TESTIMONY OF CHANCELLOR JOEL I. KLEIN

Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Chairwoman Thomson and members of the State Task Force on Community School District Governance Reform. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our vision for the replacement of community school boards.

I think it is important to put the proposal Dennis outlined in a broader context. Parents, along with their children, of course, are the most important stakeholders in our public schools. If there is one thing that comes across loud and clear from parents in each and every Children First meeting, it's that we need to provide parents with multiple opportunities to communicate their views to decision-makers in our schools. Therefore, in order to more effectively engage parents and to ensure that we respond to their concerns at the local level, I will establish the position of Parent Coordinator in each school. The Parent Coordinator will be chosen by the principal and trained to play a key role in listening and responding to parent concerns. This significant addition of trained staff in the schools will serve as the first point of entry for parents to become more involved in their children's education. It is also the most significant point of contact for parents. Parents are primarily interested in what is going on in their children's school. As I have frequently said, and as we all know from our own experiences, parents send their children to a school, not to a school district or a school system.

But there are also times when issues are not, or cannot be, worked out at the school level. So, we are including a Parent Support Office in each of the ten Learning Support Centers that we will be establishing across the City. Each Support Office will be staffed by several Parent Support Officers – full-time staff who will supplement the engagement and response functions that our school-based Parent Coordinators will perform. Let me be clear: parents can go to any of these ten Offices, not just the one closest to their children's school. And, in order to make them as accessible to parents as possible, these Offices will be open two evenings a week and on weekends, in addition to regular business hours.

In addition, to bring greater clarity and coherence to the ways in which we engage parents in our schools and to offer parents concrete ways to learn more about what is going on with respect to the education of their children, we will create a Parent Academy. Through this Academy, Parent Coordinators will provide school-based workshops to parents on everything from understanding curriculum to forging the school-home connection and strengthening parent leadership and participation, including in key organizations like the Parent Associations and School Leadership Teams. Akin to the Leadership Academy for principals that was announced in December, the Parent Academy will be a full-service resource center with support and training for Parent Coordinators at the schools and Parent Support Officers at the Learning Support Centers.

This reference to our Leadership Academy provides a good transition to another key issue for parents. In the past days and weeks I have made clear that developing school leadership is a centerpiece of my Children First initiative. A great school leader understands that parents are key partners in the education of their children – both in terms

of their involvement in their children's education and in terms of their responsibilities to their children. Parents must ensure that their children are education-focused and education-ready, that they get to school on time, that they behave in school, and that they do their homework. To that end, we will hold principals and schools accountable for ensuring parents do indeed feel like they are true partners. Parent engagement standards will be a part of each principal's performance review. Criteria will include the effectiveness of each school in successfully engaging parents, keeping them informed and addressing their concerns. For example, as Mayor Bloomberg emphasized yesterday, principals will be expected to demonstrate a parent-welcoming school culture. This will include a set of clear expectations for all staff on showing consistent courtesy, responsiveness, sensitivity and respect towards parents. And parents will be given a meaningful opportunity to provide input into the evaluation of principal performance.

Against this backdrop, let me now turn to the historic school governance reform legislation, passed last June, which included a provision for community school boards to be eliminated by June 30, 2003, and which also established this Task Force and charged it with proposing a replacement to the Legislature. I want first to commend the Task Force for its fine work and emphasize that we look forward to working with you in devising and effectively implementing your important proposal. In that regard, the replacement for community school boards that we are outlining today -- Parent Engagement Boards -- would play an important role in shaping various aspects of the educational debate, including budget, educational policy and zoning. In fact, this proposal will provide more parents with better and more entry points and a stronger voice on behalf of their children's education.

These Parent Engagement Boards should be made up of parents selected from the different schools within their district. And, in our view, they should have several functions in common with the current community school boards, as well as some new ones. Members of Parent Engagement Boards will meet regularly with the Regional Superintendents, who will be responsible for instructional oversight of the schools in their districts, to review their schools' progress. In addition, these Parent Engagement Boards should have input into the evaluation of Regional Superintendents and their Local Instructional Supervisors. This is a critical means of building a system that is responsive to parents by having them play an important role in evaluating key instructional personnel.

Furthermore, I would like the Boards to be another avenue for parents with concerns. In effect, the Boards would have an ombudsperson function. I know that this is an important aspect of the current community school boards, and the Parent Engagement Boards should be of even greater assistance to the parents in that they will all be parents themselves. Indeed, they should monitor and advise as to how our parent initiatives at the schools and in the Parent Support Offices are working.

I also envision that the Boards will continue to comment on capital and operating budget priorities for the school system in general and for specific schools in the district. The members will review and comment on their comprehensive educational plan, and those

comments will be included in the final plan. In addition, Parent Engagement Boards will participate in the approval of zoning lines for elementary schools in the district. This has important implications and will require school managers to work closely with the Parent Engagement Boards to implement changes.

These are the key principles that I believe should guide our thinking on the best plan for replacing community school boards. I believe that this approach will yield great benefits for the children in our schools because it acknowledges the critical role that parents play in their children's education. In addition, it eliminates politics and patronage from the process and allows this new entity to function purely in the interest of educating public school students.

Let me conclude by reiterating that I look forward to working with this Task Force as you finalize your proposal over the next month. As part of our Children First initiative, I have met with thousands of parents throughout this City and will continue to meet with them, including at a Town Hall meeting in lower Manhattan this evening. I have learned a great deal from these meetings and know that we at the Department of Education – at every level – can and must do a better job in listening to parents and engaging them. Yesterday, the Mayor said he would hold us accountable on that score. I am eager to accept his challenge.

Thank you.