



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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**Testimony of Cami Anderson
Superintendent
District 79 – Alternative High Schools and Programs**

**Restructuring of Alternative High School Programs
Committee on Education
November 14, 2007**

Testimony of Cami Anderson

Superintendent, District 79 – Alternative High Schools and Programs

November 14, 2007

Opening

Good morning Chair Jackson and members of the Education Committee. It's an honor to be here to talk about what more we can do to ensure that each and every adolescent in New York City has the opportunity to succeed. I am Cami Anderson, the Superintendent of District 79, Alternative High Schools and Programs. By way of introduction, I have spent more than twenty years working with and on behalf of young people – as a youth theatre coach, a classroom teacher of students with extreme behavior challenges, an educational equity advocate and policy analyst, and a leader in the non-profit education community. While I spent many years working outside the system pushing for change and innovation, I joined the Department in the fall of 2006 with a focus on the students who are the most off-track, and with a passionate commitment to ensure that those students receive every opportunity to get back on-track to succeed. This is District 79's mandate.

Our students are young people who have fallen behind and become what we call "over-age/under-credited" – more than two years off-track from graduating. They face a range of academic challenges: some are new to this country, some never learned to read, some attended failing schools and lack basic skills, and some were very successful learners in early years and now are confronted with trying to meet family or work obligations while

attending school. Most of them face life circumstances that many of us can only imagine: they are young parents, youth who have gotten in trouble with the law, students struggling with addiction themselves and/or in their family, and young people coping with poverty who need to work to support themselves and their families. They are students like one young man I spoke with this year, who had already attended three different high schools by the age of 18 and who recently enrolled in a GED program after dropping out to earn money for his family. These students share one essential thing in common: traditional schools did not serve them well, yet despite extreme set-backs they are maintaining a connection to the public school system. In the face of impossible odds, they give us incredible opportunities and gifts, literally and figuratively, just by showing up every day.

The district has a long history of serving New York City public school students who have not succeeded in traditional high schools. An assortment of schools and programs, District 79 serves 70,000 students – approximately 20,000 students younger than 21 and 50,000 adults annually. Prior to our restructuring, the district housed 15 transfer schools, various GED programs, adult education, suspension centers, programs for incarcerated students, and several one-year transition programs for pregnant girls, students with behavior and academic challenges, and students coming out of incarceration. There were many dedicated teachers, administrators, and community leaders who were working to reverse students' previous patterns of failure. However, in the district's former structure, it was difficult to identify measurable successes. At a glance, the district appeared as a web of programs and services that were difficult to navigate, including

some that were clearly not providing students with the academic rigor they needed and deserved.

During the 2006 school year, the District 79 leadership team engaged in deep reflection, analysis, and planning. We asked ourselves one simple question: are we capitalizing on the gifts these young people bring to us and are we doing everything we can to make sure that each of our students have sufficient opportunities to succeed? We pulled apart the web: we studied sites and conducted multiple focus groups with teachers, administrators, parents, students, and advocates. Our goal was to learn what was working, what wasn't working, and what the Department and District 79 could do to improve the services it provides to the students farthest away from graduating... often the students with the most significant challenges.

Rationale for the Reorganization

Our decision-making process was extensive and comprehensive. Across all of the constituents we engaged, our findings were consistent:

- There were still far too many over-age, under-credited students not graduating with a GED or a high school diploma — approximately 140,000 students between the ages of 16 and 21 are over-age and under-credited at any given time; about 70,000 are still connected to school and only a small percentage ultimately obtained a diploma.
- Students who legitimately needed alternative options and settings had a hard time accessing these options because the referral system was confusing and services

were disjointed. Even within District 79 programs, for example, administrators and teachers had limited access to other District 79 programs.

- To the extent that students actually enrolled in these programs, the results were not good. For example, of the 15,000 students who entered our four large GED programs over the course of the school year, about 6,000 stayed for any length of time. On any given day between 3,000 and 3,500 were in attendance. Most concerning, between 12% and 15% of students in District 79 GED programs would ultimately pass the GED exam.
- Many one-year transitional programs for at-risk youth did not work. On average, students attended less than 50% of the time, many of them were lost during the transition to or from the program (less than 30% ultimately made a successful transition), and they did not gain ground academically. Indeed, students in these programs typically lost ground in accumulating the credits and passing the Regents exams they needed to graduate.
- We didn't have effective ways of keeping track of these students and their progress. An 18 year old reading at a 3rd grade level was measured with the same yardstick as a 20 year old reading at a 10th grade level. This does not measure either the students' actual progress or reflect the work of educators who are helping them to catch up and overcome previous school failure. Some students simply need more time to succeed and we could not measure value-added in our GED programs.
- All of these issues were made more challenging by the fact that as a country and a city we have not successfully figured out how to educate our overburdened older

youth, particularly those who are not fluent readers and/or who have interrupted schooling.

Despite these challenges, the Department of Education and District 79 had begun to make progress in serving students who had previously failed. There was also good news:

- Data analysis and research by the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) revealed that transfer high schools (small specialized high schools with additional resources for counseling and case management) could triple graduation rates for over-age, under-credited students. The Department invested in growing these models – and we currently have over 30 transfer high schools and 20 Young Adult Borough Centers.
- Because research tells us that small learning communities benefit all high school students, the Department created more than 200 new, small high schools. These new high schools have been critical in raising the overall graduation rates and in providing additional options for students, including those who need additional support.
- Several low-performing one-year programs were phased out. Students who needed alternative settings were able to take advantage of the new small high schools, the transfer schools, and the Young Adult Borough Centers.
- OMPG and members of District 79 had completed extensive work identifying the key components of effective GED programs and had begun designing a blueprint for success and developing a new “model” to which GED programs could aspire.
- Recent work by the Department was beginning to provide schools with a fairer allocation of resources and to assess them based on their ability to move students

forward academically (as opposed to an absolute standard). The Department of Education was developing an unprecedented ability to measure student gains and improvements and holding schools accountable for meeting students where they are and moving them forward.

The District 79 Reorganization

District 79's reorganization was designed to address persistent challenges in District 79, to capitalize on the positive changes Department-wide, and to match the spirit and dedication of our students. As a system, we needed to provide a more seamless continuum of services to ensure equitable and available opportunities for *all* District 79 students. We needed to do more to ensure that the programs we offer students, who are the furthest behind, are high quality and able to help students succeed.

We had several simple core beliefs driving the changes:

- Ensure high expectations for *all* students, including those who have experienced failure and significant challenges;
- Provide rigorous academic programs with excellent instruction;
- Actively engage students to take control of their education;
- Hold ourselves accountable to lead each student to a high school or GED diploma;
- Recruit, develop, and retain innovative and effective individuals who are committed to over-age, under-credited students; and
- Advocate on behalf of over-age, under-credited students.

We committed to making these beliefs a reality for all District 79 students. We took bold steps towards transforming District 79 from a collection of schools and programs to an organization with one clear mission: to do everything possible to ensure that every over-age, under-credited student has access to multiple opportunities to achieve the highest possible academic success.

The District 79 Portfolio

We reinvented the District 79 portfolio of programs and services to best meet the needs of students and to keep those students on a path to success. District 79 is now comprised of the following core programs: Referral services for older youth; GED Plus; Re-Start; Correctional Education; LYFE Programs; One-Year Suspension Programs; and Adult Education.

- **Re-Start** is a new network of services for students in temporary/involuntary educational settings;
- **Correctional Education** is a continuing network that serves incarcerated youth with links to options for students when they transition out;
- **One-year Suspension Programs** are for students who have been suspended for one year;
- **Adult Education** is where we continue to grow our services so students older than 21 so that they can continue and finish their education;
- **LYFE Programs** are 39 school-based childcare centers serve families with young children so parents can stay on track and in school. We are

improving the quality of these centers with the goal of also deepening their referral services for young families;

- In **GED Plus** we launched a new network of GED preparation programs to help students of all reading levels pass the GED and connect to colleges and careers. We anticipate that by Spring of 2008, all non-D79 GED programs will close and become part of GED Plus; and
- Referral services for older youth are one-stop centers, in each of the five boroughs, that help students understand their options within and beyond District 79. Guidance counselors and Parent Coordinators work with students and families to ensure that students can access these options efficiently.

As part of the reorganization, we phased out the old one-year transitional programs that had not proven to be effective or that had been replaced by better options in other parts of the school system. One example of such programs is our Program for Pregnant Students (PPS), which we closed in July. An internal study revealed that these programs were only serving a fraction of the students who were pregnant and parenting in the system. As a conservative estimate, two-thirds of the girls were over-age, under-credited, a far larger percentage than the high school population. We know that the most critical strategy for getting students who are behind back on track is ensuring that they have opportunities to accelerate their credit accumulation. At the "p-schools", the girls actually lost ground – obtaining on average 5-6 credits a year as opposed to the 11 required to remain on grade (or even better the 15 they can obtain in programs and

schools designed specifically to support credit recovery). Additionally, average daily attendance was less than 50% and the programs were unable to offer the full range of academic and non-academic services found in transfer schools. Also a concern, less than 50% of the students made a successful transition back to high school.

The Department is deeply committed to serving pregnant and parenting students, and we believe that they can excel academically while transitioning into parenthood. We know from our analysis of New York programs (and this is substantiated by national research) that this is best achieved by girls remaining in school. To the extent the girls need a new environment with credit recovery strategies in place, they can access transfer schools and/or Young Adult Borough Centers.

The Department recognizes that pregnant and parenting students require additional supports and we are committed to ensuring that high quality supports are in place to address students' needs. To that end, we are providing the following:

- The 39 LYFE Childcare Centers throughout the city remain open to serve pregnant and parenting students to help them stay on track in school. District 79 continues to work to improve the quality of the services provided by LYFE and to ensure that students and schools are made aware of how to access LYFE services.
- We have made additional referral services to health and other support services for young families available through the LYFE centers and the District 79 office, such as referrals to the Nurse Family Partnership which provides high-quality and free pre-natal care for young families.

- District 79 and the Office of Student Enrollment Planning and Operations worked closely with the Program for Pregnant Student staff and students to ensure that each and every student in the program had an appropriate transition plan out of the program. We coordinated with OSEPO to help to identify the best fit for students either in their home schools or another small supportive high school setting.
- District 79 has dedicated staff at every referral center in every borough and in the district office who are available to help pregnant and parenting students return to school, seek a school transfer if appropriate/desired, enroll their babies in the LYFE child care centers, and connect families to other support services to ensure they can stay on track to graduate.

GED Programs and Referral Services

One critical key change in the District 79 reorganization was a complete restructuring of our GED programs. With this restructuring, students older than 18 and/or with mitigating life circumstances are now able to take advantage of GED Plus – a city-wide network of GED preparation programs that aim to also link students to careers and college.

Our key goals in the reorganization were as follows:

- Give students every opportunity to stay on track to getting a high school diploma. Younger students who still have an opportunity to obtain a diploma and older students with significant credits can and should have access to the vast and high-

quality Department-wide options to finish their diploma, including transfer schools and Young Adult Borough Centers.

- Ensure that those who do need GED preparation programs (students 18 or older with few credits and/or 17 year-olds with mitigating life circumstances) can efficiently enroll in *high-quality* GED programs. A critical part of this is making program requirements more transparent and that student needs are better matched with program offerings.
- Grow our capacity to work with students who are the furthest away from obtaining a GED, including students who cannot read, students who are limited English proficient and students with disabilities.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning in GED programs by having qualified teachers in every classroom and offering integrated professional development and consistent curriculum for GED teachers.
- Build an accountability system that will allow us to transparently track progress in retention of students, average daily attendance, literacy improvement, success on the GED, and post-GED success.

I am pleased to report that while we still have a lot of work to do to fully realize these ambitious goals we have made great strides in all five areas.

To address our first goal, we launched five Referral Centers for High School Alternatives in each of the five boroughs. The goal of these one-stop enrollment centers is to improve

referrals with tailored programming for students depending on their age, the number of credits they have accumulated, where they live, their literacy level, and their life goals.

All Guidance Counselors and Parent Coordinators have begun extensive training on options for over-age, under-credited youth – including transfer schools, YABCs, LYFE centers, and GED Plus programs. To date, the Centers have seen approximately 4,000 students and provided assistance in enrolling students in GED Plus and credit-bearing programs. The referral team also transitioned about 750 students who were in GED or one-year transitional programs back into diploma-granting high schools.

Our referral centers are also designed to assist students under age 18, who might previously have been placed in GED as a “default,” to enroll in one of the many high school diploma-granting options within the DOE. Likewise, Counselors have helped re-enroll students older than 18 who have accumulated significant credits and may initially seek to enroll in a GED program. Throughout counseling and placement services, including support to help them access the many high-quality options the DOE has created in transfer schools, small high schools, and Young Adult Borough Centers, students are able to stay on track in attaining a high school diploma.

We streamlined the administration of GED program to reach our second and third goal -- to ensure high-quality, integrated experiences for students from entry into programs through graduation and beyond. Our former system was difficult to navigate -- individual sites had entry barriers, some sites were not academically rigorous, and many services were redundant while other needs remained unmet. Now GED Plus is organized in a “hub and spoke” model. Hubs in every borough have the capacity and the explicit

mission to assess students so that they can enroll them in appropriate GED spokes throughout the borough. Students' literacy needs are diagnosed upon entrance into the program. Hubs serve students with literacy, ELL, and special education needs. By opening these hubs and making their mission explicit, we increased five-fold our capacity to serve the students furthest from the GED. Spokes serve students reading at higher levels and offer connections with community-based organizations, career and technical training, and colleges. We are working to clarify and eliminate barriers to entry so that students have as many options as possible.

Before the reorganization, District 79 had capacity to serve approximately 5,500 students in GED; after GED Plus launched, we now have capacity to serve approximately the same number of students in higher-quality sites. While we closed about 25 sites, we expanded services in the hubs and opened several new GED programs in DOE spaces. The new District 79 has enrolled about 2,500 new students -- up from previous years. We attribute this to the launch of the borough based hubs.

To meet our fourth and fifth goal, we are developing new programs to assess students every 150 hours of instruction and thereby collect better data to adapt instruction and track individual student's progress toward earning a GED. GED Plus also supports innovation and professional development for staff in the areas of teaching literacy and meeting the needs of English Language Learners. We have launched several work teams to continue work we began last year to improve the quality of curriculum and materials used in GED programs.

Conclusion

The restructuring of District 79 programs was necessary. These programs serve students who have fallen behind and face tremendous challenges. Our students need the highest quality, most innovative, and best-managed programs we can create so they can succeed in school and leave our system prepared for college and careers. As a system of services, we can and will do more.

This restructure and this new portfolio are expanding on our successes to ensure that all of our students benefit from programs that meet all of their academic and developmental needs. We must maintain and develop programs and services that provide a safety net for older youth struggling with significant life and academic issues. District 79 will play a key role in helping young people and families access the many high-quality options we have already created and will continue to provide services for.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the changes we have made and continue to improve upon in District 79.

I am happy to answer your questions at this time.

Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce

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Before the Education Committee of the New York City Council

Robert Jackson, Chair

**Oversight Hearing – Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High
School Programs**

November 14, 2007

Goals, Vision, Principles

The Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce (CTW) is a coalition of organizations and leaders committed to envisioning, championing, and building a system to solve the crisis of "disconnected" young adults aged 16 to 24 who are not in school nor engaged in work.

Young people represent an important part of our City's present and future. Yet close to 1 in 5 young adults are currently out of school and out of work. These young people – notably young men of color from economically disadvantaged backgrounds – are at high risk of becoming permanently disengaged from the labor market, threatening their ability to break out of the cycle of poverty. And every New Yorker has a stake in the struggle; when our young lack the skills that local industries need and are unable to support themselves, the cost is borne by all of us.

But a great opportunity is hidden within this civic crisis. In the coming decades, the combination of industry growth and an aging workforce will produce sizeable new openings in the labor market. Young adults with the skills to compete for these jobs will be well positioned to seize this opportunity, obtain employment, and contribute to their families and the larger economy – to become "tomorrow's workforce". We cannot afford to waste their energy, talent, and potential.

For this to happen, developing a solution must be a top priority for all of us. This document represents a vision for how New York City can begin to take on this challenge.

Campaign Objective:

To advance public policy, legislative, and programmatic solutions, transform existing policies, and urge for the increased investment needed to build and sustain a coordinated, high-quality, at-scale system of programs and services to prepare "disconnected" young adults ages 16-24, to succeed in the future workforce.

What Do We Want For Our Young People?

In New York City approximately 170,000 to 200,000 young adults aged 16 to 24 are not in school, nor working. About half of these young people do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, and almost all of them have insufficient skills and little or no work experience. But they are not beyond hope. With the right set of supports, opportunities, and services, disconnected youth can transform their lives and reset their life trajectories. Given some help, motivation, training, and time, these young adults can complete high school or a GED, enter a training program, have an internship or stipended first job, and embark on to college or a career.

The following are important elements that favor a successful transition to adulthood:

- A high school diploma or GED
- The ability to earn a wage and support themselves and their families
- The opportunity to enroll in post-secondary education or vocational training programs
- Positive workforce experiences, with accompanying "hard" and "soft" skills developed through training and work
- Personal connections and supportive services to enable individuals to overcome the life barriers they may face.

An effective system must ensure that young people have viable opportunities to achieve all of the above.

The Right Service for Every Youth at the Right Time

Young adults who have exited the education system unprepared for the workforce vary widely in their levels of work readiness and academic achievement. Some may have acquired perilously few high school credits while others may have already achieved a diploma. Young people in both groups can be equally far away from even a basic grasp of the workplace skills and norms required to hold down a job (see sidebar).

The system we need must meet the needs of each young adult at their own stage of readiness – regardless of how many years of school they have completed or how ready they are for the world of work. For some, that means reconnection to the education system, which now offers promising new opportunities through the Department of Education's Multiple Pathways to Graduation and Alternative Schools and Programs (District 79) offices, though these too must be scaled up to meet the demand for these services.

For others, particularly those young people with too few skills and too little time for high school completion, current services are scarce, thinly funded, and often disconnected in their own right. Turning this around – building the right combination of effective programs with the resources, capacity, and interconnections required to dramatically change young people's lives – is the "invention challenge" that stands before us.

We have strong examples of programs that are striving to work with young adults toward these goals, but these programs have limited capacity and are few and far between. Still, they can serve as models from which to build a system that must be solidly grounded in the best principles and practices of youth development and have the ability to embrace young people where they are and take them to where they need to go.

The system we envision must have the capacity to serve young people with a diverse set of talents, challenges, and needs. For example:

- Young adults who are not yet ready for GED/high school-level programs. Often termed "pre-GED," these young people have literacy and numeracy skills below the sixth grade level. These individuals need long-term, intensive programming to develop academic skills and rebuild their confidence and self-esteem, given the challenges and, often, failures they have already experienced.
- Young adults without a diploma nor the ability or desire to return to school, but who are ready to work towards earning a GED. This group requires supported work-based experiences in order to build competencies and make connections between skill development and employment.
- Young adults with a GED or diploma, but disproportionately low basic skills and need for assistance in bolstering these competencies. These youth may need tutoring to improve academic skills for specific jobs/careers, attainment of post-secondary credential or college degree, work-readiness/pre-employment skills including high focus on training, career awareness and preparedness, intensive skills development for specific jobs/careers.
- Young adults who have a GED or diploma and some workforce experience, but need support that is focused on employment. With these individuals, the challenge is supporting them in their current job while training the worker for his or her next job.

Program and System Characteristics

A system of programs and services that effectively meets the needs of young adults must include the following elements:

Use of Effective Practices

- **High standards of quality.** All aspects of program and system design, financing, implementation and evaluation support the highest standards of quality and continuous improvement.
- **Educational and workforce services offered within a strong youth development framework.** Organizations that have the capacity to help young adults improve both their employability and their life skills are poised to have more powerful impacts on the people they serve. This includes, most importantly, a purposeful focus on the strengths and talents that each young person brings to the table.
- **Sustained, supportive one-on-one relationships between youth and adults that underpin service delivery.** Programs must offer effective programs to help young people build relationships that support them to stay on track, develop personal goals and aspirations, address barriers, and manage family responsibilities. Program environments that are small in size are more conducive to the development of supportive staff-participant relationships.

Capacity and Scale

- **Sufficient resources to both expand service slots and raise the quality of staff, training, curriculum and program development, and evaluation.** The system must get both bigger and better if we are to truly address this challenge.

Linking to Careers

- **Full engagement with the demand side of the workforce equation.** Both by looking to currently disconnected young adults as potential workers and by informing what services and training opportunities should be available, employers can offer tremendous value to programs and service providers. Young people need to be prepared to meet the real challenges of the future jobs they will hold.

Partnership and Coordination

- **Partnerships among community organizations, business, government, schools, and colleges – and with youth participants and their families.** All parties involved must agree upon and work toward a shared set of outcomes. Strong institutional relationships can address critical capacity issues within each institution, melding educational and workforce expertise with youth development and counseling know-how. We must create a cohesive, comprehensive, and user-friendly system of services in each neighborhood.

neighborhood family services coalition

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

November 14, 2007

Re: Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs

Good afternoon. I am Michelle Yanche and I am here to testify on behalf of the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition regarding the efforts underway and additional strategies needed in the restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs in New York City.

The Neighborhood Family Services Coalition (NFSC) is a group of service providers and advocacy organizations that is committed to the delivery of quality services for children, youth and families at the neighborhood level. Our overarching goal is to transform best practice into public policy – focusing in the areas of youth development, youth employment, preventive services, and community organizations' collaborations with public schools.

I want to begin by thanking the City Council and the Committee on Education, under the leadership of Chairman Robert Jackson for holding this important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to testify.

The dropout crisis is itself a manifestation of the interplay between poverty and educational failure. We applaud the focused attention that is now being given to the need for strategies aimed at reducing dropouts as part of a larger strategy to tackle the scourge of poverty in our City. Perhaps more than any other discrete group, vulnerable adolescents have long been served least well by practically every public system. The administration has already made important headway in turning that around, most significantly through DOE's cutting-edge Multiple Pathways initiative.

Today, nearly 70,000 high school youth are over age for their grades, and most are significantly behind in credits.¹ In the class of 2004, 54.3 percent of students graduated and less than one-fifth (16.3 percent) of the class dropped out at the end of the four years.²

¹ School data is from New York City Department of Education, Office of Assessment and Accountability, Office of Youth Development and Community services, as well as other units of the DOE. In the class of 2004, only 19 percent of youth who were overage in the 9th grade graduated on time; 65.1 percent were overage in 9th grade (*Class of 2004: Four Year Longitudinal Report and 2003-2004 Event Dropout Rates, February 2005*)

² The remaining 29.4 percent were enrolled for a fifth year of high school (*The Class of 2004: Four-Year Longitudinal Report and 2003-2004 Event Dropout Rates, February 2005*)

The education reforms already underway – particularly those at the high school level – have demonstrated that the challenge before us is no longer that we do not know what to do to tackle a big problem. Rather, we do know what needs to be done; the challenge is to extend the reach of these efforts to all of the young adults that need them.

While this hearing is not specifically about the work that has been done through the DOE's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, the reality is that that work has much to demonstrate about the larger challenge before us. DOE's Multiple Pathways initiative, which includes Transfer Schools, Young Adult Borough Centers, GED Access programs, interwoven with Learning to Work, is crosscutting in the most important way – at the point of service for young people. The new models employ a multi-pronged strategy to make graduation a reality for those students who are overage and under-credited or who have dropped out by linking rigorous academics with the personalization strategies and supports of youth development and the strong connection to employment provided through Learning to Work. This very promising initiative has given disconnected youth strong connections to employment and the world of work. Research and experience from the field attests to the power that this braided strategy has with youth struggling to complete their education.

What the Multiple Pathways work has shown so far is that when you provide young adults who have struggled on their educational paths with real alternatives in which they can be successful, they will come out and they will do well. We've seen that with YABCs, Transfer Schools, Access GEDs, but we do not have enough of these programs and also these models do not provide the right fit for an entire group of young people who are struggling to obtain an educational credential.

There are many, many young people for whom "District 79", particularly a GED program, is the best path. Some may have acquired perilously few high school credits and/or face age or other life obstacles that make return to high school an untenable goal. We need to make sure that these programs provide quality educational opportunities for young people, combined with the caring supports and workplace skills and connections that will ensure their educational – and lifelong – success. In short, District 79 needs to be the "Front Line" in New York City's "reconnection" strategy for the far-too-many young people at risk of becoming "disconnected".

To that end, much needs to be done to ensure that system capacity and resources keep pace with the momentum of these efforts.

What Needs to Be Done

Strengthen the quality of teaching throughout the District 79 programs, including providing incentives to bring in experienced teachers.

Need to build more capacity to make sure that education reform includes every young adult that needs this vital option.

Work has to be an integral part of the strategy, along with the personal supports that young people need, similar to the Learning to Work component of the Multiple Pathways models.

Expand literacy and numeracy skills-building programming for the pre-GED population.

Lazar Treschan
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Part of the *Campaign for Tomorrow's Workforce*

Testimony to the Committee on Education of the Council of the City of New York
November 14, 2007

Issue: Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs

Recommendation: Greater investment in these programs to make them the "frontline" for returning disconnected youth

There are approximately 170,000 disconnected youth in NYC—young people between 16 and 24 who are not in school and not in work. Of these approximately half do not have a diploma or GED.

There is no day more important in the life of a disconnected youth than the day that they wake up and say, "Today is the day that I am going to get back on track." That day is important for our City in many ways: its economy, social fabric, and moral fiber. It means the possibility of a City less divided into the haves and have-nots; it means a more competitive workforce and greater tax revenues; and it means that we can offer young people a second chance.

Young people know very little about workforce development and the intricate systems of public funding of these services. They do, however, know about the GED. When a disconnected youth wakes up one day and decides to reconnect, the first thing that most of them think of is the GED.

Most of these returning youth are too old to have enough time to get a diploma, are too scared to re-enter high school at an older age, or have simply had such bad experiences in the traditional system that they are unwilling to return. Thousands of young people seek out a GED as a way to reconnect, and the DOE's Alternative High Schools and Programs (District 79) is the biggest GED game in town.

The District 79 youth GED system, as such, is a wasted opportunity if it is viewed as just a GED system – rather, it should see itself as the frontline of the youth reconnection system. We need to make sure that we take advantage of the fact that these young people, on their own volition, decided to seek a second chance. These are, for the most part, the same young people that got a very bad first chance in life, and who have not experienced success in a classroom environment. They have not been told that they are great learners, with wonderful potential.

It is too early to judge the changes that District 79 has recently made. We applaud their creative thinking and fresh ideas: reorganization and the addition of a "Learning to Work" component, as well as the new Access GED sites. We would like to see all GED programs feature internships and other career and college preparation. We also need to make sure that young people know how to access these programs, though; one of my recent calls to 311 that I made with a young person seeking a GED program ended up as a dead end.

But if it is truly to take advantage of this opportunity to reconnect its disconnected youth, the City should invest in its Alternative High Schools with the range of supports that will ensure those returning youth made the right decision. That means strong case management, delivered within a youth development framework; rigorous instruction that is designed for young people who have not been successful previously; and ancillary programs that can prepare young people for the world of work and college.

There is a clear tension about making GED programs attractive, because we do not want young people who should get diplomas to settle for anything else. However, we can have high expectations for all young people and still make the GED a robust alternative to diploma. This involves:

- **Making sure the right young people are in the GED system.** This will require a strong system of assessment and case management as well as a porousness between HS diploma schools and GED schools. Young people with low levels of confidence should be allowed to start in GED and be encouraged to move into diploma-granting programs as they begin to succeed. Similarly, young people that do not make it in the diploma system for whatever reason, should be guided to a strong GED program, and
- **Raising the age cap.** We should allow young people up to age 24 into these programs. Youth cannot get a high school diploma or D79 GED after age 21. Right now, once you turn 22, you graduate into a much leaner adult education/GED system. Yet 22-24 year olds are still dealing with issues of transition, and are not ready for “adult” environments. This age cap could be increased if the DOE used some of its adult education monies in District 79.

There is considerable research about the impact of getting a GED. By itself, the GED usually has a short-term positive impact on job attainment, with little long-term impact. But if coupled with college placement or other workforce development supports, obtaining a GED can have a great return. As such, we need to overinvest in these programs, to make them worthwhile. We can follow the example of CUNY Preparatory High School in the Bronx, a GED-awarding school whose focus is on college and college-readiness, not just the exam. We can have GED programs that prepare young people for entry into specific careers, such as construction, IT, or other growth industries.

I will end with a quote with a young man in a GED program at New Heights Neighborhood Center in Washington Heights. This program is run by a nonprofit using D79 teachers:

- “Getting a high school diploma means that you were doing what you were supposed to do when you were young. Getting a GED means that you made a mistake, but you fixed it.”

We need to make sure that young people get a second chance, especially when so many of them did not get enough of a first chance. A truly robust District 79 would be a great step toward achieving this goal.

Testimony of Xiu Zhou
Before the New York City Council Education Committee
Hearing on Department of Educations Restructuring of Alternative High School Programs
November 14, 2007

Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Xiu Zhou. I am a CUNY Hunter graduate student studying social research. I have lived in New York City for the majority of my life and attended public schools for just as long.

First I would like to say that the District 79 reorganization can be helpful to the students. Smaller schools means smaller class sizes means more individual attention. Doing so can greatly influence the students' completion of high school, but it also has its disadvantages. Like with the general education reforms, these schools also need proper administration to head the schools. Without those that can do the job, any progress will be in vain.

The DOE can look towards privatization options. Comparing statistics from 2005 to 2006 between the five Diploma Plus Schools and District 79 data, 83 percent of students pass Math A and 86 percent pass English compared to the 75 percent and 62 percent in District 79. They cater to similar populations, but the Diploma Plus School model yields much better results. The DOE and the private systems can work together to draw on existing programs, and commit to dropout prevention programs. A private sector can ease the burden of finding qualified and accountable principals and other administration for the emerging smaller schools.

Secondly, regardless of the restructuring, the programs for pregnant teens should remain intact. They have already been shuffled around the school system since the closings of the Pregnancy Schools. Schools Chancellor Joel Klein vowed to replace the Pregnancy Schools with "options proven to help students to succeed in school and beyond." Eliminating those few available programs are not helpful. The New York City Department of Education strives to

ensure that every student has the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED. It should keep with that goal. How can young women succeed when programs designed to help them are being extinguished? There should be programs that help ease pregnant teens into lives as mothers and students. If anything, there should at least be options available, someplace to learn about parenthood but at the same time, stresses the importance of being students and how to juggle both roles.

Lastly, an increase in reform programs is not only beneficial to the students in them, but for society as a whole. That is, providing once again, that there is proper administration and thorough follow-up on progress.

Thank you for your time.

-end-

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ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

Helping children succeed in school

**TESTIMONY OF ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REGARDING THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S
RESTRUCTURING OF ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS**

November 14, 2007

Advocates for Children of New York

Testimony at City Council Oversight Hearing on the Restructuring of the Department of Education's Alternative High School Programs

November 14, 2007

Good morning. My name is Christie Love, and I am a staff attorney with the Out of School Youth Project at Advocates for Children (AFC). I want to thank the Education Committee for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify this morning.

AFC is a non-profit legal advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure equal educational opportunities and quality education for children in the New York City public school system.

The focus of this hearing is on District 79, but it is important to remember that the programs offered by District 79 are just one part of the DOE's overall plan to address the needs of those students most at-risk for leaving the educational system and to re-engage those that have already left.

My testimony will focus broadly on populations that still lack pathways to graduation, despite changes in District 79 and the creation of other programming targeting overage and under-credited youth. I will talk specifically about students with special education needs, students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) and students who are pregnant and parenting.

Students with Special Education Needs

As of June 30, 2007, 145,655 students receive special education services in New York City (NYC). Although the special education population only makes up approximately 14% of the general student population, they make up 31% of the overage, under-credited population.¹ Approximately 22,000 overage and under-credited students need special education services.

Students with significant special education needs, particularly those with low reading levels, have difficulty finding public programs that will enable them to earn high school diplomas. The DOE's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) has not yet embraced these students, and we have seen them pushed out of regular schools into GED programs offered by District 79. Once in District 79, it was not uncommon for them to go without appropriate special education services due to inappropriate staffing and curriculum.

We were pleased to hear that the newly reorganized District 79 claims to be able to serve students with low literacy skills, including non-readers at the GED hubs. However, given that class sizes have increased and staffing has been cut back, we are concerned about the supports

¹ New York City Department of Education, *New York City Secondary Reform Selected Analysis*, 2006, at 12.

available to ensure that students in these programs have a real chance at success. We also have concerns about the education provided to students in Passages Academy which District 79 manages. In our experience, many students do not receive appropriate instruction, and students with special education needs are constantly being denied appropriate classes, services and evaluations.

English Language Learners (ELLs)

ELLs are another group that has been historically underserved by the DOE. ELLs comprise 13.4% of NYC's public school student population.² ELLs have some of the highest dropout and lowest graduation rates of any group of students in the NYC school system. For example, in NYC's class of 2006, 26.2% of ELLs graduated in four years while 30% dropped out.³ Interestingly, 69.1% of former ELLs graduated last year and only 10.3% dropped out.⁴ This means that ELLs who are given quality programs and the necessary supports to become proficient in English can graduate in high numbers, and increasing investment into quality ELL programs will lead to higher graduation rates and lower drop out rates overall.

Prior to the restructuring of District 79, SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) made up 14.8% of ELL students in District 79.⁵ The Office of English Learners reports that "newcomer SIFE have a higher drop-out rate than their mainstream peers."⁶ By definition, SIFE are behind their peers academically and require accelerated content based instruction.

As with students with special education needs, the OMPG has developed relatively few programs that provide ELLs the language support they need to work successfully towards a diploma, and we have seen older immigrant students pushed toward GED programs offered by District 79. With the reorganization of District 79, we are happy to hear that GED hubs will provide services to ELLs, but have concerns about whether they will be able to accommodate ELLs with beginner levels of English proficiency. Additionally, specialized programs need to be developed in order to meet the language and educational needs of SIFE.

Pregnant and Parenting Students

Pregnant and parenting students are the last student group we would like to discuss. Other groups testifying today will discuss the needs of this population in more detail so we limit our comments to adequate access to childcare and access to academic services.

² New York City Department of Education, Office of English Language Learners, *New York City's English Language Learners: Demographics and Performance*, Working Draft, August 2007, at 4-5.

³ *Id.* at 26.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ New York City Department of Education, Office of English Language Learners, *New York City's English Language Learners: Demographics and Performance*, June 2006, at 12.

⁶ The Office of English Language Learners, *Empowerment through Language and Leadership*, 2006-2007, available at http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/72A465AA-48CF-4C36-9728-7BA785B3C597/18900/flyer_11_17_20063.pdf.

One report stated that nationally, one third of female dropouts say that pregnancy or becoming a parent was a major factor in their decision to leave school.⁷ In New York City, 34% of disconnected female youth are parents.⁸ These figures underscore the importance of having appropriate services available to meet their needs.

New York City law states that pregnant and parenting students have the right to participate “fully in school during their pregnancy and/or as a student parent.”⁹ In order for this to be a meaningful right, parenting students must have adequate access to childcare. We received a helpline call from a 17-year-old student at the beginning of this semester who wanted to attend a YABC but was unable to locate an evening LYFE childcare program, and was not sure she would be able to continue her schooling without this support. Currently, there are only two evening LYFE programs available in the city and these programs need to be expanded.

Access to academic supports is another significant concern for this population. It is common for students to have gaps in schooling due to pregnancy and parenting responsibilities, and services need to be in place to address the academic needs of students – girls and boys – to ensure that they are able to stay on track in their studies when they are out of school. For example, students need to be able to make-up Regents exams if they are unable to be there at the scheduled times. With District 79’s dismantling of the “P-schools,” it is important that the DOE take affirmative steps to address these issues and prepare regular high schools to make accommodations for pregnant and parenting teens.

Conclusion

Pathways need to be created for all students to obtain their high school diploma and in those cases where it is more appropriate, their GED. It is important that structures are in place to ensure that the alternative school district does not become a dumping ground for those students whom the regular school system has deemed unworthy, whether it is due to behavioral issues, lack of credits, language barriers or age. The students served by the alternative school district are generally the students that are most at-risk for leaving the school system, and it is important that appropriate programming and services are in place to reach this population so that they can have a chance for success.

Thank you.

⁷ Civic Enterprises, *The Silent Epidemic*, March 2006.

⁸ Mark Levitan, *Out of School, Out of Work, Out of Luck? New York City's Disconnected Youth*, Community Service Society, 2005, at 18, available at http://www.cssny.org/pubs/special/2005_01_disconnectedyouth/2005_01_disconnectedyouth.pdf.

⁹ New York City Department of Education, Regulation of the Chancellor A-740(3.1).



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Reproductive Rights Project

Testimony Of Lee Che Leong On Behalf Of The New York Civil Liberties Union

Before

The New York City Council Committee on Education Regarding the Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs

Nov 14, 2007

Good Morning, my name is Lee Che Leong. I am the Director of the Teen Health Initiative of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU). The NYCLU is the New York State affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union and has approximately 48,000 members in New York State. For three decades, the NYCLU, through its Reproductive Rights Project and the Teen Health Initiative, has been in the forefront of advocating and litigating for women's rights to access comprehensive reproductive health care in New York. The Teen Health Initiative works with thousands of school and community based social workers, teachers, medical providers and other professionals who work with young people, as well as students themselves every year.

I would like to thank the City Council's Committee on Education for providing us with the opportunity to discuss the problems confronting the Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs. I wish to focus my comments today on the issues facing pregnant and parenting teens in NYC public schools.

The Department of Education has a legal obligation to ensure that pregnant and parenting students are provided with full and equal access to both the educational opportunities and the support services that they need to succeed. We have strong reasons to believe that this obligation is not currently being met—and that the restructuring that is currently taking place runs the risk of leaving this vulnerable population of students even further behind.

Statement of the Problem

In 2004, over 23,000 teenagers aged 19 years old or younger gave birth in New York City¹. All are entitled under New York law to complete their high school education – but most are at enormous risk of educational failure. Faced with the demands of school

¹ N.Y. Dep't of Health, *Total Pregnancies and Teenage Pregnancies by Type and Resident County*, Vital Statistics of New York State 2004, tbl. 30 (2006), http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/vital_statistics/2004/table30.htm.

work on top of the challenges of raising a child, and lacking adequate support services, pregnant and parenting students too often have little choice but to drop out of school.

New York education law requires that all students up to the age of twenty-one be afforded the opportunity to obtain a free, public education.² State and federal laws, including Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibit sex discrimination in schools receiving public funds, including discrimination on the basis of pregnancy or parenting status.³ Title IX regulations explicitly state that schools “shall not discriminate against any student, or **exclude any student** from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, **on the basis of such student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom.**”⁴

DOE regulations and materials also recognize that pregnant and parenting students have the right to equal educational opportunities. Chancellor's Regulation A-740 states:

Pregnant students and student parents have the right to remain in their current school program during and after their pregnancy. *...If a student wishes to transfer to another school, it is the responsibility of the designated faculty member to ensure that the student and her parent/guardian are aware of the educational options.*⁵

The unfortunate reality, however, is that the educational promise offered to pregnant and parenting students is not being fulfilled. The combination of social stigma, lack of adequate training for administrators, insufficient support services, and intensified high-stakes testing create an environment that pushes many pregnant and parenting teens out of New York City public schools. According to a report by the New York City Comptroller's Office, as many as 70% of teens who become mothers drop out of school.⁶ That report also noted that while there are roughly 20,000 school-aged mothers, only 1,940 are receiving services from the Department of Education.⁷

Problems in addressing the needs of pregnant and parenting students are hardly a new phenomenon. As late as the mid-1960s, female students were forced to drop out of New York City public schools once it became apparent they were pregnant. This practice changed, at least officially, in September 1968, when the New York City Board of Education formally reversed its policy of excluding pregnant students.⁸

The City also implemented several programs aimed specifically at pregnant and parenting students. Between 1967 and 1970, the New York City Board of Education established six schools for pregnant and parenting students, also known as “P-Schools.” These schools were separate from mainstream schools and designed to augment the

² N.Y. Const. art. XI, § 1 (McKinney 2006).

³ N.Y. Ed. L § 3201-a (McKinney 2006); 20 U.S.C. § 1681 *et. seq.* 34 C.F.R. §§ 106.1, 106.34.

⁴ 34 C.F.R. § 106.40.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ New York City Comptroller William C. Thompson, *Undercounted and Underserved: New York City's 20,000 School-Aged Young Mothers*, June 19, 2003 at 1-2.

⁷ *Id.* at 7.

⁸ See Tamara S. Ling, *Lifting Voices: Towards Equal Education for Pregnant and Parenting Students in New York City*, 29 Fordham Urb. L. J. 2387, 2396-98 (2002).

secondary school curriculum with parenting classes, vocational education, counseling, prenatal care, and assistance with public benefits.⁹ In addition, the Department of Education established 40 day care facilities for the non-school age children of teenage parents who are still attending school or who want to continue their education, through a program known as Living for the Young Family through Education (“LYFE”).¹⁰

But services for pregnant and parenting teens have never been sufficient. It has been widely acknowledged among educators and advocates who worked with young people that the P-schools provided inferior academic coursework and inadequate social services. LYFE programs have been underfunded, underutilized, and unavailable to many teens. LYFE centers are not located in every school, and some young people are unable logistically to transport their children to other locations.¹¹ DOE has yet to issue training or guidance regarding the requirements for LYFE, leading to confusion and deterring teens from seeking placements for their children. In addition, there is little public education or outreach to alert young people of the availability of these programs. Only a brief, two line description of LYFE exists on the web with no information at all on how to apply.¹²

Meanwhile, push-out problems have persisted. As recently as 2000, Advocates for Children found in a survey of teenagers in foster care that “22% of the pregnant and parenting teens . . . had been forced to change schools as a result of their pregnancy,” and 40% had dropped out during their pregnancies.¹³ Our own study, conducted in 2000, found that the promise that regular high schools would accept pregnant students to be illusory, at best. For example, 3 out of 28 high schools called would not permit pregnant students to enroll. One high school indicated that a pregnant student could enroll, but that she would be asked to transfer to a P-School “when it gets bad” (i.e. when she became eight months pregnant).¹⁴

At the beginning of this school year, the P-schools were permanently closed as a part of an overhaul of DOE’s alternative high schools. The NYCLU was hopeful that the decision to close the ‘pregnancy schools’ would include a detailed plan for students transitioning from P-schools, and comprehensive strategy to change the culture hostile to pregnant and parenting students in the school system as a whole. In response to our concerns, DOE promised that it would take steps to ensure that all students who wished to continue their education would be supported, both during their pregnancies and after they have children.

Unfortunately, the NYCLU has continued to receive complaints from school and community based social workers, families and high school students themselves since the

⁹ *Id.* at 2396-97.

¹⁰ See New York City Department of Education, *Alternative Academies and Programs*, <http://a040-web-print.nyc.gov/OurSchools/District79/SpecialPrograms/default.htm>.

¹¹ See Thompson, *Undercounted*, *supra* note 6, at 9.

¹² See New York City Department of Education, *Alternative Academies and Programs*, <http://a040-web-print.nyc.gov/OurSchools/District79/SpecialPrograms/default.htm>.

¹³ See Advocates for Children, “Educational Neglect: The Delivery of Educational Services to Children in New York City’s Foster Care System,” at 38, 42 (New York, 2000), <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/2005/fostercare.pdf>.

¹⁴ See NYCLU Survey of New York City High School Admissions Practices Regarding Pregnant and Parenting Teens, <http://www.nyclu.org/node/433>.

closing of the P schools. Students continue to face obstacles when they try to access services. Moreover, despite repeated requests from NYCLU, we have yet to receive documentation that a comprehensive transition plan is in place—or even in process.

The following examples illustrate the recent experiences of pregnant and parenting students and their advocates assisted by NYCLU.

- A woman from the Bronx called on behalf of her sister because her guidance counselor told her she would need to transfer to a different middle school “because the school could not be held liable for what happened to her” now that she is pregnant.
- Three students called because the Department of Education has yet to open the LYFE program they were told could serve them at the YABC program at Livingston Street in Brooklyn. They were finally contacted on October 15th and told that daycare would start on October 22nd however the DOE failed to open this LYFE center for over 6 weeks after the start of school.
- A social worker reported that many of her clients continue to be told that they will have to find new schools when they disclose that they are pregnant.
- Advocates report that students are told that they must provide documentation that they are pursuing child support from the father of their child if they want a LYFE placement.

These incidents suggest that despite recent changes, DOE is still failing to provide pregnant and parenting students with the educational and social support services they need to enable them to complete their education. Due to lack of training for school administrators, guidance counselors and teachers, pregnant and parenting students continue to be pushed out of school. And while DOE has been responsive to individual cases when the NYCLU has brought them to the attention of District 79 staff, the Department has clearly failed to implement in a timely manner a comprehensive program to address these problems in the school system as a whole. In closing the P schools without establishing meaningful alternatives for support services, DOE has left many pregnant and parenting students with nowhere to turn.

As New York City restructures the Alternative High School system, we cannot leave pregnant and parenting students behind. The City Council should demand that DOE to take immediate steps to ensure that pregnant and parenting students are offered the services they need to continue their education, and that school administrators are provided with meaningful training on the needs of pregnant and parenting students. Otherwise, these students will continue to be forced into inferior educational options, or to drop out of the public education system altogether.

Specifically, we recommend that this Council work with the Department of Education to implement the following changes in both mainstream and alternative schools as soon as possible:

1. Improve reporting of numbers of pregnant and parenting students in each of the New York City middle, intermediate and high schools, and data collection on educational outcomes.
2. Determine the number of school-based day care slots available at each public high school in relation to existing demand, and improve availability and accessibility of those programs.
3. Increase other programs and services offered to parenting students, both in the alternative schools and in regular schools, including enhanced tutoring options, flexible hours and leave time, and social work services.
4. Improve public education, outreach, and enrollment support to help students access programs and services available for pregnant and parenting students.
5. Implement meaningful and comprehensive training for school administrators, guidance counselors, social workers and other education professionals on the legal rights of pregnant and parenting students to equal educational opportunities, and on facilitating enrollment in programs and services to meet their special needs, including LYFE placements.
6. Implement a system to prevent discrimination, harassment or “push-outs” due to pregnancy, and to respond swiftly to such incidents when they do occur.

We know that the City Council shares the goal of promoting equal access to educational opportunities that will enable teen parents and the next generation to become healthy, self-supporting, and productive members of society. We appreciate the opportunity to share our recommendations with this Committee, and look forward to working with you to address these important issues in the future.

Progress Has Been Made— But There Is a Long Way To Go.

At least 140,000 16-21 year olds have dropped out or are at risk to do so.

(“Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation:...Overview” from the Better Futures Conference, April 18, 2007)

There are probably about 200,000 16-24 year olds without a job or a diploma.

(“The Time Is Now” from New York City’s Young Adult Task Force, November 2005)

Multiple Pathways to Graduation is a great step forward....

But what about:

Students with ZERO credits?

A model is needed for this group

Youth over the age of 21?

Why can’t they get a diploma too?

Youth who do not want to go back to a high school?

Other settings are needed.

Youth who cannot get a seat to take the GED test?

This should be easy to fix. Do we have to leave it up to the State?

***Submitted to the City Council by Bruce Carmel. Ph.D.
Turning Point, Brooklyn NY***