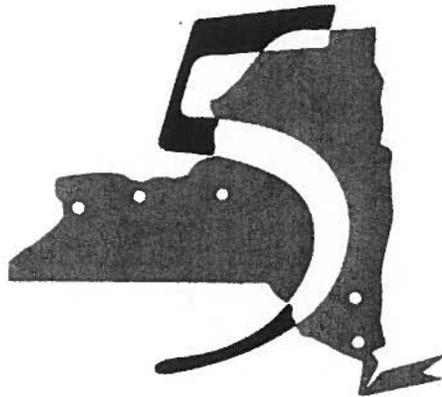


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Conference of Big 5 School Districts
Budget Testimony Before
New York State Legislative
Fiscal and Education Committees



January 28, 2014

Presented By:
Jennifer K. Pyle, Deputy Director
Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Good afternoon. I am Jennifer Pyle, Deputy Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts. I am testifying on behalf of our Executive Director, Georgia Ascianto, who is recovering from an injury and was unable to be here today.

Thank you for inviting us to provide testimony. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our thoughts and recommendations related to the 2014-2015 Education Budget. I will keep my remarks brief to afford the individuals with me, Dr. Bolgen Vargas, Superintendent of the Rochester City School District; Ms. Sharon Contreras, Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District and Ms. Barbara Smith, Chief Financial Officer of the Buffalo Public Schools, time to speak.

I would first like to thank the Governor for his steadfast commitment to targeting additional resources to high need school districts and his determination to move past the status quo and toward real change. Unfortunately, the proposed

Budget falls short of providing the State's large urban school districts with the resources they need.

Additional funding is critical in order for our schools to provide at-risk pupils with necessary programs and services. Furthermore, our teachers and administrators need additional professional development opportunities and resources to enable them to implement the Common Core standards with fidelity.

The Big 5 school districts enroll almost 43% of the State's public school students. Each of the Big 5 school districts are experiencing enrollment growth that is not adequately reflected under the Governor's plan to freeze Foundation Aid. Furthermore, a large portion of this pupil growth is attributed to newly arrived immigrants, many of which speak little or no English and are in need of expanded services and interventions. In fact, 75% of all English Language Learners and Limited English Proficient pupils are educated in the Big 5.

This is only one of a multitude of challenges faced by the Big 5 school districts. Our schools have staggering rates of student mobility, homelessness and students living in temporary shelters. In addition, nearly 48% of the State's special education students (ages 5-21) are educated in the Big 5 and the percentages of pupils with extraordinary needs in the Big 5 are staggering: Buffalo 87%; NYC 78%; Rochester 90%; Syracuse 82%; and Yonkers 68%.

The Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. We have no ability to raise local revenue given our fiscal dependency and have no expectation that our struggling cities will increase their local share for education. We are hopeful that the Governor's Fiscal Stabilization Fund will be allocated in a manner to further assist high need districts.

Despite limited resources, the Big 5 school districts have implemented a number of academic reforms and successful

instructional strategies to raise student achievement and enhance district accountability. We appreciate the Governor's commitment to provide additional funding for Universal Pre-K. Quality Pre-K programs are an integral part of our efforts to improve student outcomes.

We are also pleased to see the Governor's focus on funding for critical after-school programs. These resources are essential for our districts that are scrambling for the dollars needed to pay for extended day initiatives. We implore you not to wait until 2015-2016 to fund this program, as our schools need these funds now.

The Governor's proposed \$2 billion Smart Schools bond act, while good intentioned, is not going to assist our districts with massive shortfalls in operating aid needed to fund vital programs and staff. In addition, school districts across the State have vastly different technology needs and the proposed

distribution of the bond revenues does not adequately reflect this.

We applaud the Governor for his commitment to evaluating the implementation of the Common Core. We are committed to success for all of our schools and, more importantly, for each and every child in the State. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Governor and the Legislature on this important issue.

I will close for now to allow the rest of our panel an opportunity to address you on some district-specific issues. Thank you, again, for this opportunity and for your commitment to public education in our large cities. We look forward to continuing this dialogue over the next few months.