



GOVERNOR'S EXECUTIVE BUDGET

February 6, 2019

# TESTIMONY BEFORE

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Assembly Ways and Means Committee

Assembly Education Committee

Senate Finance Committee

Senate Education Committee

SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Jaime Alicea, Superintendent of Schools

Good afternoon. I am Jaime Alicea and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I have dedicated my 35-year career in education. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the proposed Executive Budget and the potential impact it will have on the students in Syracuse.

### District Overview

The Syracuse City School District serves over 21,000 students. We have more than 1,900 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 4,000 English Language Learners (ELLs). For four consecutive years, we have enrolled nearly 1,000 new ELL students each year. Our ELLs speak 83 different languages and are from 80 different countries of origin. More than three-quarters of our students are economically disadvantaged from low-income families. Nearly one out of five students receives special education services.

Syracuse is the 13th poorest city out of the 599 biggest cities in the U.S.<sup>i</sup>, and is the second poorest of the Big 5 Districts. Our combined property and income wealth is one third that of the average New York State school district. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with its wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding. On average, school districts in New York State rely on State Aid for one-third of their revenues, with property taxes making up over half of all revenue sources. However, Syracuse depends on State Aid for 80% of its operating support, with property taxes making up just 15% of available resources.

### 2019-20 Budget

In developing our budget for the 2019-20 school year, we have specifically linked resource allocation with student need and the expected impact on student achievement. In particular, the budget includes funding for the following priorities:

1. **Engage Families & Communities.** We know that strong school communities engender strong students and lead to academic success.
2. **Implementing Culturally Responsive Education and Restorative Practices,** which help bridge the gap between what students learn in the classroom and what they experience in the community.
3. **Provide dynamic, rigorous curriculum and instruction,** including everything from an Early Literacy Initiative to Career & Technical Education Programs with personalized learning at every grade level to ensure our students graduate prepared for successful transition into higher education, careers and active citizenship.
4. **Recruit, develop, support and retain the most effective diverse staff** who play a vital role in the growth and success of our children.

While we still have much to achieve, we are making good progress. Our graduation rate of 60% is the second highest in over 10 years. We will be closing and reopening three schools in Syracuse that despite tremendous progress, have not met the threshold of demonstrable improvement. Dr. King Elementary, Danforth Middle and Westside Academy at Blodgett will all

reopen in 2019-20 as new themed schools in STEAM, Expeditionary Learning, and STEM respectively. These turnaround measures require a tremendous amount of time and dedication and funding to ensure the success of the school and students. In order for Syracuse students to continue making academic progress, we will need additional funding.

We are facing a number of funding challenges, including property tax support from the City of Syracuse that is stable but has not increased since 2005, as well as declining sales tax, Federal support and other revenues. Due to expansion of the four charter schools operating in Syracuse, we are projecting that charter school tuition alone will increase by more than \$4 million (16%) in next year's budget. Currently we are facing a budget gap of nearly \$22.6 million after factoring in the \$7.6 million State Aid increase in the Executive Budget and using available fund balance. We are analyzing program and staff resources for further reduction, but we currently anticipate that without additional funding we will have to eliminate staff positions and scale back promising initiatives.

Syracuse is requesting an additional \$15 million beyond the Executive Budget increase of \$7.6 million for a total year over year State Aid increase of \$22.6 million before Building Aid.

Increase Foundation Aid by an additional (+\$11.5 million)

I am pleased to see more aid to school districts flow through the Foundation Aid formula based on a combination of student need and a school district's ability to pay. The \$4.7 million Foundation Aid increase for Syracuse proposed in the Executive Budget includes a Community Schools Set-aside increase of \$1.4 million – with an unrestricted Foundation Aid increase of \$3.3 million (1.2%). While I appreciate this increase, it falls far short of even maintaining existing educational services in our District.

I respectfully request a minimum Foundation Aid increase of \$16.2 million in total (\$11.5 million more than the Executive Budget) to avoid having to make devastating cuts to staffing and programs.

I suggest:

- Increasing the phase-in percentage to allow more Foundation Aid to flow to high-need districts;
- Ensuring that the formula includes proper weighting of student need by revisiting the weighting for poverty, disability, and English language learners; and
- Establishing a firm 3-year timeline for the Phase-In of Full Foundation Aid.

Increase Special Services Aid (+\$3.5 million)

Through our Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs, we are connecting our students to a world of exciting job opportunities – with the fundamentals, training, certification and hands-on experience for students to excel in their chosen career path.

Over the last five years, SCSD has invested in more than 25 CTE pathways addressing career readiness in regional, state and national growth fields. We ask for an increase in Special Services Aid (the Big 5 equivalent of BOCES Aid) to continue expansion of these critical programs.

Specifically, we ask for your support to raise the per pupil cap on funding from \$3,900, which could increase our Special Services Aid by \$500,000. We also request that Special Services Aid be expanded to include 9<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in CTE courses, which would yield \$3 million in additional funding to our District. NYSED is already collecting data on 9<sup>th</sup> grade CTE enrollment at Big 5 Districts, and the need to provide funding to cover these students is overwhelming.

**Support the Syracuse STEAM School Funding:**

In the Governor's State of the State Address, he mentioned the Syracuse Surge project. This includes the iconic architectural and historic academic structure in downtown Syracuse—Central High School. The proposed project, a Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) high school, focused on STEM programs, Performing Arts and related sciences and technologies, will anchor an area of the City beginning to experience redevelopment, serve as a focal point and catalyst for future private development and collaboration, and foster synergy with professional arts organizations in the region.

The Syracuse STEAM project will provide curricula for 1,000 students passionate about Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math. The programs will include Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, Computer Technology, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Technology, Business and Financial Services as well as a diverse program in the Arts including dance, theatre, visual arts, music, media arts and writing. The curriculum will offer intensive training, internships, and eventually apprenticeships in arts-related sciences and technologies, including kinesiology, music technology and audio engineering, arts finance and curating, film production, and similar fields. These partnerships will be with both higher education institutions and business partners, and they will help our students graduate from high school prepared for college or a career in Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math disciplines.

Public school students from across Onondaga County will be eligible to apply for enrollment with the support of their local high school, making it the first school of its kind in Central New York to allow students from throughout the County to take advantage of the innovative teaching and learning.

I urge you to support legislation allowing for the renovation of this historic icon in the heart of downtown Syracuse that will provide the first regional high school in Onondaga County.

### Reject the School Funding Equity Plan:

On behalf the Big 5 school Districts, I want to talk to you today about the Governor's proposed School Funding Equity Plan. This past summer New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers and Utica all completed the School Funding Transparency filing requirement and we will be required to do so annually. Additionally, at the end of each fiscal year we will provide another Funding Transparency Report required by ESSA mandates to report on our audited financial results. These two reporting requirements are duplicating efforts in performing essentially the same tasks for our budget and actual audited financial data.

The Governor's Executive proposal now includes a new School Funding Equity Plan prescribing the level of funding to schools identified as "significantly high-need" that are deemed "significantly low funded" based on defined calculations. Under this plan, the Big 5 and other districts would be required to obtain approval for spending plans from the State Education Department by the beginning of the new school year and the State will regulate a prescribed amount of State Aid allocated to these identified schools at the expense of otherwise poor, needy but not identified schools.

The Governor's proposal now takes district budget data, with no regard for contextual differences among schools, and requires districts to allocate up to ½ of the annual State Aid increase to schools that the State identifies as "significantly high-need" and "significantly low-funded." In fact, The Governor claims that some schools in Syracuse are wealthy. In my 35 years living in and working for the Syracuse City School District, I have yet to see a wealthy school in our District.

I urge you to vote against this plan. It insinuates that Superintendents and Boards of Education in poor districts unfairly fund and support their schools and it further reduces local control of School Boards to manage their budgets shifting control away from those who know their District's needs the best.

### Eliminate School Budget Reporting Requirement

The Executive Budget continues a requirement for Big 5 and hundreds of other school districts to submit school-based budgets to both the State Education Department and the Division of Budget for approval.

This requirement adds an unnecessary layer of reporting that undermines local decision-making on resource allocation. Big 5 Districts such as Syracuse are already subject to state reporting requirements for Foundation Aid set-asides such as Contract for Excellence (C4E) and Community Schools. In addition, it is duplicative of ESSA regulations that will require districts to begin reporting expenditures at the school level.

Most importantly, the school level budget-reporting requirement impedes planning for the following school year by lengthening the budget decision-making timeline. The City adopts our District budget in May but we must then put school-based staffing and hiring decisions on hold

until we prepare, submit, and receive state approval of our school spending plan. This stops us from engaging in a meaningful planning process for summer and school year programming and hiring the best talent for our buildings. Our students deserve better.

#### Reject Governor's proposal to consolidate expense driven aids:

Beginning in 2020-21 the Executive Budget proposes consolidation of multiple aid categories into a single new "Services Aid" that will replace the current expense reimbursement model with a per pupil adjusted for inflation formula. These expense driven aids are predictable and adjust with changing circumstances over time. I ask that you support leaving the expense-driven aid calculations as is.

#### Limit Number of Charter School Approvals

Charter school saturation in Syracuse has increased from 4.3% to 10% over the past 9 years. Students enrolling in charter schools are coming from every school and grade level in the District, making it nearly impossible to offset additional tuition expense with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms. I ask that you require a tighter interpretation of the existing statute so that charter approval is limited to 5% of district enrollment.

#### Fund Transportation Aid for K-8 Students at 1 Mile:

For several years, the entire community in Syracuse has voiced deep concern for the safety of young children walking 1.5 miles to school. Winters in Syracuse are harsh with extensive amounts of snowfall and frigid wind-chill temperatures and many of our children walk through high-crime areas. I respectfully request that you consider funding transportation for all students up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade at 1 mile.

#### Closing

I ask for your continued support by helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating students in our high-need district. A minimum additional State Aid increase of \$15 million (\$11.5 million more in Foundation aid plus \$3.5 million more in Special Services Aid) over the Governor's Executive Budget as I have outlined this morning would result in a total year-to-year increase of \$22.6 million (before Building Aid) for Syracuse. I assure you that the Syracuse City School District is fully cognizant of our responsibility to our students and families -- as well as to the taxpayers of the City of Syracuse and the State of New York -- to increase student achievement. We are taking every measure to reduce costs, improve efficiency, and most importantly to prioritize our limited resources toward improving educational outcomes. We have our eye on the future and need your support to ensure that the children of Syracuse have education opportunities on par with their peers across New York State.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey