

Testimony of Michael R. Bloomberg

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Before

The House Committee on Education and Labor

On

Mayor and Superintendent Partnerships in Education: Closing the
Achievement Gap

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Good morning. I want to thank Chairman Miller – whom we were pleased to welcome to New York last winter – and the members of this Committee for convening this hearing on Urban Education Reform. Chairman Miller played an important role in drafting the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act, which brought accountability to public schools from coast to coast. Now, in working towards authorizing a new and improved Act, this committee has rightly focused on one of the most pressing issues in public education: the achievement gap that exists among students of different races and ethnicities.

Our country is built on the principle that all those willing to work hard have a shot at success. But the achievement gap undermines that. Today in America, Black and Hispanic 12th graders are reading at the same level as white 8th graders, and unfortunately, there are too many people who accept the achievement gap as an inevitable result of social and economic factors that are out of a school’s control. In New York City – where more than 70% of our 1.1 million public school children are Black and Hispanic – that’s not a conclusion we’re willing to accept.

That’s why over the past six years, we’ve done everything possible to narrow the achievement gap – and we have. In some cases, we’ve reduced it by half. But to make even greater progress, we need to zero in on two areas that go to the heart of improving NCLB, and that have been key to turning around New York City schools: People and Accountability.

First, people. Studies have shown that if our best teachers taught our lowest-performing students, we could close the achievement gap within five years. And by the best teachers, I mean those with a proven track record of helping children learn. Far too much emphasis is placed on seniority or academic credentials when what we really should be rewarding is effectiveness.

That’s exactly what we’re doing in New York City. First, we showed our teachers just how much we value the important work they do by raising salaries across the board by 43%. Those higher salaries will also help us attract a new crop of bright graduates, who might otherwise have opted for jobs in other fields – or teaching jobs in other locations. Second, we’ve improved the tenure process so that tenure becomes a meaningful decision based on student learning rather than a foregone conclusion. Third, we’ve created financial incentives to encourage the most effective teachers and principals to choose to work in the schools that need them most. Finally, we reached breakthrough agreements with both the principals’ union and the teachers’ union to establish pay-for-performance bonuses – an idea that teachers’ unions have traditionally opposed. But by structuring our pay-for-performance program in a way that puts the decisions in the hands of teachers and principals, we won support from the head of the local teacher’s union, Randi Weingarten. As you may know, Randi is now the president of the national AFT, and I think that’s a good thing, because her willingness to experiment could result in more school districts adopting pay-for-performance programs.

Pay-for-performance leads us to the second key to closing the achievement gap: accountability. In New York City, we’ve established data-driven progress reports that give a letter grade to every single school, and we send them out to every public school

parent. These are progress reports in the truest sense of the word, because they don't just measure how many kids at a given school are proficient, they also measure something we care about much more: year-to-year progress. A school's letter grade on its progress report is determined by many different factors – including its success in narrowing the achievement gap. Based on the data we're collecting, there are now rewards for success in our schools – and consequences for failure. If a school continuously fails its students, we will shut it down. And if a teacher continuously fails his or her students, we will work to give principals the tools to remove that teacher from the classroom.

Unfortunately, this hasn't been very easy to do in New York – or in many other cities – because of inflexible union work rules. I believe we should be treating teachers like the professionals they are. And that means not only paying them as professionals, but also holding them accountable as professionals. That would go a long way toward ensuring we have top-quality teachers in high-needs schools – the single most important factor in closing the achievement gap. But to do it, we need federal leadership – and let me suggest one promising idea: Congress can use the power of the purse to withhold funds from districts that fail to take meaningful steps towards reform.

Rewards for success and consequences for failure. That's how it works in the real world – the world that our students will enter when they finish school. We've got to do everything we can to prepare them for that day, so that all of them – regardless of skin color – leave school ready to claim their piece of the American Dream.”