



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 2025-2026 Enacted Budget incorporated several modifications to the Foundation Aid formula including an update of the poverty measures, increased weightings for English language learners and limited adjustments to the Regional Cost Index. We are also appreciative of the Governor's proposed increase in 2026-2027 Foundation Aid funding. However, we urge you to continue to draw upon the Rockefeller Institute of Government's recommendations and take action to further update the Foundation Aid formula to ensure that it accurately reflects the unique needs of the students we serve. First and foremost, we stand with our Educational Conference Board Member organizations in calling for a new successful schools study in order to update the Foundation Amount to more accurately reflect increased student needs and the demands attached to implementation of the new graduation standards. The Foundation Aid formula should

also be adjusted through further refinement of the regional cost index as well as weightings for homeless students and English Language Learners.

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. Continued support for Community Schools is essential but it should be a stand-alone funding stream thereby freeing up critical Foundation Aid dollars for other purposes. In addition, Building Aid reimbursement must be adjusted to afford school districts reimbursement for spaces utilized for community school purposes.

Charter Schools

We have voiced longstanding support for school choice and affording parents the option to send their children to charter schools. However, we remain deeply concerned about 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, Charter School Transitional Aid must be enhanced and Supplemental Charter School Tuition payments 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 and 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 are truly grateful for the increase in the per pupil cap under Special Services Aid and for the expansion of Aid to serve 9th graders. We urge you to continue to increase investments in Career and Technical Education programs by further increasing the Special Services Aid per pupil formula-based funding cap. In addition, more resources should be provided to enable Mount Vernon and Utica to expand in-district CTE programs.

Pre-kindergarten

The Governors proposed consolidation of essential Pre-K programs coupled with increase in State support will afford our school districts the resources they need to continue to operate these critical programs. Our school districts have some of the State's longest running and most successful Pre-K programs. However, funding levels have not been adjusted to reflect the actual costs of these vital programs. We also urge the State to hold school districts harmless from year-to-year Pre-K enrollment declines that are outside of their control.

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 ser-

vices 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.

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, 65% 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 fully 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 receive sustained support to ensure that all students and staff have access to critical technology and connectivity.

Portrait of a Graduate

The State must commit to providing additional funding in order to support successful implementation of the new graduation standards. Both the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and the Big 5 school districts will require expanded resources to meet the professional development requirements the process demands. NYSED's proposed establishment of six technical assistance centers is critical to ensure that school districts are afforded the support that will be required

to implement the new graduation standards with fidelity. The Governor's elimination of funding for the monitors in Mount Vernon and Rochester should be restored to enable these school districts to continue the fiscal and academic progress they have made as they prepare to implement the new graduation standards.

Back to Basics in Math/Literary Pilot Program/High Impact Tutoring

We appreciate the Executive's focus and support for best practices in the teaching of math in kindergarten through grade 5. This is aligned with the New York State Education Department's numeracy focus. We are also supportive of the literary pilot programs advanced for Albany and Yonkers. Lastly, we support the Governor's focus on providing additional resources for struggling students through the High Impact Tutoring proposal. We urge careful consideration of unique district needs and implementation flexibility in order to afford school districts the ability to allocate dollars in the most impactful way.

Chronic Absenteeism

Lastly, I want to touch upon the issue of chronic absenteeism. Student attendance in many school districts across the State including the Big 5 is a serious concern. Our school districts are committed to doing everything they can to determine the root causes and take action to ensure students are present and engaged.

These extraordinary efforts have placed a significant financial burden on school districts who recognize the need to invest in programs focused on addressing this critical issue.

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.