

Syracuse City School District



Joint Legislative Public Hearing 2026-27 Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget

Pamela J. Odom
Superintendent

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Board of Education

President Tamica Barnett, Karen Cordano,
Mary Habib, Gwendolyn Raeford, Ranette Releford, Michael Root

Good afternoon,

I am Pamela Odom, the Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, and I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be here today to discuss the Executive Budget from the perspective of the Big 5, more specifically our students in Syracuse.

We are thankful that the Governor has taken into consideration the Consumer Price Index increases that our District will experience in the 2026-27 school year. We are faced with increased labor expenses as we compete against our wealthier suburban counterparts for highly qualified staff, and increased transportation and healthcare expenses that will rise 8% in the coming school year and are projected to rise another 12% in the following year. These are increases that we have little control over, so we greatly appreciate the additional revenue proposed.

With this being said, we are disappointed in the fact that it's been over a year since the Rockefeller Report on the Foundation Aid formula was released and only marginal changes have been made. The changes that were made have had a positive effect on our funding, but we are cognizant that there are more changes that are needed for this formula to be equitable for all school districts and students in New York State. With over 22% of our students in need of Special Education services and almost 20% of our students identified as English Language Learners, further revisions need to be made to equitably account for the needs of these student populations. The current formula includes limited weightings for these and other high-need special education students but also doesn't differentiate for the severity of needs. The formula, also, does not provide State Aid for students enrolled through age twenty-two, nor does it include expanding the allowability for transition programming.

Our combined wealth ratio of 31% is less than one-third that of the average New York State school district. The district's pupil demographics, poverty rates, and wealth measures highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding, especially as we continue to accommodate the academic and social-emotional needs of our children as we transition to a post-pandemic reality. The school system has no control over our community's wealth, yet we are penalized by the minimum limit within the Income Wealth Index (IWI) in the current formula. This arbitrary limit prevents the state from providing exponentially higher aid to the very poorest districts. Currently, the Income Wealth Index is limited to a minimum of 0.65 and a maximum of 2.00. SCSD's Income Wealth Index is 0.32, which is 50% below this arbitrary minimum. The current restrictions make the Syracuse City School District look wealthier due to the minimum cap; therefore, we receive less aid. Conversely, districts with more wealth appear less wealthy due to the maximum cap and receive more aid at the expense of those of us on the other side of the formula spectrum.

Due to the expiration of federal stimulus funding through sources like ARPA, we will need continued state aid increases and funding to adequately address the academic, social-emotional, and technological needs of our students. Post-covid our District has experienced a dramatic change in the needs of our students and families. Our schools are looked upon by our community as a safe place to go for assistance and we have an obligation to do all we can to assist them, whether it's through community schools, after-school and summer school programming, or partnerships with mental health providers. The District requests flexibility in

how we are to meet the needs of our students and families and the Community Schools and C4E set asides in the Foundation Aid formula restrict \$68.8 million of our funding to designated specific areas. The removal of these set asides will enable the District to determine the best use of these funds.

As you may know, Syracuse continues to be one of the poorest communities in the state. In fact, based on recent census data, Syracuse's children have struggled for years with some of the worst poverty rates in the entire nation. We strongly believe that education is the way to break the cycle of generational poverty, but we need students to be in school for them to excel. We request that additional funding is allocated to districts that are experiencing chronic absenteeism, which is an issue facing many of our schools today.

Our District recently opened the first regional STEAM High School in the state with a cohort of 9th grade students in September 2025. Special Services Aid and additional Career and Technical Education funding must be increased as we now partner with 19 school districts in 3 counties. Within the District, we have expanded our CTE programming into all high schools, even implementing exploratory programs in our middle schools. It is critical that these programs receive additional per pupil allocations to support these CTE pathways.

Finally, I want to touch on our reading and math intervention initiatives. It's important that we continue to support our students with reading and math interventions. We need to ensure that our students have the necessary skills to succeed in today's world and reading and math are a critical part of that. By continuing to invest in reading and math interventions, we can help our students achieve their full potential and succeed in school and beyond.

On behalf of the children and families of the Syracuse City School District, I thank you for your continued support in helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to engage in the work of educating and supporting our students and their families. Working together, we can maximize your education investments for the benefit of all the children and families in New York State.

Pamela J. Odom
Superintendent of Schools



2026-27 SUPPORT REQUEST

SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
PAMELA J. ODOM, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS



WAYS YOU CAN HELP OUR SCHOOLS

Remove the Community Schools and C4E Set-Aside Restrictions on Foundation Aid

The Community Schools and Contracts for Excellence (C4E) set-asides restrict how the SCSD expends \$68.8 million of the general-purpose Foundation Aid to a narrow range of specific services and programs, and places significant additional reporting requirements on the District. Funding for these services and programs should be allocated through a separate state aid allocation and should not restrict a portion of general-purpose Foundation Aid funds at a time when flexibility in responding to post-pandemic challenges is critical as we are no longer receiving pandemic federal stimulus funds.

Fund Transportation Aid for K-8 Students at One Mile and Fully Aid in “Safety Zones”.

For years, the Syracuse community has expressed significant concern about the safety of our children, some as young as 4 years old, who walk 1.5 miles to school or walk through high traffic areas that are unsafe. Winters in Syracuse are harsh, with heavy snowfall and frigid wind-chill temperatures and many children navigate through high-crime areas and busy intersections. We are requesting funding for transportation for all students up to 8th grade at 1 mile and without any mile limitations in “Safety Zones” be considered.

Fund Initiatives to Combat Chronic Absenteeism

In 2024-25, nearly 43% of SCSD students were chronically absent. To improve attendance, we have implemented a districtwide Show Up to Glow Up: Rise & Thrive attendance campaign and Attendance Teams at every school costing \$2.1 million. Current funding provides 29 Program Aides and an Attendance Coordinator who make home visits, phone calls, and reach out to parents when students are absent. Attendance Teams at each school review student absences and provide school-based incentives to promote and recognize regular attendance. Regular attendance is fundamental for the long-term success of all students and additional funding is requested to continue these initiatives.

Increase Instructional Materials Aid for Inflation

Rates have not increased since the 1990s. These funds provide critical access to educational materials including library materials, textbooks, software, and hardware. We ask that instructional materials aids are increased for inflation and that resident enrollment is used instead of attending enrollment to support all students in the District.

Update the Foundation Aid Formula

As you continue to analyze the recommendations from the Rockefeller report on revising the Foundation Aid formula, we strongly encourage the state to increase weightings for Special Education students for equitable funding. Reasonably, this is the year to update the formula to ensure that State funds will be allocated to students who need it most as the federal stimulus funds have expired. We appreciate your support in following the recommendations for updating the census and poverty data, and increasing the weightings for English Language Learners (ELL) which allocated additional resources to our District.

Consolidate and Increase Per Pupil Pre-K Funding

The District supports combining Statewide and Universal Pre-K funding into a single application and funding source while also increasing the per pupil allocation to reflect inflationary effects and the increased cost of operating these vital programs. This will provide the appropriate resources that our students require and reduce the administrative burden on the District, enabling us to focus more on the needs of our children

Fund Additional Learning Time for Students

Investing in our students' futures means supporting academic and social-emotional programs before school, after school, during school breaks, and throughout the summer. These initiatives not only provide additional learning but also enhance and foster overall well-being. Funding for these programs in prior years was supported by the New York Education Department but much of this funding is now going through the Office of Child and Family services which has created complex administrative burdens and are not specific to the needs of school districts and our students. We request that funding for these programs increase and they are distributed through the NYS Education Department which has knowledge and understanding of how these programs improve student learning and growth.



ADDITIONAL WAYS YOU CAN HELP OUR SCHOOLS

Limit Charter School Approvals and Freeze Charter Tuition Rates

Limit Charter School saturation to 10% in urban centers and discontinue SUNY Charter authorizations. This allows for school choice while limiting the financial burden on public school districts. In Syracuse, charter school enrollment has increased to 10% in recent years, costing nearly \$43.6 million. Students enrolling in charter schools impacts every school and grade level in the District, making it nearly impossible to offset additional tuition expenses with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms.

Advance Payment of Supplemental Charter School Transitional Aid to the Current Year

Supplemental Charter School Transitional Aid is paid a year after the District expends these funds. If the State would pay this aid in the current year, it would provide a one-year pick up in 2026-27 and then will help with cash flow thereafter. The District is mandated to pay Charter Tuition prior to receiving Foundation Aid (or risk having it intercepted) and then must wait a year before receiving Charter School Transitional Aid.

Adopt Federal Purchasing Thresholds

Doing so will reduce the administrative work involved in the purchasing process and will expedite ordering timelines, which is critical in these times of supply chain disruption. Federal Uniform Grant Guidance CFR 200.320 requires competitive bidding for purchases exceeding \$250,000. Under current General Municipal Law 103, Districts must competitively bid Goods over \$20,000 and Public Works over \$35,000. Quotes would still be obtained up to the \$250,000 limit to encourage competition but with far less administrative processing. SCSD is larger than many cities and municipalities so has much larger dollar value purchases.

The SCSD would benefit tremendously if GML 103 was amended to reference federal bid limits or higher SUNY purchasing thresholds were applied to the Big 5 School Districts.

Increase School Health Services Aid and Fund School-Based Mental Health Clinics

School Health Services aid has not kept pace with student health and medical needs for years. This gap has widened as a result of the pandemic. SCSD funding of \$1.08 million covers the cost of 15 nurses, yet we employ more than 49 nurses, 5 LPNs, and 34 health aides at an expense of \$6.58 million to provide essential services to all schools in the City of Syracuse including Charters and private schools. Nurses are critical to the daily operation of our schools and should be fully funded. School-based mental health clinics are vitally important to the well-being of our students. Funding this initiative will enable the SCSD to address students' mental health needs immediately and provide supports that these students wouldn't receive otherwise.

Fund Another Round of Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA)

The pandemic emphasized just how crucial technology has become to education. The SCSD doubled the number of devices deployed district-wide, added staff and enhanced infrastructure to support the additional bandwidth, safe internet access, number of devices, training for staff and students, hardware, and software to ensure that virtual learning could be supported. By funding another round of SSBA, the State would provide funding to replenish devices and sustain infrastructure for the future of education.

