Memorandum to: The Honorable Merryl H. Tisch,
Chancellor, New York State, Board of Regents

The Honorable Members, the New York State Board of Regents

David Steiner, President, University of the State of New York and
Commissioner of Education
New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, NY 12234

From: The Council of University Education Deans

Subject: Recent Policy Matters Before the Regents

Date: December 23, 2009

We, the undersigned, constitute the members of the Council of University Education Deans, a group established over 25 years ago, comprised of deans of schools of education at the research universities of New York State. Until now the group has concerned itself with creating and maintaining high standards of research at our respective institutions. As a group, we and our predecessors rarely took a public position on issues impinging upon the conduct of education research in New York State.

However, recent actions of the Board of Regents have compelled us to write the following, largely based on the urgency of our concerns regarding the relationship of research to matters of educational policy that affect teacher preparation and education reform.

Your recent decisions (memoranda dated November 16, 2009, and December 14, 2009) reflect your concern with the slow rate of education reform in the State and the Nation. We share this concern. Our State and our nation face a crisis in urban education, as revealed by high dropout rates, low graduation rates, poor test performance, falling performance in national and international assessments, and diminishing public confidence in public education. We share your commitment to developing evidence about what teaching practices lead to high levels of students learning, and what teacher education practices produce effective teachers. We know from research on the pathways into teaching (summarized in Ladd, 2008), that teachers affect student learning. We also know that regardless of the route into teaching (traditional, alternative, Teach for America, etc.) candidates are on a continuum with some showing high levels of student achievement and some low levels. We also know that teacher credentials are important predictors of student achievement. We need to expand and build on such findings.

- We recommend that the Regents support research on what knowledge and experiences of teachers predict effective teaching.
We applaud many of the proposed policy changes, including:

- Expanding opportunities for alternative certification; these should be developed in concert with institutions of higher education and should be researched as they are implemented.

- Requiring students in training for initial certification to demonstrate subject knowledge and teaching skills by planning and teaching lessons to provide documentation and analysis of instruction, to collect student work and provide analysis of student learning, and to offer reflections on teaching practice. These are all elements of rigorous teacher preparation at our research universities.

- More rigorous content specialty tests in subject areas for which pre-service teachers are being prepared including subtests in early childhood and middle childhood levels (including knowledge of how children develop and learn) and mastery of content in math and literacy/English/language arts. At our universities, research on how children learn is leading to important insights that should inform teacher education. Divorcing preparation from this cutting edge research means delaying potential improvements that could lead to significant gains by pre-K-12 students (See e.g., Neuroeducation: Learning, Arts, and the Brain, 2009).

- Performance-based assessment, formative assessment of teachers, professional development and new teacher standards. We would welcome an opportunity to partner with you on these initiatives.

- Development of assessment data on teacher education institutions including data on students’ and graduates’ performance assessments and certification exam results, diversity of student enrollment, percent of graduates employed in high-needs schools and graduate performance related to student learning and achievement. If retention in high needs schools is recorded these data need to be matched to overall retention rates of schools and districts. We have begun to assess these outcomes and welcome your commitment to building reliable and accurate systems to collect these data.

- Provision of differential pay to attract and retain teachers in STEM disciplines. We recommend you support research on both the intended and unintended consequences of differential pay.

- Development of model induction programs. We suggest these models be based on the evidence regarding effective induction.

- Improvement of the State’s lowest performing schools. We are engaged in such efforts and are researching what leads to effective school reform.

- Development of models for clinically based teacher education serving high needs schools. Our school partnerships situate us to engage in this initiative.
While there is much that we support and applaud about your recommendations, we are deeply troubled that some of your new or proposed policies are not informed by research evidence already available. We also acknowledge that more research is critically needed to inform policies regarding school leadership and teacher preparation and hope you would support such efforts underway on our campuses.

We are dismayed that you propose a policy that will allow non-academic units to provide teacher education with the Regents conferring a master’s degree. We oppose any action that would de-professionalize teaching. Teacher preparation moved into the academy in the 1870s and 80s. Teachers were to be taught, as physicians and lawyers were being taught, by higher education faculty. Prior to that time, teachers were educated in normal schools, separate from the research faculty and the arts and science faculty. Moving teacher preparation into the academy was an acknowledgement that teacher preparation should be a collaborative effort between arts and science and education faculty and that research developed by both education and arts and science faculty should inform teacher preparation. The Regents’ decision to award master’s degrees to programs not based in universities, represents a step backward (See J.W. Fraser, Preparing America’s Teachers, 2007, Teachers College Press).

- We believe that removal of the master’s degree as a requirement for advanced teacher development, and conferral of a Regents’ master’s degree that is awarded outside of higher education, de-professionalizes teaching, and is a dangerous step away from collaboration with content specialists in arts and sciences, and away from evidence based practice.

New York State has some of the most rigorous teacher preparation standards in the nation, including requirements for accreditation, and emphasis on a preponderance of full-time faculty in teacher preparation programs, and master’s level training for teachers to remain in the field. Our urban schools face a crisis and this is not a time to lessen the quality of teacher preparation in the name of expediency.

- We believe that all teacher preparation programs, regardless of route, should require the same standards, evidence of quality, and process for program review and approval, that currently apply to institutions of higher education. If changes need to be made to any aspect of the quality review process, the changes should apply to all routes into teacher preparation.

It is a misconception that schools of education lack partnerships with others, including our colleagues in arts and sciences, K-12 schools, and school systems. We believe high-quality teacher preparation programs are characterized by such collaborations. We ask the Regents to support and encourage partnerships between higher education and K-12 schools. We believe, and evidence indicates, that such partnerships make teacher preparation most authentic, provide more opportunities for candidates to engage in practice, bring additional resources from higher education into schools, and ground the higher education faculty in the reality of contemporary classrooms and schools. This is especially critical for preparation of teachers for urban schools because many teacher candidates do not come from urban schools and lack experience derived from these contexts.
We recommend that the state develop an expectation that pre-K-12 schools work more collaboratively with teacher preparation programs in internships and student teaching so that appropriate practice and study of such practice can be effectuated. We also recommend that the state expect that all teacher preparation programs assign a substantial portion of interns or student teachers to low performing schools.

Many of the proposals noted here could be best informed by formative and summative evaluation and systematic research that our universities and schools of education specialize in. In its well intentioned effort to strengthen professional preparation and certification, we ask that the Regents build bridges. Everyone would benefit from a clear and focused plan that partners with the research community to reflect the best available evidence in education policies and to further study what constitutes “best practice.” We believe our recommendations would cost New York State less than the development of alternative non-university based programs that require much study but will, we worry, be rushed into operation without safeguards and without serious thought given to potentially devastating consequences.

Our council of research universities is ready to work with the Regents, the Commissioner, and urban school districts to reform and improve teacher preparation, teacher recruitment, and teacher performance in urban schools. We look forward to the opportunity to bring the resources of our research institutions to assist you in responding to the crisis in urban education.

Thank you for your commitment to education for all children and youth in our state.

Sincerely,

Members of the Council of University Education Deans

Robert L. Bangert-Drowns, Dean
School of Education
University at Albany

Douglas P. Biklen, Dean
School of Education
Syracuse University

Raffaella Borasi, Dean
School of Education
University of Rochester

Mary Brabeck, Dean
Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development
New York University

David Foulk, Dean
School of Education, Health, and Human Services
Hofstra University
Susan Fuhrman, President
Teachers College
Columbia University

S. G. Grant, Dean,
School of Education
Binghamton University
Binghamton, New York 13902

Mary H. Gresham, Dean
Graduate School of Education
University at Buffalo
State University of New York

James J. Hennessy, Dean
Graduate School of Education
Fordham University

Thomas James, Provost and Dean of the College
Teachers College
Columbia University

Jerrold Ross, Dean
School of Education
St. John’s University