

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



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Presented By:
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Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Good afternoon. I am Georgia Ascitutto, Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify before you today. I am joined by Dr. Kriner Cash, Superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools; Mr. Jaime Alicea, Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District; Dr. Edwin Quezada, Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools; and, Mr. Everton Sewell, Chief Financial Officer of the Rochester City School District.

The Executive Budget would provide a year-to-year school aid increase of \$769 million. This includes a \$338 million increase in Foundation Aid of which \$50 million is a set-aside increase for community schools. This is a good start. However, it does not include adequate resources for urban school districts facing dire fiscal outlooks and already struggling to meet the growing needs of the pupils they serve.

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts and the other members of the Educational Conference Board have put forth a proposal calling for a school aid increase of \$2 billion. These additional resources are critical as all of the Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. Furthermore, the large city school districts have no ability to raise local revenue given their fiscal dependency and Utica is limited by the tax cap imposed upon independent school districts. There is no expectation that any of their respective struggling cities will have the capacity to increase the local share for education.

The Foundation Aid phase-in must be accelerated to drive additional dollars to high need schools. School districts deserve predictability with increases aligned to the unique needs of their students who should no longer have to wait for equitable educational opportunities. In addition, flexibility must be

continued for the additional Community Schools set-aside under Foundation Aid to meet local needs.

Our six member school districts enroll approximately 45% of the State's public school students and all are experiencing enrollment growth. A significant portion of this growth 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 69% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. More funding is needed to support additional bilingual teachers, translators and support services.

Despite the plethora of challenges and limited resources, all of our school districts have implemented a number of successful academic reforms and proven instructional strategies to raise student achievement. They are particularly interested in

expanding some of their extraordinarily successful Career and Technical Education programs. We urge you to invest in Career and Technical Education programs by increasing the Special Services Aid per pupil formula-based funding cap and to align this funding with our district Career and Technical Education programs by expanding it to students beginning in grade 9.

Additionally, many of our pupils have limited access to health and mental health services outside of the regular school day. Each of our districts provides valuable health services to their students as required under Education Law. Unfortunately, funding for these services has been frozen for many years and Buffalo and Rochester will experience a reduction in School Health Services Aid under the Governor's plan. We urge you to restore this cut, provide additional targeted school health funding for all member districts and expand aid to New York

City and Utica to assist them with increased demands for school health services.

While we support school choice and affording parents the option to send their children to charter schools, we have serious concerns with regard to the current funding system.

Supplemental charter school tuition payments must be increased to protect school districts from scheduled tuition increases and accelerated in order to enable school districts to receive current year reimbursement. The Executive proposal to end reimbursement for New York City must be rejected. In addition, charter school expansion in saturated school districts should be limited and enhanced accountability measures must be applied to charter schools to ensure that enrollment accurately reflects district pupil demographics. Furthermore, Transitional Aid must be expanded to capture conversion and district-sponsored charter schools and extended beyond three years for all schools.

We also request additional resources to support vital professional development initiatives for teachers and principals. The Big 5 school districts currently receive no targeted State funding for these programs, which are essential to improving instructional quality and student outcomes. We are pleased to see the inclusion of resources for the Smart Start program intended to support professional development and expand high quality computer science and engineering education.

Over 51% 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. We support the Governor's proposal to provide relief to school districts from unnecessary special education mandates through a new waiver system. However, we call upon you to revise the Executive Budget's proposal to alter the Summer School for Special Education reimbursement formula. While the proposed revision

would benefit some school districts, others would experience significant cuts.

We also have serious concerns with regard to the Executive Budget's proposal to link our school aid increases to State Education Department and Division of Budget approval of detailed school-based budget statements. The mandate to report school-based expenditures already exists for all public schools under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act for federal, State and local dollars. Furthermore, our school districts are already subject to numerous other financial accountability measures including Contract for Excellence expenditure requirements, set-asides under Foundation Aid and State and federal program and fiscal audits. We urge you to reject this new mandate.

The Executive Budget's proposal to cap growth in expense-based aids including transportation and building aid is also especially problematic. Several of our school districts are

engaged in major capital construction initiatives, as authorized in statute, and capping building aid could seriously jeopardize efforts to advance projects necessary to update some of the oldest and most dilapidated school facilities in the State. The cap could force school districts to delay or scale back construction projects that are essential to their educational program and negatively impact the students served.

Furthermore, school districts may be forced to divert resources from the classroom in order to cover increases in debt service payments and transportation expenses. We call upon you to reject this proposal.

We are appreciative of the Governor's continued commitment to expand prekindergarten programs for the State's neediest school districts. We are also supportive of the focus on guaranteeing that no child goes hungry. We look forward to working with you in the coming weeks to ensure that the final

budget provides the necessary funding for school districts to effectively implement the Breakfast After the Bell initiative.

Lastly, we support the Governor's inclusion of new funds for Mental Health Support Grants and are hopeful that support for these important programs can be expanded in future years.

Thank you for your commitment to serving the needs of urban education in New York State. We look forward to working with you in the coming months and stand ready to answer your questions or provide additional information.