families, school staff, school communities and advocacy groups as partners in improving educational, social and emotional outcomes for these students.