

*Submitted Testimony*



# SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Written Testimony of Dr. Sharon L. Contreras, Superintendent  
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Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2016-17 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic "Education"  
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Good afternoon. I would like to thank the State Assembly and State Senate for the opportunity to testify today on the impact that the Governor's 2016-2017 Executive budget will have on the education of students served by the Syracuse City School District. We appreciate the support that the State Assembly and State Senate have provided to public education as evidenced by the last four adopted state budgets which have allocated increased state aid to education.

The Syracuse City School District serves over 21,000 students who speak more than 80 languages. We serve nearly 1,600 pre-kindergarten students and more than 3,300 students who are learning to speak English. Our English Language Learners represent 15.7% of SCSD's total student population. Three quarters of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Nearly one out of five students receives special education services.

According to the most recent United States Census data, half of the children in Syracuse live in poverty and the city continues to be among the poorest in the nation. The child poverty rates are well above the national and state averages for 2014. Syracuse is now poorer than all of the other major Upstate cities. Most alarming is that a recent analysis of census data shows that Syracuse has the highest rate of extreme poverty concentrated among blacks and Hispanics out of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas. Our combined property and income wealth is one third that of the average New York State school district. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with its wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding.

Syracuse is implementing key strategic initiatives to improve the academic outcomes of our students and we are making progress. The District's 4-year June graduation rate increased by four percentage points in 2014-15 (from 51% to 55%), the highest one-year increase in six years and the highest graduation rate in nearly ten years. The 5-year graduation rate reached 60% which is also the highest rate in nearly a decade. The dropout rate has decreased from 26% to 16% indicating more children are off of the streets and in school completing their high school diplomas. While there is much work to do, the Syracuse City School District is making progress.

However, our progress is threatened if we do not receive adequate funding. For Syracuse, the Executive Budget includes a much-needed Foundation Aid increase of \$4.8 million and the addition of new Community Schools Aid of \$10.2 million. While this aid increase will certainly help us continue moving forward, we are also facing a reduction of property tax, sales tax, Federal and other revenues. Even with the state aid increase proposed in the Executive Budget, our potential budget deficit could reach \$30 million after using all of our available fund balance. We are analyzing program and staff resources for further reduction.

In order to continue to close persistent achievement gaps, and fundamentally change the life chances and opportunities of the students that we serve, we respectfully request a minimum additional state aid increase of \$22.8 million beyond the Executive Budget Proposal to support the following district priorities:

- School Turnaround/New School Development/School Choice (\$4.9 million): In accordance with federal guidelines, the New York State Education Department has designated 18 of SCSD's schools as struggling or persistently struggling. Most of these schools have been struggling for more than a decade.

The students who are most often relegated to attend these schools are the poorest and most vulnerable in the City of Syracuse, in New York State and indeed in our nation. Many parents throughout the United States have the financial means to use schools as a determining factor when looking to buy a new home, or enroll in parochial or private schools, but most parents in Syracuse do not enjoy this privilege. SCSD is prepared to infuse more choices into our existing school system in order to introduce more high quality options for families and as a key strategy for school turnaround. We are exploring options such as expansion of Expeditionary Learning; expansion of gifted education at the secondary level where students of color are woefully underrepresented; development of a performance arts secondary school; development of year-round school models, development of a Montessori school; development of a personalized blended learning school modeled after New York City's School-of-One; boys' focused education to reduce the deplorable dropout rates of black and Latino males inspired by models like Urban Prep in Chicago and the Eagle Academies in New York City; and programming designed to encourage and increase opportunities for girls to participate in computer science education, coding, gaming, engineering and mathematics. We are requesting \$3.5 million for research, planning and development costs for a minimum of eight new schools that will improve student academic outcomes, enable school choice, and reduce the racial and socio-economic isolation of our students.

As an additional strategy to improve performance outcomes of the schools in receivership, SCSD seeks to ensure equitable funding for schools and students across the district, empower those who are closest to students to make critical decisions regarding staffing and programming, and increase accountability and transparency by implementing weighted student funding in all 18 receivership schools by the 2017-18 school year. Weighted Student Funding models ensure:

1. Students are funded equitably regardless of which school they attend.
2. Schools have both the autonomy and the responsibility to design their schools to best meet their student needs.
3. Principals have the freedom to organize their school in whatever way they believe will best serve their students.
4. Every school controls its own budget and school leaders are responsible for resource decisions and related outcomes.
5. All relevant stakeholders know how much money schools receive and how the allocation process works.

A one-time cost for technical assistance and planning in the amount of \$1.4 million will prepare all 18 schools in receivership to be prepared to implement the weighted student funding model in July 2017.

- Transportation (\$5.5 million): Syracuse currently busses K-12 students who live outside a 1.5-mile radius from school, the minimum distance aided under current state formulas. Pre-k students are not provided with transportation. However, many of the District's students reside within the 1.5-mile radius in economically distressed areas that are plagued with violence and crime. These students have difficulty getting to school on a daily basis, especially given the inclement weather and brutal cold for which Central New York is well known. We are working to expand Student Safety Zones for K-8 students so that more of our pupils are considered aidable under the state formula. We are also requesting that the state funding formula is changed so that any pre-k-12 students who reside more than 1.0 mile from school is considered an "allowable pupil" for aid purposes. This would allow us to bus 1,000 pre-k students and an additional 2,200 K-8 students, and would generate a total of \$11 million in aid for the Syracuse City School District. The earliest that our transportation vendor could implement these changes is January 2017. Consequently, the expense for transportation for the 2016-17 school year would be \$5.5 million. With a safe and reliable way to get to school, we are confident that student attendance and achievement will improve.
- Academic Interventions and Support (\$10.7 million): Part 100 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education requires that school districts provide Academic Intervention Services or additional instruction which supplements the instruction provided in the general curriculum and assists students in meeting learning standards. With implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards and state

assessments aligned to these more rigorous standards, more than 90% of students in SCSD qualify for Academic Intervention Services, including 6,228 children in grades 4-8. As a result of increased state aid for the 2015-16 school year, we have been able to add 58 academic intervention teachers to support struggling students in grades K-5. However, the sheer number of students who need additional supports require new models of instruction and additional staffing. Fortunately, CR Part 100 allows for flexibility. We are requesting \$4.0 million to sustain the 58 current AIS teachers and an additional \$6.7 million to fund an adequate number of additional AIS teachers. Additional funding will also include professional development for teachers, as well as school models that provide digital and online content that provide students with more personalized learning opportunities allowing them to move at their optimum pace.

- English as a New Language (\$5.0 million): Education Law 3204 and newly amended Part 154 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education ensure the needs of New York State's expanding multilingual population are served. English as a New Language (ENL) students must be provided with equal access to all school programs and services offered to non-ENL students, including access to programs required for graduation. Effective implementation of CR Part 154 which includes expansion of bilingual programming and effective supports and interventions for SCSD's 3,300 English as a New Language (ENL) students, a large and growing segment of our student population, requires increased aid of at least \$5 million to fund 30 ENL teachers and support staff; technical assistance; and teacher professional development so that SCSD educators are able to appropriately support the unique learning needs of the ENL student population.
- Computer Science Education/Personalized Blended Learning (\$3 million): The new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes computer science with other core subjects. Computer Science Education offers more employment opportunities for students than any other discipline. Unfortunately, women, blacks and Latinos are underrepresented in the field. Currently, blacks and Latinos each make up 2% of all of those employed in computer sciences in the United States. Syracuse is moving toward making computer science available to all 21,000 students across all of our schools. Implementing computer science education coupled with implementation of Personalized Blended Learning models that allow teachers to tailor instruction to each student's strengths, needs and interests will transform education in SCSD. We plan to use Smart School Bond Act funds to cover the purchase of new student devices and hardware, but we will need significant ongoing investments outside of hardware to make this initiative a success. We are requesting funding in the amount of \$3 million to support technical assistance, curriculum development, digital content, an online learning management system, and the staff to required to support this important new initiative.
- Career and Technical Education (\$2 million): Over the last three years, Syracuse has invested in more than twenty Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs addressing career readiness in projected regional, state and national growth fields. The District is expanding programming to include three new CTE pathways next year -- Health Information Technology, Clinical Laboratory Technology, and Construction Technology. In SCSD, students enrolled in CTE programs experience greater academic success and higher graduation rates. At the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central, the District's career and technical high school, the August graduation rate was 85%. We request \$2 million to continue expansion of these critical programs and to provide the cutting-edge instruction, technology, equipment and materials needed to develop programming.
- Expansion of Arts Programming (\$4.1 million): The research is overwhelming that children from low socio-economic backgrounds who have access to the arts also tend to have better academic results including participation in high-level high school courses, participation in intramural and interscholastic sports as well as academic honor societies, enrollment in selective colleges, and completion of four-year college degrees. An over preponderance on academic intervention services alone coupled with drastic budget reductions over the years has resulted in many students in Syracuse being denied the basic opportunity to participate in the same arts programming that their more affluent peers enjoy less than five miles away. SCSD is requesting the addition of 25 instrumental teachers at the elementary and middle-school levels to ensure, over time, robust music programming at the high school level. We also

request funding for 2,000 additional instruments and increased funding for ongoing maintenance and repair for instruments.

- Security (\$600,000): Teachers and students deserve school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning. The Syracuse City School District has invested significant grant and general fund dollars over the past two years to meet the social, emotional and behavioral needs of students. Moreover, SCSD has invested in safety equipment such as scanning machines, security cameras, and visitor identification systems for our schools. The District plans to invest in additional security equipment as part of our Smart Schools Investment Plan. In order to sustain and increase our safety efforts, it will require further investment in school security/safety officers and continuous training of the security/safety officers who work with our students. We request an additional \$600,000 to support the addition of school security/safety staff and their subsequent training as neither are allowable expenses under the Smart Schools Bond Act.
- Technology Support (\$2 million): We are preparing a plan to use our \$27 million in Smart Schools Bond Act funds to expand and improve technological and security capabilities at every school in the district. In order to appropriately support, maintain, and repair this new equipment, we must invest \$2 million so that we are responsive to our core business of teaching and learning.

In closing, a minimum state aid increase of \$37.8 million would bring our state aid request to a total of \$343.4 million, a 12% increase over the current budget and \$22.8 million more than proposed in the Executive Budget. I ask for your continued support by helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating students in our high-need district. I am committed to continuing to partner with the State Assembly and State Senate to support public education and ensure that every New York student graduates college and career ready. I stand prepared to do everything I can to ensure the academic success of our children. With that, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to take your questions.