



**BEACON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
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The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

Last week, Governor Cuomo made several key announcements about his “Reimagine NY” initiative. Prioritizing invitations to powerful, unelected billionaires with a history of failed experiments in public education and deeply complicated relationships with companies that stand to profit from a larger investment in technology, Cuomo announced that he would be collaborating with Bill Gates and Erik Schmidt while declining to invite a single person from the K-12 public education community. Rather than creating a path forward to serve our students, this move shuts out the voices of those who have first-hand experience with the successes and shortcomings of distance learning and sets this process up for failure.

The responses from some of those intimately involved in New York’s education system, but left out of the “Reimagine NY” process, were less than positive:

“If we want to reimagine education, let’s start with addressing the need for social workers, mental health counselors, school nurses, enriching arts courses, advanced courses and smaller class sizes in school districts across the state,” Andy Pallotta, president of NYSUT

“The use of education tech may have its place, but only as an ancillary to in-person learning, not as its replacement. Along with many other parents and educators, we strongly oppose the Gates Foundation to influence the direction of education in the state by expanding the use of ed tech.” NYSAPE, Class Size Matters, Parent Coalition for Student Privacy

Without these voices at the table, Cuomo has leapfrogged from students’ real and actual needs to a new, idealized picture of education: “The old model of everybody goes and sits in a classroom and the teacher is in front of that classroom and teaches that class, and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms. Why, with all the technology you have.” Cuomo’s **why** is clearly rhetorical here but should not keep us from clearly stating **why** students need teachers in the classroom:

To build attributes like empathy, collaboration, self-regulation that are key to citizenship. The New York Times recently published a letter by an 8th grader who said she preferred distance learning because her studies were no longer interrupted by less well-behaved children. These interruptions are an opportunity to consider the lives of others and what might impact their ability to learn. In-class participation encourages cooperation and sensitivity to the needs of others.

To support our students with disabilities. This is the law and there is no evidence that it works better-or at all-at a distance.

To give students from abusive or chaotic homes a safe and stable environment. For some students, time in the classroom provides a much-needed break from food insecurity, abuse and the stress of unstable family life.

To stimulate curiosity with a flexible environment. We all react differently to real-life events. Learning is no different. Classrooms permit teachers, in face-to face situations, to spontaneously provide students with the optimal means to explore a topic: individually, in small discussion groups or as a class. When students are curious, they retain what they are studying.

Access to technology is not equitable in our state. The scope of the needs of our students and the range of our goals in educating them is vast and not easily covered by online learning. Unequal access to technology has been the most obvious barrier to success for many students in the ongoing emergency-experiment in distance learning. Cuomo failed to acknowledge grievous failures of state initiatives such as the 2014 Smart Schools Bond Act, which was created to fill this gap, but still has not produced the required funding.

Meanwhile, we tighten our belts. IN the current budget climate, our top priority has been to look for ways to maintain services to our students. We are proud of the improvements we have made in our district over the last few years, including:

- smaller class sizes at the elementary level
- increased access to extra-curricular classes
- compliance with the unfunded PE mandate
- pursuit of a longer term vision for our district through a strategic planning process
- professional development in the areas of student engagement, restorative justice and responsive classrooms

For us, cuts to student services are a last resort because we know that public education has been chronically underfunded for decades. Growth in this climate seems out of the question, but should it be? We know that our students' needs have increased-the governor acknowledged at a recent press conference that substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health issues have risen-and we can safely assume that distance learning will continue to be part of our lives for the near future. It will take investment to serve the increased needs of our students better and to support our teachers to develop robust curricula that are effective with distance learning. The state must take this into consideration in the reimagining process and we expect our legislators to do the same hard examination of their budgets and revenue opportunities in order to find funding we can use to invest in our students, one of our most vulnerable populations.

As New York's students and educators confront huge challenges, a proper process to successfully accomplish the required changes requires careful consideration by all stakeholders. The process should not be rushed through in the name of a crisis and under tech-heavy leadership that can never be more than a part of the solution. Legislators must return to session and be part of a transparent budget process, so constituents can follow along and be part of the democratic process.

Very truly yours,

The Board of Education of the Beacon City School District
Anthony White, President
Meredith Heuer, Vice President