

# Syracuse City School District

Building Our  
Future

**HEALTHY  
TOGETHER**

**2021 - 2022**

## **Budget Testimony to the Ways and Means Committee**

**Jaime Alicea  
Superintendent**

### **Board of Education**

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I am Jaime Alicea and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I have dedicated my 35+ year career in education. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Executive Budget and the potential impact it will have on the students in the Big 5, and specifically, on the students in Syracuse.

### District Overview

Our District, like many others, has taken unprecedented steps to ensure that the unique needs of our students are being met during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syracuse City School District serves more than 20,000 students. We have nearly 2,000 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 3,200 English Language Learners who speak 77 different languages from 84 different countries. More than three-quarters of our students are economically disadvantaged from low-income households. Nearly one out of five students in Syracuse receives special education services.

Syracuse is among the poorest of the Big 5 School Districts. Our combined property and income wealth is less than one-third that of the average New York State school district at 29%. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding, especially as we continue to accommodate changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students in our District meet the Community Eligibility Provision, which means that all students receive free breakfast, lunch and snack in school daily. Since schools closed due to the pandemic in March 2020, our Food and Nutrition Services department has served more than 1.5 million total meals to students, setting up meal pick-up sites throughout the city, providing multi-day meal packs during times of remote learning, and arranging mobile delivery for students in quarantine or who are medically fragile. On average, we served more than 10,900 meals each day to children aged 18 and younger. In addition to providing these daily meals, our District partnered with local, state and national partners to offer supplemental food boxes, milk, and other nutritional goods, which were distributed multiple times throughout the pandemic.

As we shifted to accommodate hybrid and remote learning, many of our students and families indicated a lack of access to technology – both in terms of devices and connectivity. In the past year, we have provided 12,000 devices to our students, as well as 3,300 hot spots. We have quadrupled our bandwidth compared to three years ago, and we implemented Microsoft Teams, as well as other learning platforms, to support virtual learning.

Students have been challenged more than ever before due to the change in their educational environment, and our staff have adjusted to ensure that students are receiving adequate social-emotional supports. To date, our support staff have logged more than 6,200 home visits and more than 104,000 phone calls or text messages to students and families. School librarians came together to offer 1:1 technical and instructional support to students and families, assisting nearly 600 families with the change to online instruction and other technical difficulties. Our Office of Family Engagement (OFE) has similarly gone above and beyond to ensure that families were familiar with the changes COVID-19 has brought about, as well as to ensure they are aware of the services and supports our District is making available to them. OFE hosted 64 virtual CoVideo Chats between July to December 2020, reaching more than 7,100 individuals.

Our staff has also worked hard to learn new ways of engaging students virtually. Over the course of 14 weeks, more than 340 professional development opportunities were offered on more than 55 topics relating to technology integration and remote instruction. More than 1,300 of our teachers took advantage of these opportunities. An additional 2,050 teachers engaged in 1:1 support sessions to help them learn new instructional strategies and best practices for remote and hybrid learning models.

Our district also partnered with our local PBS affiliate, WCNY and created WCNY's TV Classroom for grades PK-5. Our teachers created lesson plans on ELA, math, science, health and physical education, history, and social studies that were broadcast and streamed online for students to watch.

Considering all these challenges our students and staff have persevered. I am proud to announce that our graduation rate was above 70%. This is the highest graduation rate in our district in over 20 years.

All of these offerings, supports and services have been in the best interest of our students, to ensure continuity in their academic, social and emotional learning. They have also added significant strain to our already stretched budget, making this year's funding even more critical.

This year we have invested over \$9 million in COVID-19 expenditures as follows:

\$6.2 m	Devices & Hotspots (In addition to \$5 million spent last year)
\$1.6 m	PPE & Cleaning Supplies & Equipment
\$0.9 m	2,500 Air Purifiers (2 per classroom)
\$0.4 m	WCNY Public Broadcast
<u>\$0.6 m</u>	Overtime for cleaning
\$9.7 m	Total

To comply with COVID-19 restrictions, the Board of Education and I have used online platforms to engage the community in providing input for the development of the 2021-22 Budget. We have gotten feedback on critical areas of the budget that are not sustainable when funding is temporary, reduced, or cut all together. We continue to gather online input with over 4,700 views and over 300 submissions with recommendations to date.

We focused on five main topics including staff compensation, co-curricular activities, transportation, charter schools, and contractual expenditures. Over the last two years, the community clearly voted for reducing charter school expenses. They also clearly voted to maintain co-curricular activities and busing at current "mileage from schools" levels while reducing contracts to outside agencies. As such, we are building our budget with this feedback in mind.

As required by the New York State Department of Education, we are implementing Participatory Budgeting (PB) in seven CSI schools. In partnership with Syracuse University, the District is using Participatory Budgeting (PB) to engage community members in decision making on how to spend public money. PB is used to increase participation in decision making, introduce students to civic skills and processes, build stronger relationships with communities, and generate new ideas for improving performance. Each school will have \$5,000 to implement projects that are developed by their school

community and selected by the students and families at that school. Selected projects will then be announced, funded, and implemented by the end of the school year. This is an unfunded mandate.

### **Academic Achievements**

While we still have much to achieve, we are making good progress. As previously mentioned, our graduation rate of 70.1% is the highest it's been in two decades and with 24% of these graduates receiving a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation. Our focus on Career and Technical Education (CTE) has resulted in 94% of those students involved in CTE graduating with their cohort.

These trends are moving in the right direction and I believe with your continued support and funding, will continue to rise. Last year we implemented tiered ELA support and intervention rooms staffed with reading specialists and the early results are promising. This time last year, SCSD students were on track to exceed our goal of improving ten percentage points on our benchmark assessment, a trend we expected to see in the 3-8 ELA test. I would like to do the same for mathematics but can only do so with the additional funding. We are all aware of the yet-to-be measured yet inarguably devastating impact of COVID-19 on our students, staff, and community. The expected effects on mathematics learning is of particular concern, and funding for our districtwide intervention efforts will be critical.

### **Receivership**

Last year, Syracuse closed and reopened three new thematic schools, Syracuse STEM at Blodgett Middle School, Expeditionary Learning at Brighton Academy Middle School and STEAM at Dr. King Elementary, with no additional state funding to pay for increased programming and services. School Turnaround measures require a tremendous amount of time, dedication, and funding to ensure the success of the school, staff, and students. Each of these three schools have smaller class size, more than 50% different staff, oversight of an independent monitor, additional AIS, ELA, special education and mathematics coaches and thematic technical support for Expeditionary Learning, STEM and STEAM. These additional supports will remain in all three schools, with the potential need for increased support to overcome the interruption of COVID-19.

Two of our middle schools remain in Receivership, Lincoln and Clary, and both will continue to receive academic supports including academic coaches, reading, mathematics and science AIS, and professional development to support the progression of becoming an AVID Demonstration School and an authorized International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme School. We plan to continue the added academic and social-emotional supports in each school in 2020-21, along with the technical assistance to implement nationally recognized programming at both schools.

For students in these and all schools to continue making academic progress, we need additional funding.

Increasingly, children are coming to school in need of mental health services that are not readily available in the community. Understanding that student achievement is dependent on many factors including the physical and mental wellbeing of students and their families, the District partners with the County and community agencies to have services delivered in our buildings. Our social-emotional and health care direct support staff of nearly 150 professionals is supplemented with over 350 community agency professionals working with our students and families. The district spends over \$20 million per year on

these needed services. We have implemented specialized teams to support students and families struggling through the pandemic, as the impact of social isolation and the challenges of engaging in virtual instruction while balancing health needs has been overwhelming for many of our families. This intensive, personalized support requires additional funding to ensure each child is supported throughout the pandemic.

## **Legislative Funding Request**

### **Foundation Aid:**

Support the continuation of Foundation Aid in 2021-22 and with plans for increases in the coming years to stabilize the foundation of our educational program. Additionally, I ask that you ensure the formula includes proper weighting of student need by revisiting weighting for poverty, special needs and ENL status and use updated census, poverty, enrollment and regional cost factors. We anticipate and welcome a renewed growth in our settlement communities this year and need funding to ensure that we can provide equitable services to ENL students.

Thank you for supporting restoration of the current year withholdings. To date this has been \$6 million for Syracuse. Likewise, I ask that you reject the provision in the Executive Budget allowing for mid-year cuts again in 2021-22. Mid-year cuts double the impact because if we set our class size and program offerings in September, and later find out funding is not available, we have already spent funds that are not materializing.

The next few years will be times of rising costs for the Syracuse City School District. We need to provide extensive and robust summer school support, academic intervention for mathematics and enhanced social and emotional support to our students post pandemic. These resources are not optional and will require additional funding for several years.

### **Modify the formula for Special Services Aid for Career & Technical Education:**

I respectfully ask that you modify the per pupil cap on funding by 10% from \$3,900 to \$4,300 per pupil and expand Special Services Aid to cover 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. These modifications will ensure continued investment in the CTE programs that prepare students to be college and career ready for generations to come. Syracuse's robust CTE programs are successful and we are in the planning phase of the Regional STEAM High School and when it opens, we will need the Special Services Aid to ensure the programs are resourced properly.

**Reject the Governor's proposal to consolidate expensed driven aids into Foundation Aid** – in particular, Transportation Aid, Special Services Aid, Academic Enhancement Aid, and Charter School Transitional Aid.

### **Transportation Aid**

Since Transportation Aid is based on prior year expense, 2021-22 Transportation Aid will be at a record low for Syracuse, and likely all districts, since so much of this year has been remote and hybrid learning. By collapsing Transportation Aid this year it will be artificially deflated for years to come. Syracuse is facing significant driver shortages this year when the number of routes is minimal, we have drivers coming from Buffalo and Binghamton to service our District. The demand for drivers statewide exceeds the workforce available which will drive up costs in the coming years.

**Special Services & Academic Enhancement Aid** provides funding for Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs. Syracuse continues to expand CTE offerings in over 26 pathways. Consolidating these aids into Foundation Aid would freeze the funding of CTE at current enrollment levels despite planned growth. Again, we are planning the Regional STEAM High School that will offer enhanced CTE opportunities for students in Syracuse but also opportunities for students in surrounding school districts. If this is consolidated into one aid category, the extraordinary CTE work in Syracuse will not be recognized with adequate funding without increasing the rate and capturing 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in the funding formula.

**Charter School Transitional Aid** was created to bridge the gap for districts like Syracuse because the gross tuition per pupil paid to Charter Schools exceeds the state aid per pupil received. Charter School enrollment and Charter School Tuition increases each year in Syracuse. By collapsing and freezing Charter School Transitional Aid in Foundation Aid, the annual increase cost will not be funded resulting in larger gaps each year. Unless more significant reductions are made to Charter Tuition Rates, we cannot afford reductions to Charter Transitional Aid.

Additionally, I ask that you advance payment of Charter School Transitional Aid to the current year. The District is required to pay Charter School Tuition every other month beginning in July for the upcoming school year. However, the District receives most of its State Aid at the end of December, March and June. Waiting a whole year for the Charter School Transitional Aid payment compounds our cash flow dilemma. This change does not cost the State more money overall, it advances the cash flow timing into the year that the expense is incurred.

### **Committee on Special Education:**

I am asking that you reject the permanent shift and elimination of the state's share of costs related to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) placements and would transfer the state's responsibility for the blind and deaf schools to school districts. Last April, the Senate and Assembly rejected the Executive proposal and I ask that again this year you reject this proposal.

### **Charter School Tuition:**

Please support the reduction to Charter School Tuition as a permanent reduction. I encourage you to consider deeper reductions than proposed in the Executive Budget to the tuition rate as the local charters

are realizing profits from taxpayer dollars. Again, this year I ask that you limit Charter School enrollment to 10% in Syracuse, limiting the saturation point to avoid school closures.

### **English as a New Language:**

Education Law 3204 and 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 3,118 English as a New Language (ENL) students, a large and growing segment of our student population, requires increased aid. I ask that you more heavily weight ENL students in the funding formula.

### **STAR – School Tax Aid Relief:**

Please reject the STAR proposal in the Executive Budget. STAR is not a line item in State Aid, especially for the Big 5 Dependent Districts. STAR is paid directly to the City and only a portion of STAR collected is provided to the School District. If this provision remains, taxpayers deserve transparency and clarity on the STAR program, so I urge you to ensure that clear guidance is provided to taxpayers about the difference between the basic STAR exemption and enhanced STAR exemption and the option to forgo the exemption for STAR credit.

### **Health Services Aid:**

Health Services Aid has been flat funded for over a decade and now covers the cost of approximately 12 nurses out of the nearly 50 required by law. I ask that you consider the vital importance of our school nurses in keeping our children and our staff safe and healthy by increasing our Health Services Aid.

### **Smart Schools Bond Act:**

We appreciate the Executive Budget including the continuation of Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA) funding. We relied on this funding for remote instruction devices and hotspots and will continue to use SSBA to ensure our IT infrastructure will support remote instruction.

### **JSCB Phase III:**

I will be advancing JSCB Phase III legislation for your consideration this budget cycle. Syracuse has had a very successful JSCB Phase II nearing the end of completing 12 school building renovations. In order to provide the children of Syracuse with a modern learning environment we need to continue JSCB renovations across the City.

In closing, I thank you for your continued support by helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating our students. Working together, we can make the most of the education investment in New York State's children.