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**Remarks of Commissioner John B. King, Jr.
Association for a Better New York
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Good morning and thank you all for being here. I want to especially thank ABNY for hosting us and Bill Rudin for his warm introduction. I also want to recognize Board of Regents Chancellor Meryll Tisch, Regent Jim Tallon and Regent Charlie Bendit who are here with us this morning.

In the coming weeks, students all across New York State will walk across a stage and get a high school diploma. Some will go on to college and will earn a college degree. Some of them will go straight to work. Whatever they do, they are New York's future and their paths will be shaped by the education they received in our P-12 schools.

For some of them, that education is world-class. They learned college-level math in 11th or 12th grade, read broadly, developed proficiency in a foreign language, and wrote essays with a point of view and evidence to support it. They performed in orchestras and plays. They undertook service projects and internships. The world opened up for them and now they are ready to explore it.

But for some of our students who began high school four years ago, this wasn't their educational experience. Some of them – more than 25 percent statewide and a full 40 percent in New York City – struggled in school and either did not make it to graduation in four years or dropped out entirely.

Among those who did graduate in four years, less than half graduated ready for entry-level college coursework or meaningful post-secondary career training.

Disturbingly, more than a quarter of the students who entered New York State colleges were required to take remedial classes; in our community colleges, a majority of entering students required remediation – and more than 80 percent at CUNY's community colleges. These remedial courses are actually high school work for which students and their families are paying college prices. Students required to take

remedial courses are far more likely to leave college discouraged and saddled with debt but without a degree.

And, as I travel across the State, I hear from employer after employer that they cannot find the skilled employees they need – or even unskilled employees ready to succeed in post-secondary training.

To put it plainly, this crisis in preparation for college and career is largely a result of a troubling mismatch between past P-12 expectations and what is actually needed today for success in the 21st century.

We can and must do better. In order for New York State to secure our long-term economic future, we must ensure that all of our students – regardless of race, zip code, or economic status – receive the excellent, effective education they need to be prepared to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Your leadership is essential to achieving this goal.

As we come to the end of this school year and look ahead to the next, we must come together across sectors – business, unions, non-profits, civil rights organizations, higher education, and P-12 education – to support higher standards for teaching and learning. We must support what works for kids.

The Common Core State Standards – common sense standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics developed through the collaboration of P-12 educators, higher education faculty, business leaders, and content experts, and adopted by 45 states – identify the knowledge and skills necessary at every grade level for students to be on the trajectory toward college and career success.

We've had a lively discussion in New York over the last year around accountability, teacher effectiveness, and the implementation of the Common Core standards, adopted by the Board of Regents in 2010.

Unfortunately, in that conversation, too much of the discourse has been driven by false narratives and too little attention has been paid to what the Common Core means in classrooms.

Each week, I visit classrooms in every corner of the State. In classroom after classroom, as a result of the outstanding work of teachers and administrators, students are reading more challenging texts, strengthening their writing skills, and learning to apply their math knowledge to solve real world problems.

One example of how the Common Core is changing instruction is an elementary school I visited in Western New York where I had the opportunity to sit with a group of 5th graders who were working on English Language Arts. It was their school's first year of a new curriculum more reflective of the Common Core. I asked them how English Language Arts had changed because of the Common Core. The first student explained that, "Before the Common Core, we would just read a book and then write a book report at the end, but now we have to use evidence from the text to support our arguments." And a second student said, "And to do that, you have to read every page really closely." But the best part of the conversation was the third student who said, "And the books are better that way." And of course they are.

Texts are more meaningful when we pay close attention to the arguments the author is making, the story she is trying to tell, and the words she carefully chose to convey her ideas. Whether you are reading a sociology textbook in a college course, a technical manual in the workplace, or a novel for pleasure, the ability to read with care and precision is invaluable, as is the ability to communicate your ideas effectively in writing and orally.

The Common Core also emphasizes crucial skills in mathematics. A couple of years ago, I was in a welding classroom in the Southern Tier, near the Pennsylvania border. These high school students had not yet benefited from the Common Core. As the teacher gave me a tour of the classroom, he pointed to one side of the room and said, "That is the area of the classroom for the students who are good at fractions," and then added, "This is the area for students who are bad at fractions." He explained that success on many welding projects requires the ability to understand and apply fractions and to make precise measurements. That experience was an important reminder that the Common Core – which emphasizes the ability to understand and apply fractions – isn't just about the students who will go on to pursue four year liberal arts degrees, it is also about career readiness in the truest sense.

Despite all of the noise of the past year, most of our teachers and principals across New York are meeting the challenge of higher standards with new curricula,

better lesson plans and new approaches to teaching that are raising the bar and improving outcomes for children.

And I just want to stop for a moment and thank them. They are heroes doing things every day that help the children they teach overcome their learning challenges and social and emotional issues – both inside and outside the classroom.

I am here today because I was blessed to have teachers like that. My mother passed away when I was eight; my father when I was twelve. Teachers could have written me off. They could have said “Here is an African-American and Latino male student going to school in Canarsie, Brooklyn with a difficult home situation – what chance could he possibly have?” But they didn’t write me off. Instead, they created classroom experiences that were at once challenging and nurturing, rigorous and engaging.

I became an educator to try to create for students the kind of learning experiences that saved my life. Across our State, there are thousands of educators who are just like the amazing teachers I had – devoted to their students and devoted to their craft. They are making a difference every day – even as the policy battles are raging around them.

New York’s battles are not unique. In fact, states across America are debating the same issues. But despite the attempts by some to gain political advantage by attacking higher standards, there are over 40 states that are moving forward to improve instruction and almost all of them have begun in some way to administer Common Core assessments.

As the school year comes to a close and the season of graduation ceremonies begins, we need to move away from political debates and focus on the only thing that really counts: whether we are getting results for kids.

Across the country, educators support the Common Core and describe the difference it is making for their students.

Yes, changing instruction is hard.

Yes, we need to continue to provide high-quality professional development and build on the \$500 million in Race to the Top funds we have invested in New York in districts' work on the Common Core and the new evaluation system.

And yes, implementation across our 700 districts has been uneven and we must help districts that are struggling learn from those that are excelling.

But just as we teach our students to respond to adversity with perseverance and renewed effort, we must continue to thoughtfully adjust and move forward toward higher standards.

There can be a political debate about evaluation and accountability – but the only issue that matters is whether it's helping teachers and schools get better.

What we know about student learning growth has to inform our evaluation of educator performance, alongside administrator observations.

Our teacher evaluation system must and will continue to provide feedback to teachers to help them improve their teaching and student learning. For the vast majority of teachers, it is simply about getting better. For a very tiny percentage, it helps determine whether they are really suited for this work.

In New York State last year, we only identified one percent of teachers as ineffective. These teachers have another school year to get better with support. So anyone who says the new evaluation system is all about firing teachers is simply wrong.

There can be a political debate about testing, but we have to know if children are learning and we have to make sure that children at risk are not slipping through the cracks.

The Common Core does not mean more testing. In fact, not a single additional test is required by the Common Core. The same number of state tests is required in New York now as before the Common Core. The Common Core actually means these tests are better – not perfect tests, because of course no test is a perfect measure – but better. Common Core-aligned state tests incorporate more writing in English Language Arts, more real world problem solving in Math, and more critical thinking.

At the same time, we have to limit testing to the minimum needed for good decision-making. In some places, testing has gone too far. Under state law, districts can choose to add local tests for a variety of purposes. That's their choice, but local school districts have the power and the authority to reduce unnecessary testing – and they should.

There can be also be a political debate about curriculum, but again – student learning is the only thing that matters and educators at the local level are the best people to make that judgment. In New York State, we created an optional curriculum for English Language Arts and Mathematics. It has been recognized nationally for its quality and downloaded nearly seven million times – but the decision on whether to adopt it, to adapt it, or even to ignore it remains at the local level, where curriculum and professional development decisions have always been made.

At the same time, we must all hold publishers accountable for producing high-quality Common Core materials. Just because it has a label saying “Common Core-aligned” doesn't mean it's good. It doesn't even mean that it's aligned. Frankly -- low-quality curriculum materials being marketed by some publishing companies are more of a threat to the success of the Common Core in classrooms than the political rhetoric at the extremes.

As we focus on what matters most – student learning – we must come together to push back on the falsehoods around Common Core standards that threaten to undermine the progress of our teachers and students.

When your elected officials acquiesce to people who claim that the standards are a national conspiracy of the left or the right – speak up and push back.

When opponents of higher standards make false claims about privatization and corporate reform, speak up and explain that the business community has a stake in better educational outcomes for our students, just like everyone else.

When defenders of the status quo say poverty, or difficult family circumstances, or speaking a language other than English at home are insurmountable obstacles to success and that schools can't make a difference, you must point to the countless schools, teachers, and students proving them wrong every single day.

We all recognize that schools can't solve every problem our society faces, but education offers our best hope for fulfilling the nation's promise of equal opportunity and securing the long-term future of our economy and our democracy.

We must also come together to help our students better understand the connection between what they are learning in P-12 and their future beyond high school graduation.

P-Tech in Brooklyn offers one fantastic model. A partnership between IBM, the NYCDOE, and the City University of New York, P-Tech is located on the campus of what was once a failing high school, but is achieving outstanding results for a student body comprised largely of students of color from low-income families. P-Tech is committed not only to ensuring students achieve proficiency with respect to the Common Core, but also helping their students develop the workplace skills necessary for success at businesses like IBM, such as the ability to collaborate effectively in teams and to manage long-term projects.

P-Tech students will graduate with a high school diploma, an Associate's degree, and first-in-line for a job at IBM.

Thanks to the leadership of Governor Cuomo and the Board of Regents, New York is replicating P-Tech in 16 communities throughout New York State. In areas ranging from clean technologies to agribusiness, and from information technology to advanced manufacturing, students from each of the State's regional economic development areas will graduate high school ready for success at the next level because of strong partnerships between P-12 school districts, higher education, and business.

We need more employers to step up in the way IBM, GlobalFoundries, Cisco, Wegmans, the Catholic Health System, and our other P-Tech partners have.

So we need the ABNY community as a partner and we need to hear from the ABNY community. You can't be silent in the face of deception. You can't stand on the sidelines while some call for a retreat to lower standards.

A better New York starts with you. It starts with each and every one of us. It starts today – right here in this room – with a determination to do whatever it takes to improve outcomes for students.

I know we can do this. I have faith and confidence in our teachers and principals. I have faith in the leadership of our superintendents. I have faith in our elected leadership. I have faith in our union leaders who are important partners with very difficult if not impossible jobs. I have faith in our students' families who – no matter their daily struggles – want the best for their children.

Above all, I have faith in our students. I know that when we challenge our students –when we inspire them –when we support them – and when we listen to them – they will meet our highest expectations and do great things.

And that – more than anything else – is what will produce a better New York.

Thank you.