



R.E.F.I.T.

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING
ON
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
January 31, 2018
HEARING ROOM B
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING
ALBANY, NEW YORK**

Dear State Leaders:

For over a generation, R.E.F.I.T. has advocated for the needs of financially challenged school districts. We appreciate the significant effort you've made to restore funding lost to the Gap Elimination Adjustment. We know that other legitimate state priorities have been frozen to support public education. Thank you! Having brought our schools back from the brink, now is not the time to pull back. In fact, your leadership is needed now, more than ever before. Consider this:

- The Executive Budget is proposing a state education aid increase amounting to roughly half of what is needed to simply maintain existing programs and services in our schools.
- More of our students are living in poverty. For instance, on Long Island alone, there has been a 78% increase in childhood poverty in only the last eight years.
- More of our students are learning English as a second language and we have more unaccompanied minors and other homeless children than ever before.

HERE'S WHAT YOUR SCHOOLS NEED TO BUILD A BETTER NEW YORK STATE

- A Foundation Aid Formula that is adequate, recognizes student poverty, the increased costs of educating English Language Learners and unaccompanied minors and increased costs in some regions of the state. The Executive Budget is not only insufficient in amount, it fails to adjust a decade old formula that now improperly assesses a school district's financial and educational needs. The legislature must immediately commit itself to this vital work.
- An approach to preschool that allows all school districts to provide this game changing beginning to a child's education. Research proves that this is the only successful way to overcome learning deficits that so many of our children bring to school. A surprisingly small number of young students on Long Island participate in school-based preschool programs. Schools desperately need transportation aid for preschool, to ensure that students in need have access to this life-altering program. Similarly, transportation aid must be applied to afterschool programs to allow our schools to offset the impact of poverty on many students.
- A rational and consistent way for school districts to maintain reserve funds. This would allow them to prevent fluctuations in local property taxes. All other forms of local governments keep reserves far in excess of our schools. If local governments kept to the school district limit, they would be deemed "in fiscal distress." At the very least, there should be a reserve fund for all school employees; to offset spikes in retirement system payments that damage educational programming and make local property taxes volatile.

HERE'S WHAT WOULD HARM OUR FINANCIALLY STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

- **Capping expense-based reimbursements for the cost of transportation, BOCES programs and Building Aid.** These reimbursements are a promise made to local taxpayers

by the state. Local taxpayers have already paid for these expenses and await the state's fulfillment of its promise to reimburse them. Building Aid in particular results from voter approved debt that would be jeopardized (including payments to bondholders) if the reimbursement were arbitrarily changed after the fact. Artificially capping these reimbursements would wreak havoc on school district finances and local taxes. The result might well be the dismantling of needed programs and services to students.

- **Shifting the cost of special education summer school programs to local taxpayers.** The Executive Budget calls for the deterioration or even dismantling of a vital service provided to our most vulnerable children. Summer programming prevents the loss of learning for those children who work the hardest to make academic gains. Cutting summer school special ed funding forces school districts to scale back on these critically important programs. It forces schools to choose between cutting programs for the general school population or special education students. New York State should not become noted for creating class conflict between our children.

HERE'S OUR CHALLENGE

While New York State spends a great deal on public education, it distributes that money in a horrific manner. Stifling both local and state revenue to already financially struggling school districts prevents children from succeeding. The long term impact of this approach will keep New York State from achieving long term economic viability. We owe both our children and our state a better effort than what is presented in the Executive Budget. That's not just wishful thinking, it's a court ordered mandate on state leaders to provide each child their constitutionally protected sound, basic education. Fortunately, we have committed leaders willing to meet the challenge. Thank you for engaging in that vital effort.

Respectfully submitted,

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Chief Operating Officer