

**Commonwealth of Pennsylvania**  
**Senate Education Committee**

**Public Hearing on**  
**Education Empowerment Act**  
**York College of PA**

**Testimony of Mayor C. Kim Bracey**  
**Thursday, March 4, 2010**

Senator Piccola, Representative, Senator Dinniman, Representative DePasquale, Secretary Zahorchak, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding provisions to the Education Empower Act.

I am a proud graduate of the City of York public school system.

Over the last half century, however, family dysfunction and poverty, aided and abetted by a negligent state government have led to the gradual decline in the quality of life in our 53 cities of the third class in Pennsylvania, including a serious decline in the performances of our city schools.

A culture of self-respect, respect of others, healthy competition, achievement, and pride have been, in many quarters, replaced with just the opposite, and our townships –and our boroughs are not too far behind – increasingly have become the domiciles for warehousing are poorest, our neediest, and our racial minorities, while suburban schools thrive.

This is not the fault of our children. This is our fault – our collective fault as adults who have allowed this injustice and outrage to occur. We need to have the best interests of the children and community at heart, and a perspective that puts our kids first.

It has been the unofficial but *de facto* policy of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to facilitate the decline of our small cities throughout the last half century. Not unlike other cities our size, such as Lancaster, Reading, and Harrisburg, to name a few, York has serious social and fiscal challenges. 86% of our City student population is on free or subsidized lunch programs. The City School District graduation rate hovers at 65%, which shamefully is the lowest graduation rate in the County. By comparison the next lowest graduation rate is approximately 85% in Hanover and Southwestern School Districts and the

remaining County school districts with well over 90% graduation rates. The 2008-2009 total York City student population was 7,860 students. Of that, 2,183 students were enrolled in charter, private or alternative educational programs. Therefore, just shy of 30% of our City student population is currently not enrolled in the traditional public education system. Our poverty rate is mired at 20%. Our median income is slightly over \$26,000. Nearly 37% of the value of our taxable real estate is tax exempt. All of these challenges, combined with a feckless state government, make it difficult to build and sustain strong social networks and educational and physical environments where our children can thrive.

Because of socio-economic trends; high truancy; dismal graduation rates; the anonymity of the internet, the blogosphere, video games, and mean streets; and because of transitioning neighborhoods where the average household does not stay for more than five years, one could argue that our cities' civic lives have become even more fragmented and diluted in the last 15 years. A major modern evil is anonymity – living in grey shadows where apathy and moral relativism reign supreme and where some urban children have few stable role models, little direction or discipline, and scant hope.

Perhaps the most haunting poster child of anonymity is the functionally homeless child, that is, a child with no fixed address who is shuttled between aunts, uncles, parents of friends, or the boyfriend of mom. Allow me to share a story with you. When we have periodic curfew sweeps in the York, we bring youths into our police department for violating our curfew ordinance and then call their parent or guardian for returning them to their homes. One evening during a sweep, for three siblings, all of whom were under 13 years of age, the calls went unanswered, no one came to pick them up, and they stayed in our police department lobby overnight. That disturbing incident was the impetus behind the city establishing a

curfew center where children can talk to a child care professional and stay in comfort.

This story is, however, a disgrace to our community and something we should not and cannot tolerate. If children are to be our testament of hope, we have to give them stable homes, consistent role models, steady discipline balanced with steady encouragement, and space to breath and dream. It starts in the home and in the immediate block and neighborhood, and all of us, father and mother, aunt and uncle, grandma and grandpa, neighbors and block parents, principal and teacher, pastor, priest, and rabbi, doctor and nurse, coaches and volunteers, county and city governments, and, yes, even the state and federal governments, through adequate funding, through CHIP, and through Head Start, are responsible.

Our public schools face daunting challenges. They must serve all children regardless of language skills or handicapped status or special education or needs ...that is their legal and ethical obligation. Whether students are special education, English as a Second Language students, or behaviorally challenged, our public schools must serve all. As you know, private schools do not have to do this. Public schools do not have that luxury.

We have no illusions. In one administration, we will not halve or make a devastating dent in the percentage of impoverished city residents. We likely will not overthrow a century-old local governmental structure and taxing system, shackled by rigid state law. Many of York's most menacing problems have been festering for fifty years or more. They will not dissipate or disappear in the blink of one administration. And we will not be able to help anyone who does not want to help oneself. But we can make progress, and we must embrace measures and tools that give us a fighting chance to right the ship, which is more of a bulky

cruise liner whose trajectory needs to be righted over time. Simply put, the compass needle must shift in a new direction to help us, climbing through the wilderness, to find a brighter dawn.

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We want to build a city where a young boy or young girl cannot be anonymous. We want to build a city where it is virtually impossible for a young girl or boy to walk outside of home without being exposed to and inundated with the possibilities of learning, imagination, recreation, and beauty. Our parks, architecture, churches, cathedrals of learning, such as York College, Penn State York, and HACC-York, and neighborhoods, combined, will exude an undeniable ethos of pride, purpose, and productivity.

We want a city where it is virtually impossible not to notice the breadth and depth of quality public and private pre-k through 12 educational opportunities. To name a few, William Penn’s performing arts magnet school, the private Logos Academy with a brilliant new home on the Codorus, and the following charter schools provide a diverse range of opportunities: New Hope Academy, Lincoln Edison, Crispus Attucks Youthbuild, and Helen Thackston Middle School, and the Cyber charter school. We also support a proposed international baccalaureate charter school within our major economic development initiative, the Northwest Triangle. Small cities should be bustling with a healthy range of opportunities and a healthy competition amongst providers from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Why? Because, as former Governor Tom Ridge said, speaking here in York, “Education is the ultimate tool of empowerment.” And to quote former Governor and York County native, George Leader, “The only way out of poverty is through education.”

We believe that our city children and youth and families should have access, right here at home, to excellent educational choices and options. Therefore, we support a culture of healthy competition and of choice. We have supported YorkCounts proposed international baccalaureate school at North Street's Smyser-Royer, one of the gems of the Northwest Triangle – the largest community and economic development project in the city's history. Further, the city and its redevelopment authority have supported and facilitated the expansion of Logos academy, which provides a highly competitive private school education.

We want a city where children and youth have full, productive days at school, whatever school their families choose to enroll them, and then at Martin Library, at the YMCA and YWCA, at the Graham Aquatic Center or the gymnastic studio, in the music teacher's home or the art studio, at part-time jobs, and in the church choir or with the church youth group-- where days are filled with books, conversation, physical exertion, the arts, learning and productivity. We want a city where there is no time for idleness – the devil's playground, because one is stretching one's body and endurance limits on real playgrounds and real athletic fields.

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To give us at least a fighting chance to someday reach this vision, something dramatic must be done.

When going door-to-door when I campaigned for mayor, it pained me to hear from many residents that the very same public schools that I once attended are not adequately serving today's students. The schools must be safeguarded and a place where self discipline is a cultural value and excellence is the community expectation. This is the number one complaint I heard when campaigning in all

city neighborhoods. This is not just a perception. Unfortunately, the York City School District has failed to meet federal test score goals for six years.

A new approach is needed. The current empowerment law is not strong enough and does not include the appropriate mix of tools, accountability measures, incentives, and penalties. I believe that the Empowerment Act needs to incorporate an appropriate measure of carrots and sticks and I believe that the proposed amendments do just that.

Therefore, I recommend that the state move toward reauthorization of the state's Education Empowerment Law by June. The federal No Child Left Behind law requires the state to have such a statute, which among other things spells out the consequences for failing to make adequate yearly progress.”

As a recent editorial in the *York Daily Record* succinctly put it: “We cannot sit by watching class after class post standardized test scores that show they are not learning enough to succeed in this competitive, high-tech world.”

Under the provisions currently proposed, state intervention could start with intensive care or one-on-one tutoring for troubled students, renegotiating union contracts, longer school days or years, merit pay for successful teachers or administrators.

In dire situations down the road, intervention could ultimately include closing schools or converting them to charter schools, the state takeover of schools or even dissolution of entire districts, but, under my reading, these radical interventions would only occur after several years of the school district not making adequate progress. I can anticipate that the public and media attention likely will focus on dramatic phrases, such as “state takeover” or “state intervention”, but would politely recommend that all interested parties take the time to at least read the summary of the provisions to the Act before jumping to conclusions.

Ideally, if the tools during the district's early years of recovery are successful, we can right the ship. I see the Act as giving the community the tools, accountability measures, and correct mixture of carrots and sticks to give us a fighting chance to succeed within the next five years.

Please note that I support the Empowerment Act without casting blame on any of the fine administrators, public school educators, and staff, who work their hearts out for our children and should be commended for doing so. They do so with precious few accolades and little appreciation. In fact, I want to publicly thank them for their outstanding work.

They, like Sisyphus pushing the proverbial rock up the hill, are doing everything they can within their power to make our students succeed. And, while some students do succeed, we, as a state and as a community, are not getting the results that are required.

Our support is not unconditional and without caveats and warnings. This Act is not a silver bullet or a panacea, and school reform cannot be seen in a vacuum. Until we get serious as a state about giving the cities the tools to be self-reliant and viable so that community and economic development can take root in all neighborhoods and until a culture of self-respect, respect, and pride can bloom in all neighborhoods, we will not achieve the results we all seek.

It would be foolish to discuss raising the standards for public schools in our small cities without discussing economic development and without discussing the particular financial burdens that confront such cities. These long festering financial burdens, over time, have led to an over-reliance on property taxes, which, in a climate of increasing, mandated costs, cause enduring upward arcs in property



taxes and other fees that frustrate tax predictability, family planning, homeownership, and economic development.

As former York Mayor John Brenner often pointed out, it is a practical failure for our Commonwealth to have 2,562 local governments and to have counties, like York, with 72 municipalities that, for the most part, do their own things without coordinated effort while the county seat is left to grapple with the largest concentrations of tax exempt properties, poverty, and blight. Embarrassingly, Pennsylvania has more municipalities with taxing authority than any state in the nation, yet fewer than ten percent of all its municipalities even have populations of at least 10,000 people.

Cities of the third class should be given a menu of options to become more self-reliant, in the tradition of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, both of which have been bestowed and trusted with a flexible range of means to chart their destinies as world-class cities. Our state legislature and we, the people, need to see our small cities as special, distinctive places that can light up our Commonwealth with innovation, culture, and family-sustaining jobs. We can only realize our destinies as great small cities with great public schools if the Commonwealth affords us appropriate tools.

The stakes are high and the prospects are great. Imagine if the architecture, history, and imaginations of our 1,000 cities and boroughs would be renewed throughout Pennsylvania. Their flickering potential can be barely glimpsed. With the right tools and resources, our 53 small cities and their sibling historic boroughs (more than 900 statewide) – and the public school districts therein -- can become shining cities on the hill, radiating enlightenment, opportunity, and productivity

throughout their regions and throughout our great Commonwealth -- William Penn's "holy experiment" re-engineered for the twenty-first century.