



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Testimony Before

New York State Senate Standing Committees

on Education and New York City Education

on School Policies Related to Discipline and Suspension

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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 affording me the opportunity to testify before you on critical issues related to discipline and school suspension and for your steadfast commitment to serving the needs of urban education in New York State.

I want to thank the State Education Department, Chancellor Young and Commissioner Rosa for convening the Safe Schools Task Force and including the Big 5 in this important work. The recommendations put forth by this body would address many of the concerns our members have expressed pertaining to the existing statute and provide the foundation for a revised system that is focused on restorative justice, strengthening supports for students and enhancing professional development opportunities for school staff.

Establishment of a new system around discipline and suspension should be based upon engagement of stakeholders and a process that ensures all voices are heard. This hearing is an important first step. All of our member school districts are committed to reducing suspension rates and ensuring that every effort is made to keep students in the classroom. We believe that there is also a need for a thoughtful and thorough collection and analysis of data to enable policy makers to assess school district and pupil conditions in a meaningful way. Such a process should incorporate a comprehensive review of pertinent literature and include a review of data relating to the current discipline and suspension process through an equity lens.

We recognize that it is also imperative that the State engage educators in a comprehensive review of our special education population and discipline. All too often children with special needs have been identified as having behavior issues that must be addressed through disciplinary techniques when, in fact, an underlying developmental condition from which the behavior stems could be managed through appropriate interventions. Such consideration and procedures should be implemented before a situation escalates to a point at which suspension is an option.

The Big 5 school districts are united in our support for a focus on restorative practices and committed to interventions that deescalate difficult situations in an effort to prevent unnecessary suspensions and removing students from the classroom. We firmly believe that suspensions are not beneficial for the student being removed. However, we recognize that there are instances in which allowing

a student to remain in a classroom is disruptive at best and, in some cases, puts other students and staff at risk instructionally, physically and emotionally.

I cannot overstate the need for an extensive array of options and interventions to address social emotional issues through incorporation in the discipline process. Children removed from the classroom must retain a connection to the school and be provided with support and services to meet their unique needs and address the root cause of the behavior that resulted in the suspension. Schools should have a solid reentry plan to ensure that returning students are supported. Furthermore, schools must work with parents and community partners to support families and include them in the restorative work and process. Parents and other caregivers should play an integral role.

We know you hear our constant plea for more resources and that you have demonstrated your support by providing additional fiscal support through the Foundation Aid phase-in and funding for a multitude of other critical programs and services. We are committed to doing our very best to provide each and every child with the resources necessary to succeed. However, the needs of our students were immense prior to the pandemic and they have only been exacerbated, as is the case in our communities. As a result, there is a critical need for additional funding to replace exhausted federal dollars and enable us to support essential programs and interventions designed to assist students with challenges and keep them in school. The State must also ensure that school districts are not burdened with additional unfunded mandates that impede their ability to direct resources where they are most needed.

My superintendents will tell you that they have some of the very best teachers and support staff in the State. We must recognize that adults, including our staff, are facing challenges and require extra support. Additional dollars are essential to support professional development including training on implicit bias and restorative practices. We need teachers to feel invested and appreciated for the multitude of functions they serve and the enormous positive impact they have on children.

Our higher education institutions should also share in the responsibility to prepare teachers to work in urban communities. The diversity and plethora of unique challenges facing our cities require teacher preparation programs to incorporate implicit bias training, cultural sensitivity as well as proven classroom management techniques and deescalation strategies. We stand ready to assist in

bridging the gap and working with our higher education partners on this important work.

Thank you, again, for affording me this opportunity to comment on school discipline and suspension. We look forward to working with you and remain available to answer any questions or provide any information that may be of assistance to you.