

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



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Presented By:
Georgia M. Ascianto, Executive Director
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 today. I am joined by Dr. Kriner Cash, Superintendent of the Buffalo Public Schools; Ms. Barbara Deane-Williams, Superintendent of the Rochester City School District; Mr. Jaime Alicea, Interim Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District; Dr. Edwin Quezada, Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools and Mr. Bruce Karam, Superintendent of the Utica City School District.

The Executive Budget would provide a year-to-year school aid increase of \$961 million. This amount falls far short of what is necessary to meet the dire needs of many school districts across the State. The Conference of Big 5 School Districts and the other members of the Educational Conference Board have put forth a proposal calling for an increase of \$2 billion, \$1.04 billion above what the Executive Budget would provide. These

resources are critical as all of our 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 no expectation that their respective struggling cities will increase their local share for education.

We are deeply concerned about the Governor's proposal to abolish the Foundation Aid phase-in. School districts and the students they serve deserve an equitable and adequate funding formula that includes poverty measures reflective of their populations. The Foundation Aid phase-in must be maintained in order to provide predictability and transparency and increases must be aligned to the unique needs of school districts including consideration of factors such as pupil demographics, enrollment growth and local fiscal capacity. In addition, flexibility must be provided under the community schools set-aside allowing current programs to be maintained. We also urge you to reject

the Executive Budget proposal granting the Governor unilateral authority to make mid-year reductions absent legislative approval.

Our six member districts enroll approximately 45% of the State's public school students and many 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. Additional 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 and enhance district accountability. They are particularly interested in expanding some of their extraordinarily successful Career and Technical Education programs. The Regents adopted Multiple Pathways to High School Graduation with the goal of expanding delivery of Career and Technical Education and improving graduation rates. We urge you to invest in Career and Technical Education programs by increasing the Special Services Aid per pupil formula-based funding cap from \$3900 to \$4200 and to align this funding with our district Career and Technical Education programs by expanding it to students beginning in grade 9.

The Conference of Big 5 School Districts supports the Educational Conference Board's request to revise the timeline under the Receivership statute to provide schools with a minimum of five years prior to the appointment of an external receiver. In addition, additional and sustained funding for both

persistently struggling and struggling schools is essential to ongoing efforts to transform schools.

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 also 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 to 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 and the Executive Budget proposal to unfreeze charter school tuition

rates. School districts must be protected from increases and held to statutory decreases if charter school tuition is unfrozen next year. In addition, stronger 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 to extend 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 funding for these programs, which are critical to improving instructional quality and student outcomes.

Over 50% 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 applaud the

Governor's proposal to provide mandate relief to school districts from unnecessary special education mandates through a new waiver system.

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.