



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Budget Testimony Before

New York State Legislative

Fiscal and Education Committees

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Presented By:

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Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Pyle. I serve as Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, representing the Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica City School Districts. Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to testify before you today and for your unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of urban education in New York State.

Formula Based Aids

We are pleased that the Executive Budget draws upon the Rockefeller Institute of Government's recommendations and proposes adjustments to the existing Foundation Aid formula that would update the poverty measures embedded so that they more accurately reflect current demographics in our communities. In addition, we appreciate the Executive's proposed maintenance of full funding for expense-based aids.

Our school districts had significant fiscal capacity issues prior to the pandemic and these have only been exacerbated. It is imperative that the State thoughtfully consider the Rockefeller Institute of Government's far reaching and comprehensive recommendations and commit to a revised Foundation Aid formula

that is transparent, predictable and distributes funding in an equitable manner reflective of unique student needs.

In addition, the State must recognize that resource allocation decisions are best managed by experienced educators at the local level. The Rockefeller Institute recommended elimination of the set-aside requirements and we urge you to take action to afford school districts the ability to target funding where it is most needed. Lastly, we strongly oppose the November database freeze.

Charter Schools

While we support school choice and affording parents the option to send their children to charter schools, we have serious concerns with regard to the current charter school funding system. Charter school expansion in saturated school districts must be limited and the New York State Board of Regents designated as the sole authorizing authority. The State must also prohibit charter schools from expanding to serve additional grade levels when this would alter the school's current grade configuration.

In addition, Supplemental Charter School Tuition payments must be

reimbursed in the year they are paid. School districts should not be burdened with cash flow struggles and short-term borrowing expenses caused by delayed reimbursement.

Furthermore, an independent entity must be appointed to oversee the dissolution of charter schools to ensure public funds are protected and returned to school districts as required under current statute and charter school reserves must be limited. It is unconscionable to continue to advance public funds to charter schools with reserves, in some cases, in excess of 50-150 percent of their total annual operating budget.

Charter schools must also be required to provide school districts with accurate enrollment and attendance information in a timely fashion. Furthermore, a statutory process must be established whereby school districts may recoup excess charter school payments from prior years.

Lastly, enhanced accountability measures must be applied to charter schools to ensure that enrollment accurately reflects the district's pupil demographics.

Career and Technical Education

Our school districts currently operate some of the most innovative and successful CTE programs in the State and we are continuing to grow these programs. We urge you to invest in Career and Technical Education programs by increasing the Special Services Aid per pupil formula-based funding cap and to align this funding with our Career and Technical Education programs by expanding it to students beginning in grade 9. In addition, more resources should be provided to enable Mount Vernon and Utica to expand in-district CTE programs.

Prekindergarten

Our school districts operate some of the State's longest running and most successful prekindergarten programs. However, funding levels in many cases have not been adjusted to reflect the actual costs of these vital programs. The State must commit to fully funding prekindergarten programs for existing programs in high need urban school districts.

Health and Mental Health Services

We applaud the Governor's continued focus on mental health needs in our schools. Many of our pupils have limited access to health and mental health

services outside of the regular school day. Each of our school districts provides valuable health services to their students as required under Education Law.

Unfortunately, funding for these services has been frozen for many years and Buffalo and Rochester will experience a reduction in School Health Services Aid under the Governor's plan. We urge you to restore this cut and provide additional targeted school health funding for all member districts to assist them with increased demands for school health services.

English Language Learners

Several of our eight member school districts have experienced increased enrollment of pupils who are newly arrived to the United States, including large numbers of refugee students who speak little or no English and are in need of expanded services. In fact, almost 67% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. More funding is needed to support additional bilingual teachers, translators and support services.

Transportation

The current Transportation Aid mileage limitations are not aligned with the conditions in our State's urban centers. While the State acted to address this issue through modifications to school safety zones outside of the Big 5, there was no

action taken to afford students in the large cities the same protections. It is imperative that the State address this issue by reimbursing school districts in the Big 5 for school transportation below the current 1.5 mile limit in instances where the State Education Department deems there is a safety issue.

Instructional Materials and the Digital Divide

Funding for instructional materials including textbooks, software, hardware and library materials has been frozen for decades. The State must take action to increase aid to ensure school districts have the capacity to provide students with the materials they need and deserve. In addition, school districts must be provided with sustained support to ensure that all students and staff have access to critical technology and connectivity.

Professional Development and Staffing

Additional resources must be provided to support vital professional development initiatives and recruitment and retention efforts for teachers and principals. The Big 5 school districts currently receive no targeted State funding for professional development programs, which are essential to improving instructional quality and student outcomes.

Internet-Enabled Devices in Schools

All of our school districts remain deeply concerned about our students' mental health and are well aware the dangers of excessive cell phone use. We appreciate the Governor's focus on this important topic. However, we are concerned that a one-size fits all approach could prove challenging for a plethora of reasons including the climate of fear brought on by actions being taken at the federal level in communities across the State. We are already hearing children expressing fears about having no easy way to keep in contact with their families during the school day, absent access to their cell phones, as they are terrified of leaving their parents to come to school and returning home to find them gone. We also question the need for additional reporting and we strongly believe that all children must be provided with a robust media literacy education.

Dual Enrollment

Our school districts have a multitude of successful partnerships with higher education institutions and operate numerous dual credit/early college high school programs. These initiatives give students in our State's urban centers unprecedented opportunities to explore their interests and graduate from high school with up to two years of college credits. This being said, there is a need for sustained funding for these programs and for the State to work with high schools

and higher education institutions to ensure that credits earned in these program are readily transferable post high school.

Thank you, again, for affording me this opportunity to comment on the Executive Budget proposal. I look forward to working with you in the coming weeks and remain available to answer any questions or provide any information that may be of assistance to you.