



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Budget Testimony Before

New York State Legislative

Fiscal and Education Committees

February 11, 2020

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

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Pyle. I serve as Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify before you today and for your steadfast commitment to serving the needs of urban education in New York State. I am joined by Mr. Jaime Alicea, Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District; Dr. Kriner Cash, Superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools; Mr. Terry Dade, Superintendent of the Rochester City School District; Dr. Edwin Quezada, Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools; and Ms. Kaweeda Adams, Superintendent of the City School District of Albany. I have submitted written testimony and will not speak today in order to afford my panel time to address you.

Foundation Aid

The 2020-2021 Executive Budget provides a year-to-year school aid increase of \$826 million. This includes a proposed \$504 million increase in Foundation Aid of which \$50 million is a set-aside increase for community schools.

We appreciate the Governor's ongoing commitment to increased funding for education. However, the proposal falls short of providing adequate resources for urban school districts faced with immense fiscal stress and struggling to meet the mounting needs of the pupils they serve.

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts and the other members of the Educational Conference Board (ECB) have advanced a proposal calling for a school aid increase of \$2.1 billion including a \$1.5 billion increase in Foundation Aid. The ECB recommendations include a three-year phase-in for full funding of Foundation Aid, updating the formula to more accurately account for student needs and restructuring the regional cost index.

Revision and full funding of the Foundation Aid formula is imperative for all of the Big 5 school districts as they are heavily reliant on State funds. Furthermore, the large city school districts have no ability to raise local revenue given their fiscal dependency and Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica are 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.

In addition, flexibility must be continued for the additional Community Schools set-aside under Foundation Aid in order to meet local needs.

Expense-Based Aids

The Executive Budget's proposal to cap growth in expense-based aids by merging 10 expense-based aid categories into Foundation Aid is especially troubling. Furthermore, the proposed cap on Transportation Aid and changes to the Building Aid formula would be damaging to school districts preparing to enter into new transportation contracts and critical school construction initiatives.

School districts could be forced to divert scarce resources from the classroom in order to cover increases in areas such as transportation and charter school tuition. We call upon you to reject these proposals.

Charter Schools

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 charter school funding system. The statutory increase in charter school tuition rates for 2020-2021 will place an additional undue burden on school districts. 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.

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.

English Language Learners

Our eight 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. In fact, almost 68% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. More funding is needed to support additional bilingual teachers, translators and support services.

We are pleased with the Governor's continued inclusion of resources for refugee and immigrant student welcome grants.

Career and Technical Education

We support the Board of Regents commitment to multiple pathways and enhanced opportunities for all students through the expansion of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Our school districts currently operate some of the most innovative and successful CTE programs in the State and we are continuing to grow these 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 Career and Technical Education programs by expanding it to students beginning in grade 9.

Prekindergarten

The Big 5 school districts appreciate the Governor's ongoing commitment to funding and expansion of prekindergarten programs in New York State. Our school districts operate some of the State's longest running and most successful prekindergarten programs. However, funding levels in many cases have not been adjusted to reflect the actual costs of these vital programs.

The State must commit to fully funding prekindergarten programs for high need urban school districts.

Health and Mental Health Services

Many of our pupils have limited access to health and mental health services outside of the regular school day. Each of our school 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 and provide additional targeted school health funding for all member districts to assist them with increased demands for school health services.

We support the Governor's continued inclusion of funding for Mental Health Support Grants and are hopeful that these important programs can be expanded in future years.

Professional Development

Additional resources must be provided 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 continuation of funding for the Smart Start program intended to support professional development and expand high quality computer science and engineering education.

Special Education

Over 53% 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.