



**Testimony Presented to the New York State Commission on Property Tax Relief
By: The New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers**

**Albany, New York
April 23, 2008**

Good afternoon. My name is Richard Longhurst and I am speaking on behalf of the New York State PTA. We are a 350,000 member organization of volunteers whose sole purpose is to advocate on behalf of children and families. Throughout our 111 year history, our members have worked to encourage New York State to invest wisely in the future of its children. Wise investment should include property tax relief for those most burdened by property taxes. On the other hand, we reject proposals that would place additional caps on school property taxes since we believe that they would inappropriately limit local control, discourage community collaboration and ultimately erode the quality of public education in New York as they have in other states. We have researched the use of tax caps and their alternatives extensively and could provide you with detailed lists of reasons to avoid new caps on school property taxes as others have done. Given the emotional climate of the past weeks and what we see as a crucial need to re-build faith in our public officials, however, I would like to make the issue of protecting public education very personal. The State of New York has been very good to my family. As public officials, you can take pride in that. I want to protect and expand on that positive tradition for my grandchildren, those of NYS PTA members and for yours.

Many of those born in the wake of the celebration and optimism that followed World War II had as their school experience: brand new schools, the cold war environment that assured a curriculum rich in math, science and language, rapid expansion of public post secondary programs designed to provide an affordable college education for New York's baby boomers, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s leading to opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities and the learning challenged. By the early 1990s, fueled by our state's investment in education at every level, high school graduation rates soared. Those who had previously been left behind such the learning disabled entered a lively and skilled job market. The SUNY/ CUNY system afforded access to higher education at a quarter of private school costs and with similar quality. Then, as now, many citizens, seeing the value of these investments, gladly accepted a significant property tax burden. When that burden grew more rapidly than the incomes of many residents, the State took action to give local residents direct control over the future of their schools and their school property taxes by limiting budget growth in communities that failed to adopt budgets proposed by their school districts. For the elderly and disabled, whose ability to live in New York has been most severely threatened by increased property taxes,

however, the STAR program and Middle Class STAR rebates combined with optional local programs have dramatically lowered school property taxes.

Before concluding that the system has failed or that a “blunt instrument” is necessary to curb growth in school taxes, we would ask you to take a longer range view of what has occurred as a result of New York State’s investment in public education over the past fifty years.

1. We serve a much different and less homogeneous population now than we used to. At one time, two parent families appeared to be the norm. In the Ozzie and Harriet years mothers worked at home. Children left for school following a nutritious breakfast and had milk, cookies and help with homework waiting for them when their school day was over. That resource simply isn’t there today, for my kids or for yours. Nevertheless, we graduate more students with a greater variety of skills today than we ever dreamed of in the 1950s and we do it without banning the hard to teach to basement boiler rooms or urging them to quit school as soon as the law permits.
2. Those buildings that were brand new when the baby boom generation started school aren’t new any more. They were built at a time when gasoline cost thirty cents per gallon and when each classroom functioned with a single electrical outlet and an intercom to the office. Asbestos was the insulator of choice. Lead was in every can of paint. Computers were machines hidden in the back rooms of giant corporations. Air conditioning was non existent and with energy cheap and abundant, no one considered putting insulation in roofs or double panes in windows. To the credit of our policy makers, the state has recognized the challenges of upgrading our facilities and has shared some but not all costs needed to move our buildings into the 21st century.
3. In an earlier time, doctors, not ad agencies prescribed treatment for illness. At the same time, many fewer of our state’s residents had access to the high quality of health care many of us enjoy today. The predictable result is that the costs schools must budget for health insurance have outpaced the increase in the cost of living by nearly three times.
4. The dollar cost of pensions has risen dramatically over the past thirty years. Due to prudent investment of school and municipal employee pension funds, however, New York’s pension programs are among the most stable in the nation, requiring percentage of payroll contributions by employers that are less than half of what they were 25 years ago.
5. Beginning in the early 1990s, the NYS Board of Regents developed standards that the publication *Education Week* cites as the nations best and when fully implemented promise to provide the most comprehensive basic education program found anywhere in the world. When the State courts concluded that the financial support system in place to deliver program which addresses these high level expectations did not do so in New York City, our legislators adopted a four year plan to raise New York State’s funding effort to a level that would ultimately assure a sound basic education program for each child, regardless of the learning challenges brought to the classroom and hold our educators accountable for not only delivering that education but assuring that it delivers results.

Our former governor maintained that there is a need to “uncover the root causes” of high property taxes. New York has done a lot for families and the communities across the state. These accomplishments were not without cost and only achievable with strong community support. Is it really a surprise that such gains have increased school costs at a rate that exceeds the general cost of living? In spite of that, in the last twenty five years my home school district experienced 14 years in which total increases in state aid support were less than the cost of living and six years in which total aid actually decreased from the previous year. When that happened, we had three options: Increase property taxes, cut program or find ways to save money. I was fortunate to live and work in a community that valued its schools but also demanded results and looked closely at the value they received for their tax dollars. We formed consortiums to purchase everything from paper to electricity. We employed energy conservation measures both in our building renovation programs and in our every day operations. We worked with parents to create workable special education plans without resorting to costly legal intervention. We used BOCES services to share program costs and we worked with employee groups to assure fair but affordable employment contracts. Still, and despite our best efforts, when costs increased for us as they did for everyone, property taxes increases resulted when the State couldn't or wouldn't contribute to sharing in the support of those cost increases. **When the State did contribute to program support with at least a cost of living increase, property tax bills increased by a similar amount or less.**

New York State has a history to be proud of in building and supporting its public education programs. Last year set us on a course to an even prouder future. Quality public education, however, is far more than a matter of State or community pride. It's an essential investment in our children's economic wellbeing. We got where we are with parents, communities and the State working together. In the current climate of cynicism and doubt about the integrity of our State leaders, the last thing our public education system needs is new State edicts that supercede community initiative. Arbitrary caps on school property taxes aren't the answer. In the end, they will hurt the communities and children that need our help the most. We urge you to find another way.