



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Testimony Before

New York State Senate Standing Committees on

Education and Budget and Revenues

on the Foundation Aid Formula

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Presented By:

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Good morning. My name is Jennifer Pyle. I serve as Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts. Thank you, Senator Mayer and Senator Benjamin, for affording me the opportunity to testify before you here today and for engaging our members in the meaningful dialogue at the Statewide Foundation Aid Roundtables over the past few months. We are truly grateful for your unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of urban education in New York State and tackling the shortcomings of the State's current school aid formula.

We are also appreciative of your extraordinary efforts to address local revenue shortfalls and secure additional State support for our school districts in recent years. Unfortunately, despite the increases that have been provided, each of our school districts continues to lack adequate resources to meet the mounting needs of the students they serve. It is important to note that overall graduation rates and student achievement continue a slow climb upward notwithstanding growing challenges and fiscal stress facing all of our school districts. However, in most cases these measures are nowhere near where they need to be and efforts to augment successful programs have been stymied by inadequate funding.

Collectively, the Big 5 School Districts enroll 45% of New York State's public school students. Our seven member school districts have experienced enrollment growth in recent years that can be attributed to 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 and interventions. In fact, almost 66% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. Furthermore, over 50% of the State's special education students (ages 5-21) are

educated in our school districts. The percentages of pupils living in poverty in the Big 5 are staggering as are the rates of student mobility and homelessness.

The utilization of Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) as a measure of poverty under Foundation Aid must be revisited. Given the establishment of the Community Eligibility Program in our school districts, whereby all students are eligible for free lunch, there is little incentive for parents to fill out eligibility forms. As a result, FRPL percentages are decreasing and inaccurate, despite extraordinary efforts to encourage parents to complete the forms. In addition, the utilization of the 2000 census is antiquated and must be revised. The Foundation Aid formula's Regional Cost Index should also be evaluated and updated to ensure that it adequately reflects variations in the cost of delivering services in different parts of the State.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit concluded that the school aid formula was not succeeding in delivering funding in a fair and equitable manner. As cited in the decision, there are measurable inputs that must be considered when defining a sound basic education. The Foundation Aid formula must be updated to ensure that it truly reflects the costs of educating all students and recognizes unique pupil needs. Furthermore, increases must keep pace with expenses related to providing additional services as well as inflation. The State should also take action to conduct a new cost study to determine the per pupil Foundation Aid amount as much has changed since its inception.

Each of the Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. The large city school districts have no ability to raise local revenues given their fiscal dependency and Mount Vernon and Utica are limited by the tax cap imposed upon independent school districts. Furthermore,

there is no expectation that any of their respective struggling cities will have the capacity to significantly increase their local share for education in the foreseeable future.

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts and the other members of the Educational Conference Board (ECB) have advanced their annual State Aid proposal calling for a \$2.1 billion increase for 2020-2021 including a \$1.6 billion increase in Foundation Aid. The proposal calls for a three-year phase-in and also includes an additional \$500 million in funding for school safety and mental health, Receivership schools, supports for students with special needs, strengthening college and career pathways and professional development.

The State must commit to a sizable Foundation Aid increase coupled with an accelerated phase-in along with a formula that is transparent and affords school districts predictability. This is imperative to ensure that school districts have stability and the ability to properly plan for the future. Flexibility in funding is also critical. Local funding decisions are best managed by school leaders who understand the unique needs of the pupils they serve.

In closing I want to thank you, once again, for the opportunity to address you today and stress the urgency of reforming the State's Foundation Aid formula to foster equity and adequacy. As Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins stated, as noted in today's hearing notice, "Every New York student, regardless of zip code or school district, deserves access to a high quality education." New York State's school funding system must be modified to ensure it truly accounts for pupil needs and is based upon a premise of equitable distribution of resources. We stand ready to assist you in your efforts and look forward to continuing to engage on this issue in the coming weeks and months.