

# Syracuse City School District



*A commitment to the future of  
the students, families, and staff  
in the Syracuse City School District.*

## **Joint Legislative Public Hearing 2024-25 Executive Elementary & Secondary Education Budget**

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**Superintendent of Schools**

February 1, 2024

Board of Education

President Tamica Barnett, Twiggy Billue, Nyatwa Bullock, Karen Cordano, Mary  
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I am Anthony Davis and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as the Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I started my career as a teaching assistant and now have the honor and privilege of being Superintendent. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to discuss the Executive Budget and the potential impact it may have on the students in New York, and more specifically, the students in Syracuse.

Firstly, I want to take a moment to personally thank you for securing over \$150 million in federal stimulus funding for Syracuse and for your statutory commitment to fully fund Foundation Aid. The Legislature deserves tremendous credit for its efforts to allocate and deliver unprecedented financial support to our schools during and following the pandemic. As a result of your commitment toward funding public education, the children of the Syracuse City School District are on their way to academic recovery and success. Thank you for believing in our kids by showing your support with the financial resources that our children and their families deserve. That said, it is important to understand that the increased needs of children post-pandemic will continue long after the stimulus funding has expired. Therefore, your continued advocacy and financial support is crucial as we embark upon this post-pandemic educational environment.

## **DISTRICT OVERVIEW**

Our District, like many others, has taken unprecedented steps to ensure that the unique needs of our students are being met during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Syracuse City School District serves approximately 19,000 students. Within this figure, there are nearly 1,500 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 3,000 English Language Learners who speak 69 different languages from 78 different countries. More than one out of five students in Syracuse receives special education services. More than eighty percent of our students are economically disadvantaged, living in low-income households.

Syracuse continues to be the poorest community in New York State. In fact, based upon recent census data, Syracuse's children have struggled for years with some of the worst poverty in the entire nation. The overall poverty rate of 45.8% is the second highest in the country among U.S. cities with 100,000 people or more. More than 13,700 students live below the poverty line. Over 7,600 families in Syracuse (27% of all families) live on less than \$25,000 a year and over 3,000 of those families (11%) struggle to get by on less than \$10,000 a year. This is the third highest rate in the entire nation.

Our combined wealth ratio (CWR) at 30% 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 children as we transition to a post COVID-19 pandemic reality.

## **ADDRESSING ON-GOING CHALLENGES**

### ***Academic Challenges***

For the last several school years, data has confirmed that our students are in dire need of academic support. To address academic needs, we expanded our Reading Intervention and Math Intervention programs at all levels with the federal stimulus funds. We are in our second full school year of our 1:1 device initiative. This year we have expanded this initiative for our students in grades 3-8. We strongly believe that literacy now includes digital literacy, therefore, we must provide students with the technology and skills necessary to compete in this technological environment. As we work to increase

our proficiency in literacy and numeracy, we are making additional tools available at home for students to practice skills anywhere anytime. To this end, supporting families to leverage technology as a tool for learning has been a priority of family engagement events. To ensure our students are equipped with the skills to expertly access, consume, contribute, and compete on a global level, we will continue to provide authentic experiences for students leveraging technology. We continue to apply what we learned from the pandemic to innovate and broaden the world for our students through digital resources. With every student in grades 3-12 having a device and all P-2 classes effectively equipped with technology, we are shifting our focus to increased staff training and replenishing and maintaining hardware and software.

Far more preschoolers who were unable to access a structured educational program during the pandemic need special education and related services. The impact of isolation and lack of access to in-person services resulted in over one quarter of our preschool students being identified as needing services and the effects continue with increased identification this year. We have expanded program offerings to support our youngest learners, but the need continues to be great. We anticipate an additional need for even more programs in the 2024-25 school year, including staff certified in specialty and high-need areas. We continue to adjust the continuum of services at all grade levels P-12 with extra attention to grade-level transitions.

Data clearly demonstrates that there is a disproportionate impact on learning loss on economically disadvantaged communities like the city of Syracuse. Our chronic absenteeism rate is high, and to reengage our youth, we have appointed attendance teams in each school and have hired a districtwide attendance coordinator to support these teams. We incentivize good attendance with our Strive for Five (days a week) campaign and pilot initiatives to support families in areas they identify as challenges, from laundry to wake up calls. Every school has family engagement personnel, and we are hosting events to support literacy and numeracy outside of the school building and collaborating with a range of community partners. This critically important work helps all our students catch up on some of the skills needed to be more successful in schools, and we are excited about a range of tutoring programs to provide extra academic support for students in need. All our schools now have extended learning opportunities either before or after school, and this year we have begun to expand to Saturday Academy.

### ***Social-Emotional & Mental Health Challenges***

We conducted a Panorama survey with all our students at the end of the last school year and the fall of 2023. Based upon this data, it was clear that many of our students require intervention and support to ensure their well-being. In response, the SCSD (Syracuse City School District) continues to recruit and hire additional school counselors, social workers, and social worker assistants. In addition, last year we created the position of parent aides to work in tandem with our office of family engagement, instituted school teams to monitor attendance and behavior, and hired health attendants to support our school nurses.

The SCSD realizes that it takes more than the school system to address the many, varied needs of students and families and therefore have held many community forums throughout the city at churches, community centers and schools to allow for community input on how we collectively can work together to improve the lives of our students. The SCSD is committed to establishing and expanding our partnerships with the community to foster relationships and build connections to support the needs of our students inside and outside of the classroom. We understand the importance of community engagement and with your continued support we will further enhance our community collaborations.

We have begun to expand our partnerships with many of our community-based organizations to directly support several of our students with case management and family support. These community organizations provide a safe after-school learning environment for our students while also providing some of the social-emotional support that our students need. These agencies have recruited and hired staff that can relate to these students' needs and have the skills necessary to address them.

We have several community schools where we leverage your financial support to address the needs of these students and families directly at the school-site. These community schools coordinate resources from the community and bring them together to support our students and families. As we move forward, we are going to be looking at ways to further enhance this model and leverage our community resources to have a greater impact on more students and families. Continued Community School legislative support is critical to the success of this initiative.

The district has established a multi-tiered system of support. To ensure universal support for social-emotional learning (SEL), the SCSD continues to utilize a consistent SEL curriculum in grades PreK-8. We have transitioned over to the digital version to increase staff accessibility to resources and support reinforcements, and we are working to systematically support social-emotional and academic needs in our youth. Our 9th-12th-grade high school teachers received SEL materials developed by teachers relevant to the current needs of our students. Our newly hired Director of Mental Health is partnering with local hospitals, the County, and City to engage crisis response teams and expand access to mental health clinicians beyond the school day.

The SCSD, like many other of our Big 5 counterparts, has experienced a decrease in student attendance post-pandemic. To address this, the SCSD has instituted school attendance teams and has hired and placed program aides in every school building to collaboratively work with students and their families to resolve attendance matters and coordinate resources to address the underlying issues that are impacting their regular attendance. We have partnered with Onondaga County to provide resources in the form of ACCESS workers who engage with all our schools in providing and coordinating support to families to decrease chronic absenteeism. Lastly, we are leveraging our ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) McKinney-Vento funding to provide a wide array of support to our students identified as homeless. This year, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of homeless students, many of whom have been placed in temporary housing outside the SCSD catchment area, which has created numerous challenges to ensure that they are provided with transportation to and from school daily.

### ***Workforce Challenges***

Similar to last year, this school year has also been plagued by workforce constraints. We are struggling to fill all positions – instructional and non-instructional. The year began with difficulty finding certified and non-certified staff, and now it is nearly impossible to find qualified staff at all levels. For example, we are operating this year with substantially fewer bus drivers and have had to change school start and end times to accommodate route consolidation due to an inadequate pool of CDL candidates. It has been challenging to provide adequate continuity of instruction due to position vacancies and the intense need of supporting uncertified staff in both content and service delivery. The need for certified special education and math teachers is particularly concerning, given the academic performance, specialized needs, and social-emotional needs of our student population.

Staff are committed, yet overwhelmed, with the complex challenges of our community and the needs of our learners. Community violence impacts our schools, and we have increased staffing to support proactive resources to address community conflicts while also maintaining safety within our schools. While we are working to provide a safe and supportive climate and culture for staff and students, we do expect ongoing workforce issues in the coming school years. We are implementing initiatives to attract, support and retain top talent while being mindful of the cost considerations and future expenses associated with compensation and benefits. We are providing ongoing professional development via job-embedded coaching, after-school and summer training opportunities and school-based and instructional themed PD for staff to ensure they have the skills needed to effectively teach our student population.

We are in our third year of implementing Impact Coaches for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year teachers to address the large numbers of uncertified staff, and we have assigned a coach to each long-term substitute serving in uncertified teaching roles. Recently, we developed plans to support uncertified teaching assistants, as our retention rate for these critical positions has been impacted by lack of orientation and development. All newly hired teachers have a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) coach. We are grateful for the opportunity to hire retired teachers to temporarily fill some of these critically important positions and are hopeful that the Legislature continues to provide school districts with this option. We continue to implement coaching support to teachers and leaders so that we are not only competitive for talent, but also continue to develop and support our employees, ensuring better outcomes for students while also retaining diverse and effective talent. We are strengthening our mentoring system for district and building leaders due to the many transitions that occurred due to workforce changes and challenges. We have created teacher and leader pipelines in partnership with institutes of higher education, such as New York University, SUNY (State University of New York) Oswego, SUNY Cortland, and Syracuse University to increase our ability to hire certified teachers and promote from within. To assist in this work, we hired a Director of Retention to focus human resource efforts on career development and growth.

### ***Academic Achievement***

While we serve some students well, the SCSD is not achieving the kinds of academic results our children deserve. Although our graduation rate remains over 70%, higher than it has been in decades, our achievement data indicate current and future cohorts of students are missing vital learning to maintain and improve that rate of high school completion. We continue to enhance our Career and Technical Education programming to respond to local workforce development needs while engaging our high school learners. These unique programs serve students from grades 9-12, and all eighth graders have the opportunity to participate in choosing which program best suits their interest and needs. These programs help our achievement move in the right direction, and we believe with your continued support and funding, our learning outcomes will begin to increase.

Our tiered math and ELA (English Language Arts) support and intervention rooms are staffed with reading specialists and highly trained math interventionists, which is showing promising results. SCSD students engaged in these interventions are on track to exceed the average rate of growth, a trend we expect to see reflected in future 3-8 math and ELA testing, in addition to increased proficiency rates in ELA and math. We would like to expand these intensive learning opportunities to more students in need over the coming years but can only do so with additional funding. We are all aware of the inarguably

devastating impact of COVID-19 on our students, staff, and community and the effect on mathematics learning is of particular concern. Funding for the enhancement and improvement of our Tier I instruction along with districtwide intervention efforts will be critical, albeit time consuming and costly, as we train our teachers, teaching assistants, and instructional leaders in evidence-based practices.

### **Receivership**

In the 2019-20 school year, the Syracuse City School District restarted three new thematic schools: Syracuse STEM at Blodgett Middle School, Expeditionary Learning at Brighton Academy Middle School, and STEAM at Dr. King Elementary. We did so without additional state funding to pay for increased programming and services. We realized the critical importance of these restarts and the need for immediate change. School Turnaround measures require a tremendous amount of time, dedication, and funding to ensure the success of the school, staff, and students. Each of these three schools has smaller class sizes, oversight by an independent consultant, academic intervention services (AIS), instructional coaches, special education programming and thematic technical support for Project-Based Learning, Expeditionary Learning, and STEAM. This additional support will remain in all three schools, with the potential need for increased support due to the exacerbated impact of COVID-19 during the initial restart years.

Two of our middle schools - Lincoln and Clary - remain in Receivership and both will continue to receive targeted supports including academic coaches, AIS in reading, mathematics and science, and professional development to support the progression of becoming an AVID Demonstration School and an authorized International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme School, respectively. We plan to continue the added academic and social-emotional support in each school in 2024-25, along with the technical assistance from outside partners and the New York State Education Department to implement nationally recognized programming at both schools.

For students in these and all schools to continue making academic progress, we need additional funding to support community and school-based tutoring opportunities outside of and during the school day, throughout the summer, and increase exposure to learning experiences that enhance content knowledge for our children. Our newly launched Saturday Academy offers students the opportunity to engage in one-on-one and small group tutoring as another way to enhance content knowledge and skill-building for our students. This year we have committed to strengthening our culture of collaboration through Professional Learning Communities at all levels. We have begun to deepen and expand our collective knowledge and efficacy district-wide in Tier 1 high-leverage best practices including the Science of Reading (SoR), writing, social and emotional learning, cognitive engagement, and Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE). We need additional funding to continue to build our expertise internally and to provide more personalized professional learning and job-embedded coaching opportunities.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

The SCSD has strategically utilized our additional stimulus funding and state aid to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students with the knowledge that these funds will expire at the end of the 23-24 school year. We have strategically planned for this reality but many of these initiatives that were

instituted with these funds will continue to be required once these funds no longer exist. Legislative support will continue to be instrumental in assisting the SCSD in meeting this post-pandemic challenge. Increasingly, children are coming to school needing mental health services not available in the community, and many local agencies are struggling to staff their positions to provide this support. Understanding that student achievement is dependent on many factors, including the physical and mental well-being of students and their families, the SCSD will continue to partner with Onondaga County and community agencies to have services delivered in our buildings. Our social-emotional and health care support staff of nearly 200 professionals is supplemented with over 350 community agency professionals working with our students and families. The district expends over \$25 million per year on these needed services. We have implemented specialized teams to support students and families struggling through the pandemic, as the impact of social isolation, lack of access to community resources, and the challenges of engaging in virtual and interrupted instruction while balancing health needs has been overwhelming for many of our families. This intensive, personalized support requires additional funding to ensure each child and family is supported throughout the pandemic. Leveraging the Community Schools model requires additional funding to ensure we can reach as many families as possible.

### **LEGISLATIVE FUNDING REQUEST**

#### ***Increase Foundation Aid***

We appreciated the State's commitment to fully funding foundation aid and providing additional resources in a transparent and equitable manner. We remain deeply concerned about the funding cliff looming once federal stimulus funds have been exhausted. As you may be aware, the Syracuse City School District has no ability to generate local revenue given our fiscal dependency on the City of Syracuse, where more than 50% of the properties are exempt from property taxes.

We strongly encourage the State to utilize updated census and poverty data and increase weightings for Special Education and English Language Learners (ELL) for equitable funding. Logically, this is the year to update the census data and use current, more accurate data to ensure that state funds will be allocated to students who need it most when the federal stimulus funds expire at the end of this school year.

The next few years will be times of rising costs for the Syracuse City School District. We need to continue providing academic and social-emotional support currently funded by the Federal Stimulus Funds. In addition, we need to provide extensive and robust summer school support, during-school and after-school academic interventions and enhanced social and emotional support for our student's post-pandemic. These resources are not optional and will require additional funding for several years.

#### ***Increase School Health Services***

School Health Services aid has not kept pace with student health and medical needs for many years. This gap has widened because of the ongoing pandemic. Our funding of \$1.08 million essentially supports the salary and benefits of 15 nurses, yet we employ more than 50 nurses and 30 health aides providing essential services to all schools in the City of Syracuse including Charters and private schools. Nurses are essential to the daily operation of our schools and should be properly funded as an expense-based aid. The last three years have been overwhelming for our health services staff. Our nurses have been

performing extra duties to continue providing the best services to our students during the pandemic so that we can keep our schools open for in-person instruction. Currently, we have a full-time nurse at each one of our schools regardless of the enrollment in the building. We want to establish a student-to-nurse ratio of 300:1 to continue providing essential health services to our students.

### ***Expense Driven Aids & Instructional Materials Aid Enhancement***

We encourage the State to fully fund and maintain expense driven aids and adopt last year's New York State Board of Regents proposal to increase instructional material aids including library materials, textbooks, software, and hardware aid for inflation using resident enrollment instead of attending enrollment. These funds provide critical access to educational materials and the rates have not increased since the 1990s.

### ***Increase Special Services Aid (CTE)***

Special Services Aid for 9th grade students enrolled in Career & Technical Education courses should be provided for every school district. The current formula only funds students in grades 10, 11 and 12. Data is being collected and reported on 9th grade CTE students and this investment will provide opportunities for students to be college and career ready. It is important that Special Services Aid is funded for *all* high school students in the CTE programs.

Additionally, consider creating a new reimbursement-based special services formula that would provide aid for a percentage of actual CTE costs as outlined in the Regents Proposal, or increase the cap on the per pupil rate by 33% (from \$3,900 to \$5,200 in 2023-24) each year for three years.

As the SCSD embarks on the first regional STEAM High School in New York State with a cohort of 9th grade students in September 2025, Special Services Aid must be provided for them.



## Other Legislative Requests

### ***Limit Charter School Saturation in a City or District***

Limit Charter School saturation to 10% in urban centers allowing 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 more than \$32 million. Students enrolling in charter schools come from every school and grade level in the district, thus making it difficult to offset additional tuition expenses with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms.

### ***Freeze Charter Tuition Rate***

The Charter School Tuition Rate needs to be aligned with the respective expenses. The cost of operating a charter school without unions, pensions, legacy costs, OPEB, and with lower concentrations of ELL's, students with special needs and students who are disadvantaged is much less than that of a traditional public school. Much of the taxpayer dollars funneled to charters either goes to their corporate oversight entity or adds to their equity. Taxpayer dollars should not be used to fund private for-profit margins.

### ***Enact Reclaiming (Clawback) Provision for All Overpayments to Charter Schools***

When charter schools return students to the district during the school year, we need to have the option to reclaim tuition payments. This would deter charters from releasing students back to the district at the time of state assessments, Regents exams, and graduation. Also, student attendance records must be provided by charter schools promptly and tuition reclaimed for chronically absent students.

### ***Discontinue SUNY Charter Authorization***

Only the State Education Department should be allowed to authorize charters. The current system supports charters going to SUNY for authorization after SED has declined their application. SUNY does not have the same vested interest in P-12 education and does not require compliance with SED guidelines for operating a public school funded with taxpayer money.

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

Supplemental Charter School Transitional Aid is paid on a one-year lag. If the State would pay this aid in the current year, it would provide a one-year pick up in 2024-25, and then will assist 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.

### ***Student Health, Mental Well-Being, and Nutrition***

Establish and fund infrastructure to sustain critical well-being support for students. All children have been impacted by the pandemic, however, those in urban centers living in poverty, with disabilities, and with language acquisition challenges have been particularly impacted and will need specialized and accessible support long after the federal stimulus funds expire.

### ***Teacher and Administrator Shortage***

The shortage of certified teachers in many disciplines and administrators is directly impacting our students. To address the teacher and administrator shortage this year and for years to come, continue the temporary waiver of the income cap for returning retirees, expand the alternative teacher certification process, simplify the certification process, and provide college tuition programs for students earning education degrees.

### ***English Language Learners***

Most pupils who are newly arrived in the U.S. are educated in the Big 5 School Districts. We respectfully request that the State provide more support for English Language Learners (ELLs) through a designated categorical program that will fund the services immigrant students need as they acclimate to school and learn skills beyond just language acquisition, including heritage-language resources to support the transition to the U.S. and schools.

### ***Fund Another Round of Smart Schools Bond Act (SSBA)***

The pandemic emphasized just how crucial technology has become to education. Syracuse quadrupled the number of devices deployed districtwide and has had to add staff and enhance 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 can be supported. By funding another round of SSBA, the State can provide funding when approved and when needed to replenish devices and sustain infrastructure for the future of education. Otherwise, we will require assistance from the State to separately fund ongoing technology.

### ***Expedite State Aid Payments to Beginning of School Year***

Align State Aid payments to the beginning of the year to eliminate the need for short-term Revenue Anticipation Notes (RAN) borrowing. Also, fund the district promptly, aligned with the Charter Tuition payment schedule. Districts are required to prepay Charters beginning in July, yet most of the district's aid is received at the end of January, March, and June.

### ***Adopt Federal Purchasing Thresholds***

New York State allows SUNY to make purchases using the federal purchasing thresholds and the same should be allowed for P-12 Education. Doing so will reduce the administrative work involved in the purchasing process and will expedite ordering timelines, which is critical in these times of continued supply chain disruptions.

Federal Uniform Grant Guidance CFR 200.320 requires formal competitive bidding for purchases exceeding the simplified acquisition threshold which is currently set at \$250,000. Under current General Municipal Law 103, Districts must competitively bid on Goods over \$20,000 and Public Works over \$35,000. If approved, quotes would still be obtained up to the \$250,000 limit which encourages competition yet involves a far more streamlined administrative process. SCSD is larger than many cities and municipalities and as such, has much larger dollar value purchases. SCSD would benefit tremendously if General Municipal Law 103 was amended to reference federal bid limits.

## **Mandate Relief**

### ***Remove the Community Schools Set-Aside Restrictions on Foundation Aid Funding***

Since the 2016-17 Enacted State Budget, the State has implemented a Community Schools Foundation Aid set-aside. The district's current Community Schools set-aside amount is \$14.6 million. This set-aside restricts the use of general-purpose Foundation Aid to specific services and programs and places additional reporting requirements on the districts. 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.

### ***Remove Contracts for Excellence (C4E) Set-Aside Restrictions on Foundation Aid Funding***

The SCSD is committed to investing in targeted programs that raise student achievement for students with the greatest educational needs and has consistently exceeded the minimum C4E spending set-aside requirements for these programs since 2008. The administrative and reporting requirements to demonstrate the district's continuous compliance with the C4E initiatives are a significant and unnecessary burden. These programs have become standard during the sixteen years that C4E has been in place. We ask that the \$23.6 million C4E Foundation Aid set-aside and reporting requirements be discontinued.

## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, the issues facing the Syracuse City School District these past four years are not going to vanish next year, or the year after that. We continue to address issues of equity academically, social-emotionally, and technologically as result of this post-pandemic reality and will need the continued support of the Legislature to meet the challenges of these current and future changes. CRRSA (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations) & ARPA have temporarily provided the financial support needed to address these issues. With these funding supports expiring, the needs of our students will continue, and we will need continued State Aid increases and funding support to appropriately address these academic, social-emotional, and technological needs. We recognize our obligation and are committed toward ensuring that all students have the educational opportunities that they rightly deserve and that we prepare them for future success in college and careers. Kids First, period.

Again, 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 continue the important work of educating our students. Working together, we can maximize your education investments for the benefit of all the children and families in New York State.