

Testimony of Garth Harries –Assistant Superintendent for Portfolio and Performance Management, New Haven, Connecticut and former Chief Executive for Portfolio Development, New York City Department of Education

September 2, 2009 – Washington DC – Howard University

Commissioners of the Aspen Institute NCLB School Turnaround Committee:

My name is Garth Harries. In July of this year, I became an Assistant Superintendent in New Haven, Connecticut. I am here today to talk with you primarily about the experiences of my prior position, in New York City. Between 2004 and July, I served as Chief Executive of the Office of Portfolio Development, Chief Executive of the Office of New Schools, and Chief Operating Officer of the Office of New Schools at the New York City Department of Education. In that time I was responsible for implementing the DOE's New Schools Strategy – what amounted to our turnaround approach – and I am honored and gratified to share the lessons of that experience with you. New York City's New School Initiative provides an important reference point to school turnaround efforts nationally, both for the example of success at scale in the reinvention of individual school buildings, and also for the important systemic implications of new school, or school turnaround, reform.

By way of introduction, three quick points. First, let me give you a sense of the New School Initiative in New York City. Between 2002¹ and 2009, NYCDOE opened 335 new DOE public schools, and 86 new charter public schools. The majority of District schools we opened were secondary schools (175 High Schools and 58 6-12 schools); we also opened 66 middle schools and 36 Elementary Schools. New charter schools, by comparison, were more almost always elementary and middle schools. Obviously, the absolute scale of the New School Initiative in New York is staggering, bigger than all but a handful of other districts. The relative scale is also striking, insofar as new schools represent roughly 25% of the total number of schools in the system, and roughly half of high schools. Most importantly, performance gains have been stark. Elementary and middle schools consistently out-perform the schools they replaced, based on the New York City Progress Reports. Students in charter schools in New York City score at the same level as students throughout New York State – despite being twice as likely to be minority or low-income. In the high schools and secondary schools – the initial focal point of the new school initiative – despite serving a student population starting markedly further behind standards than the norm in New York City, students are 12 points more likely to earn enough credits to be promoted in 9th grade and 14 points more likely to graduate 4 years later – even though more students are starting high school behind grade level than the norm.² It is worth emphasizing that not all the new schools we opened were successful – some schools struggled, and others were little better than the schools they

¹ In 2002 new schools were opened as part of the Bronx New Century Program, prior to the arrival of Chancellor Joel I. Klein; we include the schools opened this year in our count of schools in the New School Initiative because we built our wider new initiative from the design principles of this first year, and we supported these schools through their phase in.

replaced, and will shortly be candidates for closure themselves. But what is distinctive about the New School Initiative is both the general pattern of success, and the complementary increases in performance around the system. Of the 15 percentage point increase in graduation rate between 2002 and 2008 in New York City, the Parthenon group attributed 5% of overall gain directly to the new high schools themselves – and I would argue that a significant additional percentage came from the dismantling of the lowest performing schools, and from the starkness of the accountability message sent to the rest of the school system.

Second, it is worth underscoring the theoretical underpinning of our turnaround work in New York City, and much of our other work in New York. The New School Office in New York City is a disciple of the idea that the school is the unit that matters – that our ambition should not be to be a great school system, but to be a system of great schools. The school is the collection of adults that interact with students through their days and over the course of the years, making a thousand small decisions that in sum constitutes the educational experience of students, as well as the professional environment and learning environment for adults. Although an abstract idea, this theoretical underpinning had important implications for our day-to-day work in the New School Initiative, and I think important implications for federal policy making. In our New School Initiative, we sought to confront the hard facts about school failure, and we sought to be pragmatic in arranging the circumstances so that new, or reinvented, groups of adults could be successful. We found, in that work, that there were very few quick fixes. We focused less on educational theory and more on the collection and collaboration of adults serving students. By constantly asking ourselves what was best for school organizations, by consistent and applied focus, by initiating new closures and new schools every year, we were not only able to reinvent specific school buildings; we were able to send signals into the rest of the system that helped to lift all schools.

Third, I should clarify how I use terms. In my lexicon, turnaround is a broad category, including any of a variety of interventions that create a different organization to serve students in the place of an existing failing school organization. I self-consciously differentiate this from the soft meaning of school turnaround, the idea that we can effectively reform school organizations from the inside through additional resources and programs, and without making difficult decisions about the fit of adults with the new organization. This softer conception of turnaround is a strategy that I do not favor, one that I believe offers a false appeal –and which does not reflect the work of New York City's central school turnaround effort, what we called the New School Initiative. On one side of the New School Initiative is the school creation effort. With the generous support of the Gates Foundation, The Carnegie Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and others, we were able to build in New York City a vibrant pipeline and a strong support structure for school planning teams reinventing the way that education would be delivered to New York City students. I will talk in my recommendations about some of the important aspects of that pipeline – aspects of the creative work of building school leadership, cultures, and systems that I think bear lessons for all forms of effective school turnaround. But the other side of our new school initiative, important to keep in mind, was the dismantling of existing school organizations in order to make way for the new – what we termed school closure, or restructuring, or reconstitution. Whatever the name, it was the targeting of dysfunctional school organizations, without

the capacity to improve at the pace we wanted improvement, where we would wipe the proverbial slate clean so that we could begin the process of reconstruction. All told, between 2002 and 2009, we dismantled over 80 school organizations in New York City. And it is important the school turnaround discussion in NCLB not shy away from these difficult decisions.

In considering school turnaround, I believe it is important to confront choices realistically, recognizing that we cannot quickly or effectively create new organizations without dismantling old ones, acknowledging that for every one thing we try to accomplish in a school setting, we must set aside some other ambition. The work of school turnaround is, in the end, all about pragmatic choices and concrete organization building: choices that emerge in the detailed, noisy, and sweaty work of organizational creation. Although the rhetoric of turnaround provides an important rallying cry for school reform, and although there is much hope for a magic policy bullet, success depends on the pragmatic creation of school cultures and district support systems. As commissioners, I recommend that you focus on how NCLB and other federal mechanisms can align and cohere to common vision and practical goal of turning schools around. What follows are a set of those pragmatic observations, that I encourage you to keep in mind as you draft recommendations for the renewal of NCLB.

Encourage hard-headedness in the recognition of failing school institutions:

There is no question that the decisions about which schools were irredeemably failing, which collections of adults to dismantle, or - in the harsh language we used in New York - which schools to close, were among the most difficult decisions that came to the Chancellor and the senior leadership. We work in a profession where we are conditioned to see hope in every situation, where our mantra is to never give up, to always create another opportunity. That attitude is right and just in regards to students. But the closure of a school, as we used the term in New York, does not mean you are giving up on students – it means giving school managers maximum policy and managerial flexibility to adjust the individuals, collaboration, and culture of the adults serving those kids. As a profession, we should be more disciplined and more hard-headed about these decisions, recognizing that the extant collection of adults and school collaborations in a building is not coextensive with opportunity for the students in that building. Skittishness about reconstituting schools – the pervasive national desire to give adults another chance – gets in the way of making the immediate decisions we should on behalf of students.

From this perspective, school turnaround, or reconstitution, or closure and new schools, or whatever we call it, should not be a rare or exceptional intervention. In New York, part of our conception of school portfolio was that we should be reconstituting our lowest performing schools on a regular managerial schedule. Every year, we were identifying our lowest performing 10 to 15 schools, and investing the energy and resources to begin their turnaround. In any one year, that was a very small percentage of the system. But over the course of time, the school reconstitutions, and the new schools, added up – and in the course of 5 years, suddenly, it was hard to – forgive me – turn around in New York without bumping into a new school that we had created. By the end of my time in New York, we were closing schools we would not have considered closing at the outset – not because the performance of those schools had deteriorated, but because we had raised the relative bar of performance. This reflected a very deliberate approach, a very self-conscious building of capacity to make decisions about school

reconstitution, so that in the end school turn-around would not be exceptional, it would be a standard operating practice, in order to continually raise the bar of the lowest performing schools.

In important ways, NCLB actually does not support this kind of hardheaded approach. The federal law proscribes not just one chance for the adults to perform for students, but many. In some circumstances, those layers of second chances may be appropriate. And I will put to the side the question of absolute as opposed to growth or value-add accountability, topics on which I have strong feelings. But it is worth noting that in taking this approach, the vast majority of school closures in New York pre-empted any mandated action under NCLB. In fact, some of the schools we closed were in good standing, or were in the lesser realms of NCLB accountability. But when we looked at the progress students were making in the school, the years of historical under performance, and the implicit accountability judgments of students and parents fleeing the schools, we made independent judgments about school quality and likelihood of improving. Initially, this caused significant angst - we could not unilaterally close schools, we could only do so only when the state told us to do so. Many jurisdictions continue to believe they cannot legally close schools unless the state and federal accountability regimes force that choice. We decided that the decision to open and close schools, the ability to organize and configure the adults that are serving students, was a basic function of our responsibility to educate the students, and that we both could and should close schools as we saw fit in our managerial discretion. NCLB should be crystal clear on this point – that although school reconstitution may be mandated in certain circumstances, those mandated closures do not mean that reconstitution of adults is limited to those circumstances. Ideally, too, the tone and mechanisms of NCLB would not encourage school reconstitution as an exceptional event, but instead, like the GE 10% rule³, view it as part of the ongoing performance management of a district

Emphasize coherence in school plan and capacity of school leadership:

I was often asked to describe what new schools in New York. Other than small, something I will talk about later, there is no particularly satisfying answer to that question. Some run with constructivist programs, others with direct instruction. Many were strongly collaborative, but some too ran on strong command and control models. We found that the important common feature among successful new schools, and I would argue in all schools, is coherence in school plan, and capacity of school leadership, including teachers. There are many different ways to run a successful school – the important question is whether all the adults inside and outside of the building are running it the same way. As a result, the question we asked ourselves in evaluating new school proposals was whether the school planning team had the mentality and the ability to make the thousand daily tradeoffs required to run the school with a consistent sense of school mission and priorities.

It is worth noting that in general, there was an inverse relationship between the number of educational theories referenced in a new school application, and its ultimate success. Consistent with the lessons of good to great, schools are successful when they subscribe to the hedgehog concept – they identify what they are good at, and they concentrate on it. In my experience, this degree of focus is rarely found or

³ The fabled policy that the bottom 10% of performers in GE during any given year are counseled out of the firm

encouraged in NCLB school improvement plans, or school turnarounds – all too often, we encourage a multiplication of programs and interventions, rather than consistent execution and stubborn self-correction of one good approach. The more federal resources can encourage coherence of planning, the better – and this may mean integrating funding streams and releasing secondary priorities for funding, so that turnaround funding can truly focus on school priorities, whatever they are.

One related problem we wrestled with was the odd reality that Title I school improvement resources could not be devoted to new schools, because the money was tied to the federal accountability status, and our new schools were getting a clean slate. Never-mind that we were creating schools in the most troubled buildings in the City, and never-mind that our goal was to serve students from these underserved communities. It is an administrative problem that harkens back to the most simplistic definitional distinctions in the realm of turnaround – keep the same school code, and the school is staying open and keeping federal funding; change the school code, and you have created a new school and lost the funding. To the extent that we wanted to support the planning and implementation of the new schools – the all important process of transition – we had to find other resources to do that. And while we managed to find those resources, this is a problem worth clarifying in the reissuance of NCLB.

It is also worth noting that a significant part of our work in the Office of New Schools, after approving the schools and ensuring their doors opened, was to run interference with the many district and state offices that had their own well-intentioned priorities for the schools, that happened not to necessarily correspond with the mission, priorities, or systems created in the new school. We piloted the New York City Autonomy Zone in the Office of New Schools, as an experiment in creating a district structure designed to reinforce and support the individual coherence of schools. District, State and Federal policy can often be well intentioned, seizing on particular ideas that have been effective in one context: as policy makers, we need to hold ourselves to the discipline of ensuring that our good ideas do not create a distraction from the focus that an individual school has created.

Create the circumstances for adequate planning and successful execution:

In my experience, the quality of ideas is rarely the key differentiating factor between good schools and failing schools – rather, it is the quality and consistency of execution. We worked hard in New York to create circumstances that supported quality execution. In partnership with the New York City Leadership Academy, we ran what I immodestly consider among the most thoughtful and well considered professional and school development process, which we called New School Development and New School Intensive. We worked hard to streamline and support schools on the thousand of distracting operational and organizational issues they faced in opening their doors, coaching new school leaders through hiring and enrollment and budgeting. We juggled an awkward and ill-timed marriage of closure decisions with new school approvals, in order to give teams the maximum amount of time we could to plan, even in advance of their approach. I will say that an earlier release of state test data and accountability status would help this – not only could the assessments be more instructionally meaningful, but decisions of consequence such as reconstitution could happen earlier in the year, leaving more time for planning and execution.

The question of whether to phase-in new schools, or conduct what we called a “big-bang” (i.e. replace staff all at once in one year) is a vexing one that relates to the quality of execution. Ninety-seven percent of the buildings we turned-around in New York City happened through careful and deliberate phase-out and phase-in process, similar to the conventional charter school phase-in strategy.⁴ When we announced the re-constitution of a school, we told the students then enrolled that they would have a chance to earn a diploma from that school, and we began enrolling the new classes in new schools – and its worth saying that academic performance often improved with the focus we brought to those phase-out schools. This required a politically difficult and expensive phase-out process – but those costs were worth the quality of execution that we were able to achieve in the new school. To date, I have seen no turnaround model other than phase-in that so consistently and clearly supports adequate planning and successful execution – and in our research on New York history and national practice, we saw no consistent examples of big-bang turnarounds producing consistent results. I appreciate that the Secretary of Education has called for more aggressive action with faster results, and I understand why – the task is urgent, and we need to be able to say that the same kids are getting a better education. As I start work in New Haven, I too am on the hunt for new models of turnaround with faster impact, but as I do that my priority will be to ensure that there are brass tacks mechanisms to allow for analogous planning, focus, and quality execution allowed by a phase in. Stimulus resources, and other long-term resources, should support this endeavor, and the political and content leaders should be careful that in implementation federal resources allow the ability to plan thoughtfully and execute carefully.

A quick comment on leadership is also important at this point: I am an advocate that school leadership is the single most important factor in school success. But I also think there is a serious policy danger in the romance of the rock-star principal. It is worth saying that you have at least one such rock-star principal on your panel, in Ms. LaCroix, and others on other committees. Do not let the presence of these exceptional leaders mislead you that such leaders are easy to find. Our new school development systems in New York were designed to ensure that good principals could be successful, without being dependent on rock-stars – while in a city like New York we could always find the 1 in 100 leader, our priority was to be able to work with the 20 of 100. This perspective on leadership underscores the importance of allowing for appropriate planning for school turnaround, and building of appropriate supports to quality execution.

Address not only the school institution, but also systemic conditions:

As I said above, the only common feature of the new schools in New York is that they are small – typically 75 to 100 students per grade. Our bread-and-butter work was the closure of large underperforming comprehensive high school, and their replacement by a campus of small schools. In announcing school closures, we were careful to say that our decision was not a function of individual

⁴ In a small and targeted number of situations, particularly at the elementary level, particularly where the existing school was small, the enrollment and building dynamics manageable, and where we had strong leadership, we would do big-bang turnarounds. But these – like Young Scholars, led by Ms. LaCroix – were distinctly the exceptions.

failure – the large comprehensive schools were filled with adults doing their best every day. But as a system, in creating massive warehouses of the hardest to serve kids, the conditions we created over time had encouraged failure. In starting the New School Initiative, Michele Cahill, then the Policy advisor to the Chancellor and now a senior official at the Carnegie Corporation, hypothesized, and later proved with the help of the Parthenon group, that the combination of large size and high concentrations of low performing students were together the most important factors in the success of schools. So the question was not only changing the adults and the management of the school – the question was taking the opportunity to create school structures and enrollment patterns that were more likely to lead success. Whether as a function of size, enrollment, or other factors, this sort of evaluation of systemic conditions is an important thought process for NCLB to encourage.

In New York, new schools led not only to changes in their immediate systemic environment – they also led to changes in the wider policy context. We incubated the Autonomy Zone in the Office of New Schools, in part because we realized that the conventional model of top down district management was strangling some of our newly created schools. Our creation of school level accountability reports was heavily informed by our desire to set performance standards for our new schools, and the accountability contracts at the heart of our charter authorizing. We worked hard with enrollment and human resources and a range of other functional lines, to ensure that their service to all schools, including new schools, were as responsive as possible to the needs of the schools. In dealing with the most troubled school environments, I think it is important that focus of attention not become a preclusion from learning and policy adjustment across the system – we learned a great deal about how our system operated, and the policies we needed to change, through our work in new schools.

The role of charters in school turnaround is important to consider, particularly in the context of systemic implications. Clearly, the charter movement has presented a number of successful existence proofs, situations where high needs kids can have the highest quality education and succeed academically. However, at least in New York, counter-veiling regulatory regimes meant we could not use charters as widely as we might have in reconstituting failing schools. In particular, the fact of lottery admission – designed to ensure that charters could not skim, and could not target affluent residential communities – meant that it was difficult to use charters to replace schools that had enrollment zones, because the admission policies interfere with the district's obligations to guarantee a public school seat to every student. Similarly, the constraints of handling a unionized work-force, and dealing with the costs of excess staff who do not get jobs in the reconstituted schools, are pragmatic and difficult systemic issues that face districts as we engage in school turnaround. As an advocate of good charter schools among the portfolio of public school options, I believe that charters can do more than simply offer the new alternative on the fringe of the public school system. Consistent with the idea of portfolio management (i.e. districts should offer a portfolio of schools irrespective of their governance structure), I believe strongly that the next phase of the charter movement can and should go further than simply expanding the market share of charters. Correctly situated, charter schools can help public education most by providing districts with pathways to school reinvention that self-consciously address the constraints that districts live in day in and day out – helping to challenge those that should be redefined, like stifling regulation, and developing strategies for those that are inevitable, like enrollment and

discipline transfer issues. Federal policy could be helpful in resolving some of the pragmatic obstacles to this integration, by ensuring that the abstract policies of charter separation do not compromise the effectiveness of the charter example.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my thoughts. NCLB has provided a critical focus on student achievement, causing both New York and New Haven to make difficult decisions about school turnaround. Your commission will be a success if the NCLB reauthorization can also provide pragmatic support in the concrete, execution-oriented challenge of building new school organizations, whether those are termed turnarounds or new schools.