

Making Lincoln's declarations of freedom real



By Betty Rosa
Regents Chancellor

Last month, the Board of Regents celebrated the opening of a new exhibit at the New York State Museum featuring President Lincoln's handwritten draft of the "Preliminary" Emancipation Proclamation. Standing before this national treasure, one cannot help but to reflect upon our nation's troubled past. At the same time, we should celebrate the progress we have made

and contemplate the hard work that remains before us.

The exhibit is dedicated to the memory of our dear friend, Regent Judith Johnson, who passed away in October. Throughout her brilliant career, Judith was a tireless advocate for educational equity and excellence for all children. She understood better than anyone that we *can* and we *will* close the achievement gap – but only after we first close the opportunity gaps that persist throughout society and throughout the educational system.

The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive order in which Lincoln declared that slaves in rebel states were free in the eyes of the national government. In a speech marking the 100th anniversary of the Jan. 1, 1863 event, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "There is but one way to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation. That is to make its declarations of freedom real."

Sadly, despite the 13th Amendment and the Civil

Rights Act of 1964, we have not yet accomplished the formation of the kind of society that King envisioned. And we will not accomplish it until we provide all children with an education that prepares them for success throughout their lives.

Success begins by making certain every child gets off to a good start in school and in life. That means ensuring they all have equitable access to services that are developmentally appropriate and responsive to their culture, race, ethnicity, language, citizenship status and socio-economic status.

This is why public education is so important. When we invest in our children's education from the earliest stages, we level the playing field for them as they enter elementary school – which means that less money and effort will have to be spent down the road trying to bring some children up to speed with their peers.

Success also requires that schools provide access to essential services such as: prenatal care; medical, dental, vision, and hearing services; mental health counseling; and family literacy programs. In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, our children need to learn how to maintain good physical, mental, and emotional health. In other words, we must educate the whole child.

The essence of education involves the quality of daily interactions that take place between students and their teachers as well as the rigor and richness of the work in which they are engaged. That is why we recently issued guidance to help ensure that all students have access to rigorous coursework, especially those children who have historically been shut out of those classes. And it's why we are undertaking a comprehensive review of New York's graduation measures. The idea is to determine what a high school diploma should signify in order to ensure educational excellence and equity for every student.

To help guide the Regents' thinking about possible

revisions to New York's graduation measures, we have been holding information gathering sessions around the State. At every one of these sessions, we ask participants a series of questions, including: "What course requirements or examinations will ensure that students are prepared for college and careers or civic engagement?"

That question may be more important than ever now. If you're skeptical about the need to focus so intently on civic learning and civic engagement, let me share a few sobering statistics:

- Fewer than 23% of eligible voters voted in New York's November 2019 elections.
- According to one survey, 53 percent of Americans incorrectly believe that undocumented immigrants have no rights under the U.S. Constitution.
- Only 26% of Americans can name all three branches of government.
- New York State ranked 47th in the nation in voter turnout in the 2018 general election.

In his 2019 "End of Year Report on the Judiciary," Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts wrote eloquently of the urgent need to return civics education to its rightful place of prominence in our schools, stating: "We have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside ... Civic education, like all education, is a continuing enterprise and conversation. Each generation has an obligation to pass on to the next, not only a fully functioning government responsive to the needs of the people, but the tools to understand and improve it." Which is precisely what the Regents and I intend to do.

Like you, I know that education is the best way – perhaps the only way – to advance opportunity for all. So, let us continue our work to provide all children with equitable access to a high-quality education. By doing this, we will make Lincoln's declarations of freedom real.