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October 17, 2012

**Testimony of the
New York State School Boards Association
to the
New NY State Education Reform Commission
Presented by Ruth Quinn, New Paltz Central School District**

To the Honorable Members of the New York State Education Reform Commission:

As trustees of the Board of Education of the New Paltz Central School District (NPCSD), we are tremendously proud of our top performing school district. We are a medium-sized school district with approximately 2,250 students in a community of 19,569 residents, comprised of seven towns. Despite the economic recession, our high performing school district makes our area a desirable place to live and we have experienced steady enrollment.

The NPCSD ranks high on many comparative academic measures. Elementary students from kindergarten through grade 8 outperformed their counterparts in Ulster County in five of the six grades tested in ELA and in three out of the six grades tested in math. New Paltz High School graduated the highest percentage of students with Regents diplomas (94%) in the county and had the lowest dropout rate (<1%). Our high school has also been listed on *Newsweek/Washington Post* Best High Schools in the nation for six consecutive years.

The NPCSD is not only a high performing district but it is also an efficient one, sustaining an annual per pupil expenditure (PPE) below the county median. The district has been fiscally responsible while maintaining its quality programming creating budgets that have been below the rate of inflation. Over the course of four years, inflation rate was 5.8% but our school budget increased on average only 2.9% yearly, and concurrently state aid decreased five percentage points over those same four years.

This year, the tax cap required a supermajority (60% voter approval) to increase the tax levy beyond the cap. We proposed a tax levy of 4.4% (1% above the NPCSD tax cap of 3.4%) to preserve the quality of education offered in our district. A simple majority of our voters approved this budget. However, even though 59.39% of the voters approved the budget, it did not pass by 18 votes. As a result of the supermajority provision, the “no” votes weighed heavier, which is not democratic and arguably unconstitutional.

As trustees we have worked hard to balance the needs of our taxpayers with our responsibility to our students. We implemented innovative cost savings by creating a central business office with our neighbors in the Highland Central School District and we decreased the budget by 34%, mostly with program cuts and we used our fund balance and reserves to preserve what we could. Even with this total spending decrease, our taxpayers still faced an increase in their tax bills because of decreases in state and federal aid, and even more unfunded mandates.

Our district, like many others across the state, has been hit with the perfect storm: decreases in federal aid, decreases in state aid, increased unfunded mandates, decreases in fund balance and reserves, and capped revenues (the tax “cap”). As a result, our board made the difficult decision to cut our pre-kindergarten program, to lay-off teachers, which significantly increased class sizes, and to cut many after-school and extracurricular activities. There is enough documentation about the value of early learning and the importance of class size to student achievement that it should be obvious that these cuts directly impacted our program. There is no doubt; we are now in the process of dismantling our excellent education program.

In recent years, the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) has been developed to close the gap in the New York State budget. The result has been to reduce aid to school districts across the state. The GEA represents about \$2,000,000 that is deducted from New Paltz Central School District’s state aid.

And at the same time revenues are diminishing, state mandates requiring excessive testing, onerous reporting, and increasing administrative attention and costs have driven up the expense of education. Not only will our students be spending more time being assessed, but also our administrators will be spending significant time evaluating teachers. The NPCSD will receive a total of \$68,445 in Race to the Top funding over 4 years, and yet the cost of implementing the program far exceeds the funding (in 2011-12 alone, the district has expended over \$80,000 for RTTT/ APPR mandated expenses including staff professional development, substitutes, curriculum development, assessments, and other related expenses. This does not account for lost staff time and lost student learning time.). It will take over 525 administrative hours per year just to observe teachers. Hundreds of additional hours are required to write-up the observations, conduct the post-observation conferences, conduct mid-year conferences, summative conferences, composite scoring, and composite reviews. It also doesn’t include the cost or time for developing State Learning Objectives.

At a time of significant budget cuts and decreased revenue we are also transitioning over to a new curriculum the Common Core State Standard. This means that we have added expenses for training, consultants, tests, new software, computers, and infrastructure such as network improvements. A likely outcome of transitioning to the CCSS is that a lot of private business will make money while less money is directed towards the classroom.

The way that schools are funded is untenable. Not only do we need a moratorium on unfunded mandates, we also need a review of current mandates to provide our schools with real mandate relief. We also need New York State to place a higher value on education. Reliance on the local property taxpayer coupled with decreasing state aid is creating a situation that is failing both our students and our taxpayers. It is undermining the fabric of our community and the excellent education program we have worked so hard to create.

We are proposing:

- A moratorium on new unfunded mandates and a review of current unfunded mandates to provide mandate relief where appropriate
- Repeal the Gap Elimination deduction from state aid
- Increase the amount of aid for schools to be in full compliance with the CFE court ruling
- Revise APPR to provide adequate funding for administering it and time and flexibility for implementing it
- Fund technology improvements, text books, and tests that schools need to implement the Common Core State Standards
- Repeal the tax cap and its undemocratic supermajority provision
- Repeal the prevailing wage and WICKS laws requirements which add significant costs to capital projects
- Place a value on early education by funding Prekindergarten and Kindergarten

As trustees of the NPCSD, we are not willing to watch our school district's stellar educational program be dismantled piece by piece as we quickly move towards educational insolvency and ultimately to fiscal insolvency. This is not in the best interest of our students, our community, or New York State. We need our schools to be sufficiently funded in an equitable manner and we need Albany lawmakers to adequately fund preK-12 public education while providing relief from unfunded mandates.