2009 John E. Burton Lecture
University at Albany
April 28, 2009
by Chancellor Merryl H. Tisch

Leading a Race to the Top: Higher Education's Role in Raising Standards for New York's Public Schools

I've been told over the last month that I became the Chancellor of New York's Board of Regents at the best of times and the worst of times for public education.

For the first time since the late 1960s, public education is in the national spotlight. Educators are used to being the forgotten stepchild of American social policy. But now the tables have turned. Never has there been more interest in reforming public education than the present. This is a moment of tremendous opportunity, one that we must seize upon to dramatically lift our kids' life chances.

I don't need to remind anyone who casually glanced at this morning's paper that this is also the worst of times. It's no secret that states and districts are strapped for cash. We all know that public education relies on property tax revenue to pay the bills. So education is among the public services most endangered by the current economic crisis. Every day, our teachers enter classrooms teeming with kids whose families are struggling. Kids whose parents have lost jobs. Kids who are living hand-to-mouth out of motel rooms because their home is in foreclosure. These are tumultuous and uncertain times, educators are youngsters last line of defense - a beacon of stability for kids where everything else is in flux.

For better or worse, these are the conditions that frame our work as state education policymakers. Today, I want to speak specifically about the role of higher education in leading a race to the top for New York's public schoolchildren.

The educational challenges we face are enormous. America pulled ahead of the world by investing in universal secondary education, and later in college education, before most other countries caught on. Other countries saw secondary and tertiary education as the province of a privileged few. Instead, we progressively extended educational opportunity to all Americans. Our dizzying economic growth throughout the 20th century is a testament to the enduring wisdom of this strategy.

The bad news is that college completion has stagnated over the past few decades. In our urban communities, the problem is that our students don't graduate from high school. Before the race even starts, these students are shut out of the better life that a college education affords.

But for the most part, the problem is not that kids don't get to college. A higher fraction of high school graduates begin college in this country than at any other time in our history. But for too many of our young adults, college is the fabled Hotel California. Most of them check in, but only a third graduate in four years.

The causes of our college dropout crisis are complex. Part of the problem is academic. We send too many students to college without the academic skills that they need to be successful. Part of the problem can be traced to "soft skills"- what many researchers today call "non-cognitive skills" - like motivation and persistence. Even among students with exceptional academic skills, many do not graduate. The problem is not that these students can't do the work. The problem is that they miss 100 percent of the shots they don't take. They don't show up to class, they miss a deadline, they fall behind, and ultimately they drop out. And for students in both of these groups, often the crushing burden of college tuition proves too much to bear. When students cannot pay for their studies and still make ends meet, they have little choice but to leave.

President Obama recently issued a challenge to America's young people to turn this trend around, and to do it quickly. By 2020, he said, "America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

What will New York state do to help us get there? The first step is to substantially raise our state standards so that all students leave high school ready for higher education.

State leaders committed to raising standards now have a powerful ally in Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Duncan's "Race to the Top Fund" offers New York a tremendous opportunity to take a good, hard look at the standards we've set for our schools and lead a national movement for higher standards. The program will fund a group of states willing to do the hard work needed to significantly increase students' performance. Part of that commitment requires adopting a single, high national standard for proficiency, a standard that will prepare students for the rigors of higher education, the workplace, and citizenship. I plan for New York State to be a leader in this effort.

None of this is new to New Yorkers. We have always been a national leader in setting rigorous standards for our students, and our investment has paid off for New York's schoolchildren. In 2008, four out of every five of our students in grades 3 through 8 met state standards in math. More than two out of every three met the standards in English Language Arts. Our elementary students in particular have excelled. 90 percent of our state's 3rd graders met state standards in math in 2008.

But New Yorkers have never been satisfied to rest on our laurels. That's why I plan to embrace Secretary Duncan's "Race to the Top" challenge and raise our expectations of what our students should know and be able to do.

It is not enough to simply raise standards and hope for the best. Our teachers need to be prepared to help youngsters meet and exceed these standards. That's where higher education comes in.

I was a first grade teacher for seven years. I remember feeling woefully unprepared in the first year. When I talk to new teachers now, I realize that I wasn't alone.

I've come to believe that this preparation gap is shared by traditional and alternative certification programs alike. As part of my dissertation on the New York City Teaching Fellows program – a program that recruits high-achieving career changers and recent college graduates to teach in

New York City schools - I interviewed new Teaching Fellows about their preparation for the classroom.

Over and over again, I heard the same story. These Fellows learned a lot about theory in their courses, but little about the concrete strategies they needed to push their students forward and get through the school day successfully. One teacher told me, “I feel like the coursework side of this program has been very disappointing to me. The majority of what I’ve learned about teaching comes from my own reading. The coursework is totally disconnected to my classroom experience.” Another teacher echoed the same sentiment about the troubling gulf between theory and practice, “It’s not so much that the curriculum itself is wrong; it’s just that the requirements do not match up with what is possible in the classroom.”

If we are honest with ourselves, I believe we’ll conclude that neither traditional teacher education programs nor alternative teacher certification programs are currently meeting the needs our schoolchildren. So I submit to you that we need a third way. My dissertation advisor, the former President of Teachers College Arthur Levine, put it best when he recently said, "The universities tend to be too theoretical, and a lot of the alternative programs are too practical. It would be really nice if we could meld the lessons of both."

What are some of these lessons of which we should take note? Traditional university-based programs have had difficulty attracting high academic achievers as well as teachers of color. These programs often do not prepare students specifically for the challenges of teaching disadvantaged youth with diverse educational needs. These programs require much more theoretical coursework than fieldwork that are necessary to prepare early teachers for the everyday challenges of teaching. And once students enter the teaching profession, traditional programs generally do not have the resources to mentor and support them through the transition to full-time teaching.

Alternate pathways to certification share many of these problems, though some selective programs like Teach for America and New York City Teaching Fellows have succeeded in recruiting exceptionally talented teacher candidates and in providing specialized training in

meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. At the same time, alternative certification programs offer minimal classroom experience prior to full-time teaching, which sometimes leaves new teachers drowning in their first year. Alternate route teachers relate that it is difficult to juggle the demands of teaching and coursework simultaneously. And a recent national study of alternate route programs commissioned by the Institute of Education Sciences confirmed these concerns. Students of alternate route teachers who are currently enrolled in coursework suffer academically when compared to the students of traditionally certified teachers.

My point is that both traditional and alternative certification programs have much to learn from each others' strengths. Beyond looking for answers to our teacher preparation challenges within the education profession, we should also look to other professions as models. In my view, the profession that provides an exceptional model to which education should aspire is medicine.

What does the medical profession do differently than the education profession? Medical schools emphasize practical training in addition to training in the basic sciences. Doctors don't simply learn the theory of starting an IV line; they practice over and over again until they perfect their technique. Medical school instruction is evidence-based, the result of rigorous randomized trials where treatments are not accepted simply because they are novel and trendy, but because they have hard evidence behind them. When doctors treat and prescribe, they stand on the shoulders of researchers who have ruthlessly rooted out treatments that did not benefit patients. In education, we are faddishly myopic, shifting our attention from month to month to adopt the latest theory.

In medicine, there is a relentless focus on patient outcomes, and that training begins in medical school. Each time a treatment is administered, the central question is always, "Did my treatment work for this patient? And if not, what am I going to do differently to change that in the future?" In teaching, we sometimes hear teachers say, "I don't know what happened. I taught it." This is a very different professional orientation, one that both alternative and traditional teacher preparation programs can play a role in changing.

Medical schools also inculcate strong professional norms in their students about the sanctity of patient care. And once doctors start practicing, their practice is very public. If a surgeon observes her colleague doing a terrible job in the operating room, that surgeon knows she has a professional obligation to speak up. If she looks the other way, she is an accomplice and a betrayer of medicine's guiding principle, "First, do no harm."

Yet how many times a day in our schools do teachers and principals pass by the room of a colleague who everyone knows is not up to snuff? Following medicine, we need to throw open classroom doors and de-privatize teaching. We need teachers to take responsibility not only for what happens in their own classrooms, but what happens in every classroom in their school. And we need preparation programs – traditional and alternative - to play a central role in making that happen by socializing early practitioners in a strong set of shared professional norms.

Looking to medicine can also help us understand that preparation should not stop when a teacher finishes his certification program. Hospitals are structured so that the formal process of learning the art and science of medicine doesn't end at medical school graduation. We don't expect newly minted residents to assume the role of attending physicians when they walk in the door. In medicine, learning is progressive and supervised. The motto is "see one, do one, teach one." But in education, we deal new teachers a losing hand by expecting them to perform the same duties on day 1 of their careers as they will perform in year 25.

The education profession has started to draw lessons from medicine by designing innovative new teacher preparation approaches like "teaching residencies," an idea that President Obama has popularized by proposing that we substantially expand these programs. These programs pair aspiring teachers with a highly skilled mentor for a full school year. The mentor then coaches the teacher as she assumes more control over the classroom. Unlike student teaching, which is generally unpaid, the teaching resident is paid a salary - albeit a lower one than first year teachers. The resident's classroom experiences are complemented by course work at a university, and often culminate in a master's degree. The catch is that residents must commit to continue teaching in that district for a given number of years. For example, the Chicago program requires a four-year commitment. Once teachers are given their own class, they continue to receive

coaching and support from a mentor. Participating schools are essentially transformed into teaching hospitals, and the results to date are quite promising.

I am strongly committed to expanding alternative certification and create new pathways for talented individuals to enter the profession. To effectively grow these programs, we need higher education institutions to be creative in developing new programs – either on their own or in partnership with museums, libraries, and other alternate route organizations – that will help meet our state's teaching needs.

My enthusiasm for alternative certification and for programs like Teach for America, however, comes with one important caveat. I want to caution against the naïve view that selective alternative certification programs like Teach for America are a sufficient solution to our country's teacher quality problems. If you have met these young people, you know that there are a great many benefits to programs like Teach for America though which young people commit to teach for two years. We should honor their service to disadvantaged schoolchildren. It is impossible not to be inspired by their passion, energy, and idealism. Many Teach for America corps members go on to careers in public education: some stay in the classroom, but others continue their work at other levels of the system.

But our urban schools are literally hemorrhaging new teachers, and that is a problem that cannot be resolved by programs like Teach for America. The math simply does not work out. Almost half of our teachers in urban centers are leaving before their fifth year of teaching. Even if *all* graduates of our top universities opted to teach for two years, we would still be left with hard-to-staff schools on our hands.

We need to bring new talent into classrooms, and I believe that we need to expand alternative certification and the definition of certifying institutions to get there. But recruiting talent is not enough. We need to keep excellent teachers in the classroom and provide average teachers with the support and training to become excellent ones.

What needs to happen to keep the best teachers in the classroom? Think about your own job. What do you want? You want a workplace that provides you with the tools you need to get the job done. You want a system that helps you learn the ropes when you are new. You want a boss who is fair and helps you do your job better. You want training opportunities to hone your skills. You want to be treated with respect for the professional that you are. And you want to be acknowledged and rewarded when you do an exceptional job.

Somehow we forget these basics when we step into the education policy arena. We ask teachers to work under conditions we would never accept for ourselves. Where their school buildings are crumbling. Where they have to open their windows in January because their classroom is 85 degrees. Where the Xerox machine never works. Where there are 34 students in a class.

We offer teachers almost no support to help them improve their craft. We give them the same job description on day 1 as they do in year 25. We give them the same pay whether they do a phenomenal job or a lousy one.

And then we are surprised when they leave.

Let me suggest that the conversation about teacher retention needs to start with a simple question. Would you work under these conditions for three years, twelve years, or thirty years? I won't ask for a show of hands, but I'm guessing that most of us would not. We owe it to our teachers to create the necessary preconditions for powerful teaching and learning to occur. And when teachers leave in droves, we should hold a mirror up to ourselves and ask if we are keeping our end of the bargain.

Beyond teacher preparation, higher education has an important role to play in conducting research and development on effective teacher preparation. University of Albany researchers such as Don Boyd and Hamp Lankford, along with their former Albany colleague Jim Wyckoff (WHY-koff), are already national leaders in this area. Their "Teacher Pathways Project" is the first to comprehensively investigate the role that pathways into teaching, both traditional and nontraditional, play in improving teacher quality in New York State. But these researchers don't

examine the effects of teacher preparation in isolation. They recognize that factors like teacher salaries, working conditions, and district hiring practices work in tandem with teacher preparation pathways to shape our teaching force. Their overall goal – one that puts them at the cutting edge of educational research – is to develop policies that will both attract and retain high-quality teachers, and provide education policymakers with data to inform their policy decisions.

I'm here today to ask for your help. Education policymakers in this state need higher education as our partner. We need your fresh ideas. We need your help to develop new innovations. We need your help to evaluate your effectiveness and their effectiveness. We need your help to understand what's working for our kids, and what's not.

We need you to collect and share data about your own institutions – that will help us build a shared vision of best practice.

Together we have an opportunity to seize a unique moment in time – a moment where policy makers from the White House and school districts all over the country are intently focused on finally closing the achievement gap, when the national media is chock full of stories highlighting the key role improving public schools must play in getting our economy back on track, when millions of Americans including hundreds of thousands of our best and brightest young people are considering teaching and education as a career and a cause for the first time, when policy makers from the left and the right are reconsidering long held beliefs in favor of a pragmatic approach that asks only: what works to make good schools better and finally turn failing schools around.

We don't get to choose when these moments come and this one might not come again for a long time. So even though it comes during the worst economic crisis in a generation -- when schools in every community in this country are struggling like never before -- when millions of kids are going to school everyday in this country and returning at night to parents who have lost jobs, lost hours and, in too many cases, lost homes. Even though this moment comes during this crisis – it's here -- -- and now more than ever - we need you.

Thank you very much.