



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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Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Pyle. I serve as Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, representing the Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica City 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.

The Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic facing the United States and the world has highlighted the inequities in public education and required school districts to rethink their instructional models and to serve their communities in unprecedented ways. The digital divide and its impact on our neediest students is glaring. The Big 5 school districts have worked tirelessly to provide students and teachers with the technology, connectivity and support necessary to engage in a meaningful instructional model absent, in many cases, dedicated funding for these purposes. In addition, school districts have been forced to shoulder a plethora of significant pandemic related costs including PPE, air purification systems and upgrades, specialty cleaning supplies and overtime for maintenance and grounds staff.

We recognize the devastation the pandemic has inflicted on our economy and appreciate the Governor's attempt to protect school districts from damaging reductions in State support through the use of received and anticipated federal assistance. We are also relieved that assurances have been made that previously withheld State funds will be restored and further current year reductions will not take place. However, we remain deeply concerned about the precarious nature of the Executive proposal given its reliance on non-recurring federal funding.

Our school districts will not have the capacity or reserves to survive the inevitable funding cliff over reliance on the one-time federal support will result in. These revenues were intended to support pandemic related expenses that school districts have taken on and continue to incur. Many school districts are already working round the clock to address the anticipated need for enhanced academic interventions, including expanded summer school offerings, and the inevitable need for additional social and emotional supports. Furthermore, absent an assurance that adequate federal aid will be realized, school districts are again placed in the precarious position of having to plan for the possibility of damaging mid-year reductions.

It is important to note that the Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. 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.

We urge you to increase State support for education, to target the federal dollars for the purposes for which they were intended, and to initiate a multi-year plan to phase-in full funding of the Foundation Aid formula in a manner that is transparent, predictable and captures unique student needs.

Expense-Based Aids

The Executive Budget's proposal to cap growth in expense-based aids by merging 11 aid categories into the newly created Services Aid is especially troubling. 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 this proposal.

With regard to Transportation Aid, we are pleased with the Governor's recommendation to aid expenses related to the delivery of meals and instructional materials as well as internet access. However, we call upon you to expand allowable expenses to authorize reimbursement for all transportation expenses incurred throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

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. We appreciate the Executive proposal to reduce charter school tuition rates in 2021-2022 but the reductions do not go far enough. Furthermore, Supplemental Charter School Tuition reimbursement must be fully funded, should 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.

The Executive Budget proposal to reissue charters previously revoked, surrendered, not renewed or terminated runs contrary to the spirit of the law and should be rejected. In addition, the elimination of State reimbursement to New York City through charter school facilities aid must be restored.

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, particularly in light of the anticipated policy changes on the federal level given the new administration.

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 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.

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.

Prior Year Aid Claims

We urge the rejection of the Executive Budget proposal to eliminate annual funding dedicated to the payment of prior year aid claims. This arbitrary action would penalize districts anticipating these revenues.

Thank you, again, for affording me this opportunity to comment on the Executive Budget proposal. I look forward to working with you in the coming weeks and remain available to answer any questions or provide any information that may be of assistance to you.