

The Contracts for Excellence: Resources, Accountability, Results

Buffalo

PFC William J. Grabiarz School of Excellence
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To my colleagues and partners in government, and to the educators, parents, students, advocates for children and all my fellow New Yorkers who have gathered here today:

Thank you for joining us as we unveil the Contracts for Excellence, which represent a significant first step in our vision to bring reform and accountability to our education system.

In a larger sense, everything on our broader agenda comes back to a single question: What must we do to restore New York's standing as the Empire State, the beacon of opportunity and prosperity that once lighted the world?

As we consider this question, let us remember that historically, New York's strength was not due to our size, our location, our geography or our natural resources.

Rather, our strength was rooted in the fact that New York was a place where common people rose to achieve uncommon greatness. A place where anyone—no matter what their background—could make the most of their potential and achieve the American dream.

This was only possible because we had a world-class public education system.

But over time, many of our schools fell behind in terms of preparing students for the world they would enter.

Gridlock prevented education reform. Achievement gaps became wider. Funding inequality and a lack of accountability allowed once-proud school districts to struggle. Not coincidentally, once-proud cities began to struggle as well.

Together, we recognize one essential fact: that if we are to become that beacon of opportunity and prosperity once again, we must build a world-class education system in New York once again. We must transform our system from one that provides *some* students with an excellent education into one that provides *all* students with an excellent education—an education that will enable every member of the next generation of New Yorkers to compete, thrive and realize the full measure of their potential in the global economy.

The Need for Accountability

I have always believed that the way to do this is not simply to increase funding for our schools, but to tie new funding to real reform and accountability.

Since January 1, all of us have come together—the Governor, the Legislature, the Board of Regents, local school districts, teachers, concerned parents and advocates for children—and we have begun the task of building a world-class system here in New York. The task is far from complete, but we have begun.

Working with the Legislature, we took the fate of school funding out of the courts and made the single-largest investment in education in New York’s history. In one year alone, we increased school funding by 10 percent, or \$1.8 billion dollars. As a result, we are finally on the road to an adequately-funded system—one that gives every school the resources necessary to provide a sound basic education.

And, working with the Legislature, we began to change the way schools are funded, by enacting a new “Foundation Aid” formula. This formula, for the first time, has begun to distribute school funding based on educational—rather than political—need, thus targeting our historic funding increases to the school districts that need it most.

But we all knew that, if our goal was to build a truly world-class system, simply pouring more money into the system was not the solution.

Some pointed out that simply spending more made no sense because New York already spent more per student on education than all but a handful of states. Others pointed out that simply spending more wasn’t likely to help the students who were in greatest need.

Both sides were right—which is why we tied our historic investment to a historic program of reform and accountability.

The Contracts for Excellence: Tying Increased Funding to Accountability and Results

The centerpiece of our plan for reform and accountability, and the subject I want to discuss today, is the “Contracts for Excellence,” a program that is the first of its kind in the nation.

Let me take a moment to describe how these Contracts work, and how they have the potential to establish a new era of accountability in education.

In exchange for a historic increase in school funding, we required the 55 school districts that received the most new funding, and were in need of some improvement, to enter into a contract with the State called a “Contract for Excellence.” Together, these 55 school districts educate nearly half of New York’s 2.8 million public school children.

These Contracts will ensure that our historic increase in state aid is not wasted, but instead, that it will go directly toward implementing reforms that have been proven to increase student performance. Our menu of reforms includes smaller class sizes, especially in the early grades; increased time on task in the form of longer school days and years; initiatives to increase the

quality of teaching in our schools; middle school and high school restructuring; and effective early learning programs, such as full-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, to help make all kids ready to learn the day they start school and to begin to close the enormous gap facing kids in poverty.

The Contracts for Excellence require each district to use a substantial portion of the new funding they received only for these reforms, and to show where and how every dollar of this funding is being spent.

And in exchange for this new funding, districts are responsible for achieving results.

The State Education Department will require districts to show that they are improving the performance of students with the greatest needs; will require them to make greater progress in attaining state and federal accountability standards; and will hold them accountable if they fail to do so.

Today, I'm proud to announce an important step forward: every single one of the 55 Contracts for Excellence across the State of New York has been signed and is now in place.

Even though we are just at the beginning, these contracts are already beginning to change the way education is provided in New York State.

Recall the menu of reforms we offered: more time on task, smaller class sizes, improving the quality of teaching, middle school and high school restructuring and full-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten. Let me take you around the Empire State and show just a few of the ways that these programs are being implemented.

First, research has shown clearly that *more time on task*—whether in the form of longer school days, a longer school year, after-school programs, or changes in the school day—can make a difference, especially when used in tandem with other reforms.

Here in Buffalo, under your Contract for Excellence, that has been put into practice. Sixteen of the city's schools that are most in need of improvement have lengthened their school day by one hour and the school year by 20 days.

This does not just mean more time; it means more quality time, because each school has doubled the amount of time spent on Math and on English Language Arts and has create small classes of 10 students each for students who are most in need of improvement.

Under the Rochester Contract for Excellence, twenty-six elementary and high schools in Rochester will operate under a new six-day week, with the start of new Saturday sessions. The city's other 34 schools will have a longer school day, giving all of Rochester's students more time for learning.

Second, we know that *smaller class sizes*—especially in the early grades—can improve student achievement. Especially for younger children and especially for children in need, the increase in

personal attention afforded by smaller classes can be the difference between a student falling behind and a student staying engaged in learning.

New York City's Contract for Excellence plans to reduce class sizes in 75 of its lowest-performing and most overcrowded schools. New York City has also set specific targets to get below 20 students per class in kindergarten through grade 3. Seventy miles north, the City of Newburgh has an aggressive three-year plan to reduce class sizes to 20 students for all grade levels at all of its elementary schools. These initiatives will give more of New York City and Newburgh's neediest students the individualized attention that all students deserve.

Third, we know that nothing is more important than *improving the quality of teaching* and administration in our schools. Bringing teacher coaches and mentors into schools—especially to assist younger teachers and those who are teaching more complex material—can have a major impact on the quality of teaching.

The Contract for Excellence in Schenectady embraces this principle with a mentoring program specifically aimed at its elementary schools. A veteran “Master Elementary Teacher” will be assigned to each school to be a coach and mentor to all elementary school teachers, giving teachers someone to turn to and thereby reducing the teacher attrition rate. And under Elmira's Contract for Excellence, the Elmira schools are assigning new instructional coaches and leadership coaches to each of its 13 schools.

Fourth, research has shown that *middle-school and high-school restructuring*—transforming failing schools into environments where learning can occur—can make a real difference.

Under the Rochester Contract for Excellence, the Rochester school district—in partnership with that city's excellent colleges and universities—is putting this principle into action by establishing an entire portfolio of small early- and middle-college high schools, designed to help at-risk students transition from high school to college. And Syracuse and Yonkers are both restructuring schools to create new and more rigorous learning environments for their middle-school-age students. For example, Yonkers is transforming a former Grades 6-8 school into a Grades 7-9 school focused on an engineering and design curriculum that will prepare students to compete for these highly-sought-after jobs in the global economy.

And finally, we know that effective early learning programs—*full-day kindergarten and pre-kindergarten*—can accomplish a great deal toward helping all kids, especially children in need, to be ready to learn the day they start first grade.

This year, we enacted a major early learning initiative, including universal pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten to be fully implemented throughout the state within four years. Several districts in New York chose to build upon this even further by offering full-day pre-kindergarten to their students.

Two examples are White Plains and Syracuse. White Plains will transition from half-day to full-day kindergarten for its neediest students. And Syracuse combined a portion of its Contracts for Excellence funds with Universal Pre-K funds to provide full-day preschool for more than 300

students. In each of these cities, the neediest students once suffered a disadvantage; now they will have a fair start to their education.

These are just a few examples of the hundreds of programs that are now in place, for the first time, across New York State.

Yet when considering the impact of these reforms, I ask you to consider not only these individual examples, but how these reforms are designed to work together. When you have a district in which these reforms are working together—where students are not only staying in school longer, but they are getting more personal attention in smaller classes where the quality of teaching has been improved—then you have a recipe for excellence, and you have the potential to make a significant impact on student achievement.

Looking Ahead: Ensuring Accountability, Improving the Contracts and Monitoring Results

At the same time, let me be clear that I believe we have much more to do if we are to achieve the promise that these Contracts embody.

Put simply, our vision for the Contracts can only succeed if we commit to both building on early successes and correcting early problems.

The first year of Contracts reflects a range in terms of their innovation and ambition. Some represent a high degree of innovation. Others, while a solid start, should go further. This should be the goal in coming years, as should be increasing the focus on ultimate performance. Another important goal will be improving the process of negotiating the Contracts to increase both clarity for school districts and public participation.

Over the course of this initial year of implementation, we must review the process, the performance and the results and determine how to improve them in the near future. I know the Board of Regents shares my commitment to this process and to ensuring that we achieve the best possible results for our children.

The Buffalo Contract: Transforming Education for Buffalo's Neediest Students

To help us truly understand the Contracts for Excellence—and to truly appreciate what they will mean for hundreds of thousands of students across New York—it helps to look in detail at a specific Contract. And the Contract you have put together right here in Buffalo is an excellent model.

What Buffalo has done is focus on the neediest schools first. Under Buffalo's Contract for Excellence, funding has been targeted to the 16 schools that are designated as "Schools Under Registration Review," the highest designation of a school in need of improvement.

These are the schools that serve Buffalo's neediest students. Of the almost 10,000 students in these schools, 91 percent are identified as living in poverty.

Under Buffalo's Contract for Excellence, the educational experience for these students is being transformed.

Since Buffalo began to develop and implement its Contract last summer in anticipation of the approval we announce today, students in these 16 schools have been spending an extra hour in school each day, and they will be spending an additional 20 days in the summer.

All of the increased time is spent on literacy and math—doubling the amount of time students spend on these core subjects.

But this does not simply mean more time. It means more *quality* time, because class sizes have been reduced—to class sizes of 20 in grades K through 3, and class sizes of just 10 in classes for students who have the greatest educational needs.

And not only are more students spending more time on more subjects in smaller classes; the classroom experience itself is changing.

That's because Buffalo's initial implementation of modern testing techniques has enabled teachers to better assess each individual student's progress and, in real time, provide individualized instruction to meet the student's specific needs.

In addition, the Contract is meant to increase support for teachers and thereby strengthen the level of teaching as well. Buffalo has assigned a math coach and a literacy coach full-time to each of these 16 schools.

What does all of this mean?

Buffalo's students in greatest need once learned in large classes. Now they learn in smaller classes. Students once spent too little time on the most important subjects. Now, they spend an intensive amount of time on them. It used to be that if a teacher was struggling with a particular problem, or a particular method, they might have been sent to a seminar at the end of the year. Now, they are receiving support from mentors and coaches every day. And it used to be that students who were struggling the most fell further and further behind. Now, they are put in intensive classes of just 10 students and given the individualized attention they need to get back on track.

At the end of the day, these students, and all of the students in Buffalo's 16 schools in greatest need, now have the ingredients for an excellent education—one that gives them a chance to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to compete.

Real-World Impact: The Buffalo Contract and the Grabiarz School of Excellence

To get a sense of how this works in the real world, let's look at how the Buffalo Contract has impacted the very school we are gathered in today, the Grabiarz School of Excellence.

Over the past two years, Principal Michael O'Brien has worked to transform Grabiarcz. Together with an excellent staff and faculty, he has made real progress. And the Contract for Excellence has given the people of Grabiarcz the tools they need to complete this work

According to Mr. O'Brien, "If you just spend more time doing the same old thing, you have no reason to expect better results. We have that extra time, but I want to emphasize that it's not just extra time, it's extra quality time. We now have targeted assistance. We have targeted intervention. We can shoot for the bull's eye now. We can say, 'This is what a student needs additional help in,' and we can provide it."

According to the teachers and staff at Grabiarcz, the results of these longer, smaller and more targeted classes are already being realized. Mr. O'Brien tells a wonderful story about this.

Last summer, he was overseeing a program at Grabiarcz that was made possible by additional funding and the Contracts for Excellence. Summer programs tend to enroll a higher proportion of troubled students. Indeed, as Mr. O'Brien walked around the school, he saw many students who were known to have behavior problems—students he referred to as "frequent fliers" to his office.

But as he walked around the school, he noticed that a very strange thing was happening. The students were completely engaged and participating. No one was being sent to his office.

So he stepped into a sixth-grade classroom and raised the question one day: "Why is it that, two weeks into this program, none of you has been sent out of the classroom and down to my office?" And one of the students—a student named Davion Jones, who Mr. O'Brien recognized as a previous visitor to the principal's office—raised his hand and responded:

"Because we're successful. And don't you know that success is addicting."

If that does not exemplify what we are fundamentally trying to achieve in education, then I don't know what does. That child's experience of school had been transformed. His success was building upon itself, leading to confidence and more success.

And according to Mr. O'Brien, the Contracts provided the time, the technology, the multiplicity of support, and most importantly, the challenge to make it possible.

This illustrates the potential that adequate funding and accountability hold for New York's education system. If Davion Jones's experience becomes the norm for students across New York, we will have succeeded in giving our children the skills and support they need.

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Yet, while the signals of change are unmistakable, we are still at an early and fragile moment.

We know that our vision for educational excellence cannot be complete in one year, and that the Contracts for Excellence are only part of what must be done to change our education system.

Therefore, at this moment, the greatest threat to our vision is complacency. Going forward, we must continue to ask the tough questions that are necessary to determine what is working about the Contracts and what needs to be improved. We need to monitor closely the achievement of these students, these schools, and these districts; and if they fail, we need to hold them—and ourselves—accountable.

If we work together to carry out this vision, I am confident that New York will once again shine as a beacon of hope, opportunity and prosperity for all of its people.

And in the words of John F. Kennedy, “the glow from that fire will truly light the world.”

Thank you.