



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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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 proposal maintains full funding for expense based aids. However, the Governor's adjustments to the Foundation Aid formula, including the elimination of save harmless provisions and reduction of the inflation factor, would be devastating to school districts already struggling to meet the needs of some of the State's most vulnerable children. This retreat from full funding coupled with the impending exhaustion of federal grant funds would have dire consequences.

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts partnered with the other Members of the Educational Conference Board and the State Education Department over the past several months to consider amendments to the Foundation Aid formula. While we recognize that a complete overhaul of the formula will require significant time and resources, it was our desire to see the State begin making small adjustments in the 2024-2025 State Budget that would move us closer to a more equitable and adequate funding model.

Our school districts had significant fiscal capacity issues prior to the pandemic and these have only been exacerbated. It is imperative that the State commit to full funding and 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. We urge you to eliminate Foundation Aid set-asides and afford school districts the ability to target funding where it is most needed.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not recognize Chancellor Young, Commissioner Rosa, the Board of Regents and State Education Department staff for their unwavering commitment to supporting the Big 5 school districts as we

navigated unprecedented challenges over the past several years. Their steadfast support was accomplished despite the fact that the Department was severely understaffed. We urge you to ensure that they are provided with the funding necessary to enable them to continue to provide vital support to our schools.

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 and a statutory process 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 district 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

The Big 5 school districts appreciate the Governor's proposal to remove the prekindergarten supplement versus supplant language as well as her ongoing commitment to funding prekindergarten programs in New York State. 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 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 68% of all English Language Learners are

educated in the Big 5. More funding is needed to support additional bilingual teachers, translators and support services.

Literacy

We appreciate the Governor's focus on literacy and are committed to the use of evidence-based reading instruction. We urge the State to ensure that school districts are afforded continued flexibility to tailor curriculum and instructional practices in a way that best serves their population with oversight and support from the State Education Department. In addition, the implications of any burdensome additional reporting requirements should be carefully evaluated prior to enactment.

FAFSA Completion

All of the Big 5 school districts are working diligently to provide students with the tools needed to succeed including assisting them with college and career planning and counseling services. We have concerns about the capacity of school districts to provide all students with any support needed to assist them with completion of the FAFSA. We have engaged SUNY in conversations on this topic and look forward to further exploring resources and expanded higher education partnerships. Again, we remain concerned about additional reporting requirements.

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.

New York City Governance

Lastly, the Conference of Big 5 School Districts strongly supports the extension of New York City's current school governance structure. There is a precedent for education policy decisions regarding school governance to be made based on local factors. New York City's current governance structure has served parents and students well and led them to unprecedented achievement.

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.