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**Testimony to New York State Commission on Property Tax Relief**  
**Hearing of October 30, 2008**  
**Buffalo, New York**

The Erie County Association of School Boards has been advancing the concept of regionalization and collaboration for several years, to the point of establishing an arm of our organization called Promoting Partnerships in Public Education.

Economic conditions in our region prompted our focus on conducting operations more cost effectively and efficiently, in ways that would not sacrifice quality in our schools. Economic conditions in our state and nation now cry out for an even larger scale effort in regional and statewide collaboration and shared services. To simply conduct “business as usual” is not an option.

Therefore, we welcome and support the recommendations of this commission that would:

- 1) reform archaic systems that drive up the cost of education
- 2) restructure benefit systems that are essential but whose cost is becoming unsustainable
- 3) reverse the trend of pushing mandates down to the local school district level, where the capacity of the local taxpayer has been stretched to the limit.

We understand that the real way to reduce property taxes is to cap costs. Here are the key areas that need to be examined:

- **Target cost sharing strategies** through boards of cooperative educational services and other collaborative incentives. This may mean leveraging buying power through shared purchasing, merging back office functions, using cooperative contracts rather than individual school district bids for transportation services, creating cooperative regional health care consortiums, or even regionally negotiated benefits for all labor units.

- **The drum is constantly being pounded** for reform of the Wicks Law and the Triborough Amendment. Consider it banged again. These are major items that must be addressed. If changed, they would significantly reduce school district spending.

- **Benefit costs need to be reduced.** The goal should not be to take away benefits - leaving families less able to cope and sustain their needs does not help. But trying to maintain the unaffordable doesn't help either. So let's broaden the scope of health care trusts in which multiple districts participate. These trusts significantly rein in costs and still provide excellent coverage. To maximize cost containment on a larger scale, a statewide health care trust should be explored.

- **As for pensions,** well, we need them and we need them to be secure. Having pensions less dependent on market swings than 401k's is not a bad thing. But, again, it must be affordable. Districts should be allowed to create reserves to cover estimated pension cost payments as well as

unplanned increases. And a Retirement System Tier V, with new members contributing a fair amount throughout their employment, deserves attention.

**Other ideas:** Re-examine mandates that have nothing whatsoever to do with children's education. Employee time off for blood donations and paid half-days off for breast and prostate cancer screenings are laudable public health efforts, but expensive programs for school districts. School employees already have significant vacation time, sick time, personal time, holidays and summers. Whoever said these types of items wouldn't cost anything is simply wrong. Employees are paid for time off and districts must pay substitutes to teach their classes.

**While we're reviewing** unfunded and underfunded mandates, let's look at the federal level. The government has shirked its responsibilities for funding promised for special education (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for years. State and local tax dollars have been making up the difference in billions of dollars of federal funding shortfalls.

We must reduce expenses, but simply cutting funding will not achieve that goal without severe cutbacks in school districts. Instead, now is the time for mandate reform. Now is the time for maintaining aid rather than shifting those costs to the local property taxpayer. Now is the time for shared services, for BOCES, for health care trusts, for pension reform. Now is the time to do the things that really will make a difference.

Thank you for your efforts in this direction and thank you for the time to speak today.