



Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Budget Testimony Before

New York State Legislative

Fiscal and Education Committees

January 26, 2022

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, representing the Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica City School Districts. Thank you for providing us 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 want to take a moment to thank you for your extraordinary efforts resulting in the Foundation Aid phase-in and allocation of the federal resources necessary to enable school districts to meet pressing COVID-related needs. We are pleased that the Executive Budget maintains the promised Foundation Aid phase-in and full funding for expense based aids. This is particularly important as school districts continue to face a plethora of uncertainties related to the pandemic including potential losses in Transportation Aid due to shifts to a remote platform. We call upon you to hold school districts harmless from Transportation Aid losses and to authorize reimbursement for all transportation expenses incurred throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

We are pleased to see the inclusion of \$100 million in funding under the proposed Recover From COVID School Program to support critical social emotional issues and learning loss. We ask you to make a commitment to extend this support beyond two years as the current funding cliff faced when the federal funds are exhausted is already a significant concern. Our school districts had monumental needs before the pandemic hit that were not being met and these have only been exacerbated.

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. 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, the New York State Board of Regents must be given the final say when it comes to the approval of new or expansion of existing charter schools. All too often, SUNY has failed to adequately review applications and continues to exploit loopholes in the current statute.

We also urge you to increase Supplemental Charter School Tuition reimbursement and accelerate it in order to enable school districts to receive current year reimbursement.

English Language Learners

Several of 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 and Staffing

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.

In addition, we support the Governor's inclusion of the retiree earning waiver extension and urge you to ensure this is incorporated in the final budget package. This will provide school districts with another avenue by which to pursue filling vacancies in many shortage areas. We continue to work closely with the State Education Department, along with other stakeholders, to address the teacher shortage crisis.

Building Aid and Transportation Aid Forgiveness

We applaud the Governor for proposing a comprehensive solution related to Building Aid and Transportation Aid forgiveness. This is long overdue. School districts should not be penalized for clerical errors. The current piecemeal approach is unduly burdensome to the State and school districts.

Child Nutrition Programs

I would be remiss if I closed without taking time to publicly thank the New York State Education Department, Chancellor Young and Commissioner Rosa for their unwavering commitment to supporting our school districts on a daily basis throughout the entirety of the pandemic. We urge you to reject the Governor's proposal to shift the responsibility for the Child Nutrition Programs from The State Education Department to Agriculture and Markets. This change would upend a program that is exceptionally well run and inevitably create unnecessary confusion and strain for school districts.

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.