

TESTIMONY ON THE FY 2026–27 EXECUTIVE BUDGET

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Pretlow, Mayer, Benedetto, distinguished members of the Committees, and members of the Yonkers State Delegation.

My name is Anibal Soler, Jr., and I am proud to serve as Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools, educating more than 24,000 students in New York’s third-largest city. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our students, families, educators, and community.

Before I begin, I want to express my sincere gratitude to our Yonkers State Delegation. Your consistent advocacy and partnership have been essential to our progress, and I thank you for standing with Yonkers.

Last year, I came before you with a simple message: ***Protect our progress. Protect the investment. Protect Yonkers Public Schools.***

That message is even more urgent and critical today.

Let me first acknowledge what the Governor’s Executive Budget gets right.

The proposed \$1.6 billion increase in School Aid is significant. The \$779 million increase in Foundation Aid, fully funding the current formula, is appreciated.

I am also encouraged by investments targeted directly to Yonkers. The \$1.5 million *Literacy Pilot Program* partnership comes at a critical moment, as literacy remains our most pressing academic challenge. The Teachers of Tomorrow program addresses the acute shortage of math and science educators. These investments matter, and they signal that Albany sees Yonkers.

However, I must be clear: ***these investments do not solve our structural funding problem.***

Last year, the State recognized that Westchester County has the highest regional cost in New York State. However, Yonkers continues to be penalized due to its geography. The Foundation Aid formula does not properly account for the cost of living and operating a school system in Yonkers. State aid reimbursements lack a meaningful regional cost adjustment. Consequently, Yonkers is systematically at a disadvantage compared to districts in lower-cost areas—despite serving a high-need student population.

To bridge this gap, Yonkers has relied heavily on fund balance reserves. Those reserves are now nearly depleted. This is not a sustainable path forward.

What is missing from this budget matters just as much as what is included.

There is no meaningful expansion of funding for health and mental health services, despite well-documented post-pandemic student needs. Even after adding staff, our ratios remain dangerously high:

- One school psychologist for every 493 students
- One guidance counselor for every 380 students
- One social worker for every 1,104 students

These are not abstract ratios. They represent real children who are waiting, often unsuccessfully for critical support.

Universal Prekindergarten expansion is well-intentioned, but the current funding model creates serious fiscal risk for districts like Yonkers. We are contractually obligated to pay teachers for the full school year, yet our aid is tied to enrollment. When students leave after the school year begins, we absorb the full cost while state revenue declines. Expansion without enrollment stabilization protections places districts in an untenable position.

Similarly, New York State's Excess Cost High-Cost Aid must be aligned to regional cost realities. Yonkers' significantly higher operational costs are ignored in the current formula, undermining our ability to meet our legal and moral obligation to serve students with intensive special education needs.

Let me be clear about what this means on the ground.

Yonkers has already made painful decisions. We have eliminated positions and closed schools. If the funding formula remains unchanged, we face choices that would directly harm students and families:

- Reductions in art, music, world languages, counseling, and social-emotional support staff
- Additional school reconfigurations and potential closures that disrupt communities
- Cuts to after-school programs, athletics, career and technical education, and the arts—programs that keep students engaged and graduating
- Limits on technology and innovation that prepare students for college and careers

These cuts threaten the very progress the State has invested in.

Yonkers is the *only Big 5 urban district with a 90% graduation rate*. The Obama Foundation recognized Yonkers as the only district in New York State named a model community for graduating young men of color at one of the highest rates in the nation. That success did not happen by chance, it was driven by strategic investment, innovation, and sustained commitment.

And yet, that success is fragile.

This is a matter of fairness.

Yonkers is a model urban school system. Our students deserve funding equity with their peers—both in other Big 5 districts and in surrounding Westchester communities. Achievement should not be punished. Geography should not determine opportunity.

The data tells the story clearly:

- Westchester’s current Regional Cost Index is 1.351. Aligning Yonkers with the New York City and Long Island index of 1.425 would generate **\$17 million** annually.
- Applying the Comparable Wage Index for Teachers recommended by the Rockefeller Institute would yield **\$47 million** for Yonkers.
- While statewide Foundation Aid is increasing by 2.9%, Yonkers is receiving only a 1.14% increase—less in real terms once rising costs are accounted for.

So today, I respectfully ask the Legislature to take three actions:

First, **fix the Foundation Aid formula** by adjusting the regional cost index to reflect real operating costs. This is not special treatment—it is equitable treatment.

Second, **protect districts expanding Universal Pre-K** by including enrollment stabilization safeguards that prevent financial penalties for circumstances beyond their control.

Third, **provide sustainable funding to expand community schools**. Community schools work. They integrate academics, health services, mental health supports, and family engagement under one roof. In Yonkers, they have improved attendance, strengthened family trust, and achieved better outcomes—but we cannot sustain these gains on short-term grants and set aside funding built solely within our foundation aid.

Yonkers Public Schools is a success story—but success without sustainability is at risk.

Our teachers are dedicated. Our students are capable. Our families are engaged. We have shown what is possible when urban districts are resourced fairly.

I urge you once again to ***“Protect our progress. Protect the investment. Protect Yonkers Public Schools”***.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome your questions.