

**Testimony for New York State Budget Hearing
Tuesday, February 14, 2017**

Good afternoon, my name is Bruce J. Karam, Superintendent of the Utica City School District, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to all of you at this very important budget hearing. I am here today to report on the financial situation of the Utica City School District and to respectfully request additional funding as our school district faces yet another significant budget deficit for the 2017-2018 school year in the amount of over \$1,400,000. Over the past five (5) years, we have cut approximately \$24,000,000 in spending to close annual multi-million dollar budget deficits ranging from this year's projected deficit of 1.4 million dollars up to a budget deficit of over \$10,000,000 during the 2013-2014 school year.

The consequences of these spending cuts have been staggering and led to the layoffs of over 350 full time teachers, administrators, and support staff over the past five years. These reductions in personnel significantly drove up class sizes and student to support staff ratios making it much more difficult to meet the individual needs of our most at-risk students. Once again, we will be forced to make personnel cuts in order to offset our projected deficit and balance our

budget for 2017-2018; unless we receive an appreciable amount of additional state aid funding.

One of the main reasons for next year's budget deficit is the fact that our district received a smaller increase in Foundation Aid than we did last year. As you know, Foundation Aid was specifically designed years ago to provide much needed financial relief to high needs public school districts. We also have concerns about a proposal to eliminate the phase-in of Foundation Aid beginning next year and what that would mean for districts like Utica.

The Utica City School District continues to be one of the poorest, high needs school districts in the State of New York. In fact, we were recently informed that our school district is now tied for the third poorest school district in the state. We are also unique in the fact that our school district continues to be one of only a few school districts in New York State with a growing population of students.

Over the past five years, our student enrollment has increased by 1,500 students or 14%. Many of these new students are high needs, including refugee and immigrant students. This year alone, we have enrolled over 450 new English Language Learners in the district. English Language Learners now make up nearly 20% of our total student population. We are trying desperately to meet their

unique academic needs with small class sizes and intensive instruction to help them succeed academically along their path toward graduation.

The additional enrollment of high needs students each year without adequate state aid to support them continues to put tremendous amount of pressure on our district's finances. We would ask that the state consider a separate funding stream for districts like Utica who have a high concentration of English Language Learners in order to account for the higher cost of educating students with high academic needs.

Even in the face of the overwhelming challenges I have discussed, we are proud of the fact that our school district continues to make significant strides in student performance. We currently have no schools in *Receivership*, with several of our schools upgraded to Good Standing during the last school year. Our high school graduation rate continues to climb each year and has increased 7% over the past several years.

We are currently working on expanding our Career and Technical Education offerings at our high school which includes offering six articulated pathways that students can access and apply toward their graduation credential. Although we work very closely with our regional BOCES, and students are bussed there for CTE programming, we have the student interest and student population to further

expand these programs in-house; especially for our ELL students and students with disabilities who would greatly benefit from these programs. Allowing the Utica City School District to expand our programs by providing the necessary funding stream will make these Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs a reality and will also help to support our existing programs.

While we are very proud of our accomplishments, we believe that we could be doing so much more to support the academic and socio emotional needs of our students. We know this because when we received the additional financial resources from the state after a district school was placed into *Receivership* a couple of years ago, we were able to utilize these resources to quickly turn the school around and remove it from *Receivership*. We can only imagine the possibilities for success if we receive the funding we need before a school begins to show signs of trouble.

With this in mind, we would ask that the state consider additional funding so districts like Utica can sustain the improvements made by our schools whose accountability designations have been upgraded.

Finally, until the Utica City School District is fully funded and equitable distribution of State Aid funding is made a reality, high poverty, high needs school districts like Utica will never fully recover from the endless cycle of massive

budget deficits and the devastating consequences that these deficits have had on our ability to provide a sound basic education to our children.

Once again, I thank you for affording me this opportunity to address this committee. The Utica City School District is very grateful for any financial support we are able to receive as you work to finalize the state budget.