



*Testimony Before The New York Senate Finance Committee,  
Assembly Ways and Means Committee,  
Senate Education Committee,  
and  
Assembly Education Committee*

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## **Introduction**

It's a privilege to testify before you a fourth time. My message today is simple.

- Rochester schools are using the District's budget process to find efficiencies and shift resources to the services and supports that benefit students most directly.
- Our district has an Action Plan that is driving improvements in student achievement. In my written testimony I will request increased state support for the priorities defined in our plan.
- However, no amount of money can overcome the administrative barriers that handcuff my ability to drive the changes we need to make. So today I am requesting the tools to improve my district's management system. I ask for the same authority to manage the District that most private and public sector CEOs have.

A focus on management will allow Superintendents like me to lead by example. In this year's budget discussions, the state will consider changes to the system for granting tenure to teachers. As a Superintendent who would be required to implement these changes, I need tools to fix the system that manages the work of teachers.

Specifically, I propose that you amend the law so that school administrators earn tenure after seven years, and renew tenure every three years based on performance. As part of this change, we need a more timely and objective process to remove nonperforming school administrators—and greater flexibility to reward those who achieve outstanding results.

At Central Office, now is also the time to remove people in management positions from union affiliation and the associated tenure. As Superintendent, I need a team of leaders throughout the district who can provide vital support through the leadership of their respective units.

As I speak, fewer than 40 of the nearly 6,000 employees in the Rochester City School District serve at the pleasure of the Superintendent. Compare this with Mayor Warren of Rochester, who has appointing authority over all department, bureau and division heads—a total of more than 350 employees who oversee a staff that is roughly half the size of the school district.

As committee members who focus on education, you know as well as I do that competent, vigorous, and dedicated administrators have enormous impact on student achievement. In particular, good principals and assistant principals—those able and willing to

manage their staffs and buildings effectively—are essential to creating good schools. Currently, I can't even place principals and assistant principals due to contractual constraints. Inflexible rules and contractual constraints prevent the kind of evidence-based educational reform we need to improve outcomes for Rochester students, a commitment I know you share.

Let me explain how the changes I am proposing would help our students succeed. First, current rules do not give us enough time for effective administrators to do their jobs. The work rules and extra pay requirements are old-fashioned. They do not reflect current thinking about the key role of school and Central Office administrators as professional leaders and managers.

Here are a few examples: If an administrator in my district is required to work on a snow day or cold-weather day when the school is closed for students, we must provide the administrator a personal day as a reward. Similarly, if administrators work more than 90 minutes after the instructional day ends or on Saturday, we must reward them with extra pay.

Then, there are provisions such as an agreement made in 2009, before I became superintendent. At that time, the district negotiated a provision that required all building administrators to change from an 11-month work year to a 12 month work year. When this change was negotiated, the district increased administrator salaries by \$2000 and granted them each 25 to 30 days of vacation. This effectively gave administrators more time off at higher salary than they had when working an 11-month school year. Amazingly, the agreement also allowed for unlimited cash-out of vacation. Last academic year, the average vacation cash out by an administrator was 21 days, costing our District more than two million dollars just to pay administrators for unused vacation.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate my confidence that our Action Plan can drive a significant breakthrough in student achievement in Rochester. Let me also be clear that many exceptional administrators serve Rochester students in our schools and Central Office. I respect and appreciate their work to treat every Rochester child like one of their own children.

However, we need every possible tool to improve and enhance our schools. The superintendent must have the authority to drive change and effectively oversee every District employee in the district. This authority does not exist when the vast majority of District administrators serve simultaneously as management and labor.

I believe that the success we must deliver for Rochester children requires us to make significant changes in the administrative governance of the Rochester district. I ask your support in making the necessary legislative changes this session.

### **State Support for Rochester Students**

Before providing more detail on our District's priorities and needs, I would like to thank the committees—along with Gov. Cuomo, and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate—for your ongoing support of public education.

I would especially like to thank you for supporting full-day Pre-Kindergarten. At the beginning of the 2014 school year, less than 30 percent of our 1,900 Pre-Kindergarten students had a full-day schedule. This school year more than 90 percent of Rochester's Pre-K students attend full-day programs, and we are serving about 200 more students overall. Half of our Pre-K students attend District schools, and half are served by community organizations that provide Pre-K instruction to District students. There are many other examples of community partnerships that allow us to serve students more efficiently and effectively.

The conversion to full-day Pre-K is an essential component of our strategy to help Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade, which is one of our District's three academic priorities. The others are providing more and better learning time—which includes major increases in summer learning opportunities, and “expanded day” schools that provide more time for instruction and support as part of the daily schedule—and instructional excellence to help our children meet Common Core standards. We are aligning District resources to support these priorities, and we appreciate the help we receive from all our state leaders.

I also want to thank the legislature and Governor for enacting Phase 2 of our Facilities Modernization Plan. Ten Rochester schools have been modernized or have renovations underway as part of Phase 1 of our facilities plan. In December, the Governor signed legislation authorizing \$435 million for up to 26 additional projects in Phase 2. We appreciate the support of our local delegation and other state leaders, which will help us to provide students, families, and neighborhoods with facilities that are modern and conducive to learning.

## **Management Efficiency**

As I said at the outset, the Rochester City School District takes very seriously its responsibility to be a careful steward of public funding. We are working hard to manage our operations efficiency and effectively. From a budget standpoint, efficiencies help us to improve financial stability and to shift resources where they can have the biggest impact on student achievement. During my first three years in the Superintendent's role, our team achieved more than \$50 million in management efficiencies. Rochester became one of four districts in 2013 to receive a management efficiency grant from the State Education Department. We have also been recognized nationally, as one of four Districts chosen by the Gates Foundation to participate in its Spending Money Smartly initiative. Both grants have created a virtuous cycle in Rochester, where efficiencies have been recognized with funds that allow us to further improve and shift more resources to the classroom.

The District's current-year budget demonstrates our continued progress. We closed a projected gap of \$42 million and increased funding for the District's academic priorities by \$15 million. A generous increase in state aid, \$11.5 million over the Governor's original budget proposal, was the largest single contributor to this achievement. Efficiencies of \$10.2 million were the second-largest contributor. The steps we took to spend more efficiently included:

- Alignment of compensation to revenue growth and limiting vacation cash-out
- Reductions in Central Office and central services staffing
- Improved opportunities for middle grades students
- Vendor contract reductions

## **District Action Plan**

It pains me to tell you again that Rochester is the poorest urban school district in New York, and also the lowest performing district in nearly every measure of student achievement. It is even more painful to let you know that Rochester's poverty is growing worse.

An analysis released last month by the Rochester Area Community Foundation and ACT Rochester finds that:

- The city's poverty rate continues to rise, and is now at 32.9 percent
- The childhood poverty rate is 50.1 percent, ranking highest among 18 benchmark cities

- Rochester also has the highest rate of extreme poverty, at 16.2 percent

Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse for educational failure. We have a five-year Action Plan to drive student achievement in Rochester. It is based on the theory that our children can and will succeed if we mitigate poverty by giving them the extra time and support they need.

I believe firmly that Rochester students are as smart and talented as children anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. I am including copies of the Action Plan with my testimony, which describes the priorities, strategies, and measures on which we are focused to help Rochester children succeed.

Though we have a long way to go, I am pleased to see signs of progress. For example, Rochester's four-year graduation rate as of August 2014—which remains far too low—was the highest it has been in five years, despite more rigorous standards for earning a diploma. Two of our schools this year improved achievement significantly enough to be removed from the state's Priority list. We also are beginning to see improved student achievement in our schools that offer expanded learning time. Two years ago, five Rochester schools have expanded their schedules by 300 hours as part of the national TIME Collaborative. The school communities have planned together to reconfigure the daily schedule for everyone, with a variety of extra services for students and teachers. This year five more schools have begun expanded day schedules, and we hope to add four in 2015-16 for a total of 14 next year.

### **Our 2015-16 Budget Challenge**

We face significant challenges due to growing operational costs and the expansion and establishment of charter schools in Rochester. Last month, I presented to the Board of Education on our projected \$66 million budget challenge in 2015-16.

This includes a \$41 million budget gap driven by the expansion of charter schools, contractual salary increases, employee benefit costs, and rising transportation costs. In addition to this \$41 million gap, we recognize a need to shift an additional \$25 million in resources to improve student achievement.

- \$10 million is needed to fund a new management plan for East High School submitted by the University of Rochester. Our Action Plan calls for help from Educational Partnership Organizations to take over management of failing

schools; we are grateful that the University has agreed to take on the challenge at our District's largest high school.

- \$15 million will allow us to continue investing in the District's academic priorities of early literacy, more and better learning time and instructional excellence

### **Funding Request to State**

Our financial projection assumed a 3 percent increase in Foundation Aid. This would require a minimum year-to-year increase of \$10.9 million in order to avoid undesired budget cuts. Given our urgent need to improve student achievement, I am also seeking additional support for our academic priorities:

- \$10.1 million will fund the additional educational and transportation needs for East High School, which include extending the school day by 1.5 hours, providing professional development and additional instructional support to promote student achievement at East
- \$4.6 million will help us to expand instructional time at up to four additional schools, and sustain expanded learning time at 18 schools
- \$2.4 million will fund a reading teacher in every school to support third-grade literacy
- \$8.0 million will fund additional program needs to improve student achievement, which include:
  - Expand participation in summer learning programs from 10,000 to 12,500 students
  - Increase career and technical education opportunities for students by making the Edison Technology Campus a single school with multiple career pathways
  - Support academic progress at Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High by expanding the current International Baccalaureate track to an "IB for All" program

I also want to mention a separate piece of legislation that is revenue neutral. It is a request I initiated two years ago, to support neighborhood schools with a more flexible policy on transportation aid. Currently, the state pays for students who travel more than 1.5 miles to

school. If Rochester had the flexibility to bus students less than 1.5 miles, more families will choose neighborhood schools, without increasing our transportation budget. Last year the Senate passed a waiver that would support a pilot program for this concept. This year we hope that both houses will approve a waiver so that we can begin the pilot in the 2015-16 school year.

### **Conclusion**

Altogether, I am requesting an increase of \$36 million to improve the quantity and quality of services we provide Rochester students. That is a big “ask,” I know. But I would not request these funds if I did not deem them necessary to serve our children. I assure you that we will continue to drive efficiencies within the District budget. Every additional dollar the state can provide will benefit students in the classroom, or in enrichment activities and support outside the regular school day.

The Rochester City School District is working to improve with relentless focus and a strong sense of urgency. We are shifting resources to the classroom instruction and student support that will deliver results for Rochester families. I appreciate the chance today to report on our efforts and express the needs of the children in my district.