



Statement for the Record

On behalf of the

**New York State Parent Teacher
Association (PTA)**

and

**National Parent Teacher
Association (PTA)**

Before the
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

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By

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Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Kildee, subcommittee members, and fellow distinguished panelists; I am honored to have the opportunity to speak before you today on behalf of the more than five million members of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and to discuss the importance of meaningful family engagement in student learning and school success. With more than 24,000 local units, PTA flourishes in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific. I speak to you today as the President of the New York State PTA, comprising nearly 350,000 members working to improve educational outcomes for children and families in New York State.

Founded in 1897, PTA has been working to improve the education, health, and overall well-being of our nation's children for more than 115 years. As the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the United States, PTA's legacy of influencing local, state, and federal policy has made an indelible impact in the lives of millions of children and families. This legacy includes the creation of kindergarten classes, a juvenile justice system, child labor laws, mandatory immunizations for school children, and continues today as PTA fights to ensure recognition of family engagement programs and practices as a vital component of sustainable education reforms and increased student achievement. The influence of PTA is most readily felt at the state and local levels, where the association works tirelessly to promote systemic, comprehensive, and meaningful school and district-parent collaboration to better serve all students; even in schools where no PTA has been formed. It is the local and state level work and experiences I am here to speak about today.

I first became involved in education more than 30 years ago as an eager parent of a new kindergarten student in Valley Stream, New York. As my children progressed through school, my husband and I became increasingly frustrated with the limited parent-teacher interaction and poor quality of the information shared regarding our children's academic progression and the overall quality of our children's school. I remember walking out of the annual parent-teacher conference having been told "Brian is doing well..." with no additional information on what "well" meant or how we, as parents, could play a role in ensuring continued success. Were there areas for improvement? What was he learning? What were the expectations? What could we, as parents, be doing at home to build on classroom instruction during his out-of-school time?

I started thinking about the parents of children who may not be performing as well as my son Brian. What about the parents of students attending lower-performing schools in districts not as good as Valley Stream? This frustration prompted me to not only advocate for my child, but also for all children through involvement in PTA and later as a member of my local school board. Parents and families must be empowered with the tools to engage in not only individual student learning, but also school reform and improvement. Parents must be equipped with an understanding of educational delivery structures that exist to serve their children and community so they, too, can advocate for their children, whether that be by exercising school choice options or collaborating to strengthen the school their child attends. There was a time when access to performance information wasn't the norm; and while we've come a long way in our use of data to

empower parent involvement in education, we must remember that there's only value if the available data is high quality, understandable and actionable for parents and families. As PTA has stated previously, when parents are not equipped with meaningful information, transparency, regardless of good intent, achieves limited results.

For eleven years, I served as a Trustee of both the District 30 and Valley Stream Central High School Boards of Education. Fellow board members and I worked to ensure that all schools across our district included parent representation in decision-making processes dealing with everything from curriculum to student health and safety. Perhaps most importantly, this school-level practice served to build relational trust among parents and school leaders, with parent representation identified and selected by parent peers, not simply appointed by school personnel. While I no longer serve as school board member, the current superintendent has continued to encourage this practice, as well as instituted regular district-level conversations with PTA leadership from all schools. I can say that increased collaboration at the school and district level made my job as a school board trustee easier – allowing me to enter into district-level decision-making with confidence that the parent voice was integral to moving recommendations forward.

We all agree that children, regardless of their parents' educational attainment, socioeconomic status, or zip code, deserve a quality education. But what I have truly come to realize through my involvement in the PTA is that all parents - despite all the barriers I have previously mentioned – also want to be the driving force in ensuring their children have a quality, world-class education. First and foremost, parents want to know that their neighborhood school is preparing students for college and career through quality instruction and a safe climate conducive to learning. Unfortunately, this is not the case in all public schools, and while PTA supports the introduction of innovative quality public school choice options that serve to increase student achievement, the reality is that choice for the sake of choice does not guarantee systemic or sustainable improvements to our nation's educational delivery system.

More than forty years of research shows that when families and communities are effectively engaged in student learning and school improvement, student achievement increases. This is especially true of chronically low-performing schools. According to a longitudinal study of school turnaround efforts in Chicago public schools, family engagement is one of five necessary ingredients to sustainable reform and increased student achievement: as necessary as school leadership and curriculum alignment. The evidence is clear, yet all too often we discuss parent engagement through a narrowed lens limited only to school choice.

Public school choice is a good thing – but choice shouldn't be viewed as an engagement strategy. Perhaps we're asking the wrong question – instead of asking how to empower parents by providing alternatives to their neighborhood school, why aren't we empowering parents by engaging all stakeholders to ensure that every neighborhood school lives up to the quality promise we've made to educate all students? All public schools – traditional, charter, magnet – must have the capacity to build and capitalize on effective school-family partnerships to increase student achievement.

We should empower parents by preparing our teachers and leaders in research-based and culturally competent family engagement practices that have demonstrated positive impact on student achievement and school climate. We should empower parents with real, tangible tools to supplement student learning at home coupled with accessible, understandable, and actionable student and school data that serves to inform and support instruction and learning. “Your school is broken – send your child here instead” isn’t tantamount to effectively engaging parents in education. This is especially true in areas where meaningful school choice isn’t a real feasibility – areas like remote rural New York State.

I am proud to report that efforts to implement sustainable reforms by partnering with parents to make all schools great are currently underway in my home state of New York. Concerned with the sustainability of education reform implementation due to lack of stakeholder collaboration and understanding, Every Person Influences Children (EPIC) and Cornell Cooperative Extension, both former Parental Information and Resource Center (PIRC) grantees came together with NYS PTA. As a team collaborated with NYSED to develop the *On the Same Page Summit: A NYS Summit for Family Engagement in Education* to support systemic change in the New York State Educational System through strategic dialogue and action on family engagement as a catalyst for closing the achievement gap in Title I schools.

As an outgrowth of the annual summit and in recognition of the role family engagement plays in student and school success, NYS is working to advance New York State’s Board of Regents approved statewide family engagement policies. Specific areas of focus include:

- Approval of family engagement quality indicators and assessment tool for Local Educational Agencies;
- Teacher and school leader professional development in family engagement practices;
- Implementation and replication of research-based strategies to engage diverse families; and
- Inclusion of culturally-competent family engagement in higher education and professional certification programs.

In New York State, while many parents are provided with public school choice options in addition to the neighborhood public school, we recognize the importance of building the capacity of all schools and families to meaningfully partner for the benefit of our students. Thankfully, NYSED recognizes the importance of providing local educational agencies with access to statewide support and technical assistance for local implementation of research-based, proven effective policies and programs to improve communication between schools and families. PTA is committed to improving parent understanding of school accountability and data, informing families of public school choice options, and empowering parents to support learning at home and in the

community; all of which is necessary to maintain momentum and ensure sustainability of education reforms.

I understand the purpose of this hearing is to discuss local and state efforts; however, PTA believes federal leadership is important to ensuring all districts and states are able to meaningfully partner with parents. We are especially thankful to Congresswoman McCarthy and Congressman Platts of this Committee for their leadership via introduction of H.R.1821, The Family Engagement in Education Act, legislation that encompasses recommendations to ensure sustainability of practice while allowing for and rewarding local flexibility. While thankful for the bipartisan attention that family engagement has garnered during the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization process, we strongly urge the Committee to further consider the role of research-based family engagement policies and programming that are both more effective and far-reaching than school choice as communicated through the provisions of H.R. 1821.

I conclude with this thought - without parents at the table, both at school and at home, sustainable reforms that equip all public schools to provide a world-class education will not become a reality. PTA continues to advocate for prioritization of family engagement in education – and this is why I will continue to engage in this important work. Our nation’s children and families deserve the benefits of quality family-school partnerships.

I would like to again thank Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Kildee, subcommittee members, and my fellow panelists for the opportunity to engage in a discussion on the question of how to meaningfully empower and partner with parents. Thank you and I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.