

***Conference of Big 5 School Districts***

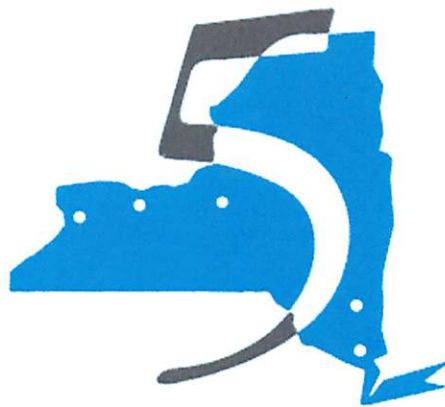
***Testimony Before***

***Assembly Standing Committee***

***on Education -***

***Chronically Struggling Schools***

***and School Receivership***



October 14, 2015

Presented By:  
Georgia M. Ascianto, Executive Director  
Conference of Big 5 School Districts

Good afternoon. Thank you for conducting this Receivership Hearing and affording me the opportunity to address you on behalf of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts representing the city school districts of Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers and Utica. I will be brief in order to afford my colleagues time to speak. I am joined today by the Chairwoman of the Big 5, Willa Powell, who is a Commissioner of the Rochester Board of Education, as well as Yonkers Public Schools' Deputy Superintendent Edwin Quezada, Buffalo's Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Darren Brown and, in the audience, a representative of Utica Superintendent Bruce Karam.

Each of our school districts is committed to improving outcomes for their students. They continue to work hard to increase pupil performance with the goal that each and every child graduates college and career ready. However, they face a myriad of obstacles and, as you know, change will not happen overnight.

Our six school districts enroll more than 44% of the State's public school students including 72% of all English Language Learners and nearly 50% of the State's special education students (ages 5-21). Our

school districts have high rates of children living in poverty, student mobility and all of the issues associated with these circumstances.

It is important to note, as you hear testimony from us today, that our member school districts have 128 of the 144 identified struggling schools (Buffalo 25, NYC 62, Rochester 14, Syracuse 18, Yonkers 8 and Utica 1) including 18 of the 20 persistently struggling schools (Buffalo 5, NYC 7, Rochester 4, Syracuse 1 and Yonkers 1).

The Receivership statute was designed as a mechanism to address deficiencies at struggling schools. However, the short timelines set forth in the statute coupled with scarce resources pose a significant challenge.

Community engagement teams and public hearings for each of these schools were required to be in place over the summer. This presented a nearly impossible task given limited staffing during such times, available resources and summer schedules for parents, students and community members. We welcome the flexibility afforded through the waiver process by the State Education Department. However, the existing timelines continue to be an obstacle to achieving meaningful

community engagement, successful program development and effective implementation in order to have the maximum full year impact on students.

It is important to note that unless schools already have an approved improvement or phase-out plan, the Internal Receiver cannot move forward until an approved plan is in place. Internal Receivers have only one year to demonstrate progress in their persistently struggling schools or they face imposition of an External Receiver. This is wholly unreasonable given the timelines in place.

Funding to support turnaround strategies is critical. Many proven improvement strategies, such as extended day and school year, expanded professional development, community school models, wraparound services, family support centers and English immersion programs come with a steep price. The \$75 million allocated in this year's State Budget is restricted for distribution to the 20 persistently struggling schools, thereby leaving the 124 struggling schools without any additional targeted funding.

We ask, "How are these schools expected to implement new programs and targeted interventions without additional funds?" In addition, there is no promise of sustained funding for the persistently struggling schools. This puts school districts in the precarious position of building budgets and implementing turnaround strategies without any long-term commitment by the State or expectation of additional local funding being made available to support these efforts.

In closing, thank you for providing a forum on these important topics. Our school districts remain committed to the belief that all children deserve a chance to succeed. We welcome the opportunity to continue a dialogue on how the Receivership statute must be altered and what additional resources are required in order to support positive change toward this goal. Please do not hesitate to reach out should you have any questions or require additional information.