

**Testimony of Kathleen Varanese, CUNY Start Lead R/W Teacher
Before the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York
Concerning the University Budget Request for FY 2015-2016 as it
Relates to the PSC-CUNY Collective Bargaining Agreement
(Calendar Item 3.F.)**

24 November, 2014

My name is Kathleen Varanese, and I am testifying on Item 3F, the University Budget Request, and the need to fund full-time positions for CUNY Start teachers. I have been with CUNY Start since March of 2011, first as a Reading/Writing Cooperator, next as a Core Reading/Writing Teacher, and now as a Lead Reading/Writing Teacher. Last semester, 83% of my students passed their reading and writing placement exams.

At CUNY Start we are required to follow an extremely demanding curriculum, demanding for the students as well as the teachers. For example, we are in the classroom for five hours a day five days a week, and we get a 40-minute lunch break. All this class time results in a lot of class work, which for me means a lot of grading. According to the curriculum, we have to grade the substance of the papers, giving detailed written comments. We have writing assistants 20 hours a week to help with grading, but the majority of the grading is my responsibility, as is the supervision and training of the writing assistant. As you can imagine, it is impossible to fit all of this work into the 30 hours a week for which we are paid. In addition to the extremely demanding curriculum, teachers are required to meet with students on a regular basis throughout the semester. Our students are triple remedial, meaning they have failed all three placement tests—math, reading, and writing, and they need a lot of individual attention to enable them to develop the skills to be successful in college. If CUNY Start teachers were full time, we would be able to address the needs of our high risk students.

I am applying to Ph.D. programs this year, but as of now, I would have to take out loans to pay for it. CUNY Start teachers don't have tuition reimbursement. It is hard enough to save for college tuition for my children (I have three). If I could count on CUNY to provide the financial assistance, it would make earning a Ph.D. possible.

I use the CUNY health insurance for my family, but since I am part-time, the weeks between semesters are not covered. It hasn't become a problem yet, but I fear the day we will have to visit the emergency room during my lapsed coverage for my daughter's asthma, for instance. If we could have health insurance that wasn't discontinued for several weeks out of the year, I wouldn't have to worry about paying out of pocket for medical emergencies.

Our contracts are up at the end of every semester, and I never know for sure whether I will have a job from semester to semester. In fact, at BMCC in the spring of 2013, I was told that my contract wouldn't be renewed. This was a surprise for me because my classes had had the highest reading and writing test scores in the BMCC program, I had outstanding observations and feedback from the professional developer at Central, and my student reviews were uniformly positive. I was replaced by the cooperator that I had trained. As a continuing education teacher, I had no way to appeal, no right to file a grievance. I applied for and received another teacher position within CUNY Start at QCC, but it entailed a much longer commute. All in all, the new commute from Brooklyn added another hour and a half to my day, time that I could be working with students or with my family. This arbitrary hiring and firing process would not have happened if CUNY Start teachers had the protection of full-time status.

CUNY Start is a highly successful program, and I enjoy the rewards of my job. Unfortunately, if the present part-time status is not replaced by full-time status, I will have to look elsewhere for a position with full-time health insurance and other benefits associated with full-time status.