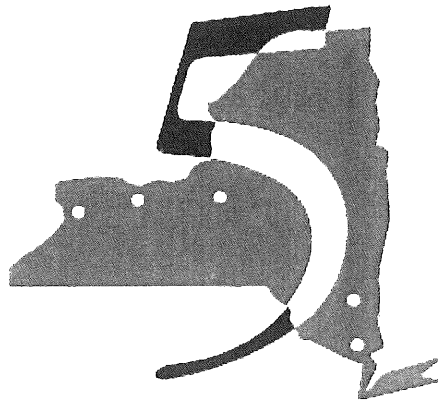


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Conference of Big 5 School Districts
Budget Testimony Before
New York State Legislative
Fiscal and Education Committees



January 27, 2016

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 affording me the opportunity to address you here today. I am joined by Dr. Sharon Contreras, Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District; Dr. Kriner Cash, Superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools; Dr. Edwin Quezada, Interim Superintendent of Yonkers Public Schools and Ms. Linda Cimusz, Interim Superintendent of the Rochester City School District, and in the audience, Ms. Pamela Reece, representing the Utica Schools Superintendent Mr. Bruce Karam. I will keep my remarks brief so that panel members may provide an overview on the status of their respective local budgets.

The Executive Budget would increase school aid by slightly more than \$990 million. While this is a good start, more funding is needed to ensure that our school districts have the

resources necessary to meet current challenges. We urge the Governor and the Legislature to provide a minimum of \$2.2 billion, as called for by the Educational Conference Board, in additional school aid over what was allocated in 2015-2016. The Big 5 school districts are heavily reliant on State funds. They have no ability to raise local revenue given their fiscal dependency and no expectation that their struggling cities will increase their local share for education. Furthermore, receipt of an increase in school aid should not be linked to district implementation of a revised APPR plan as is set forth in the Governor's plan, particularly since this plan is now under a Regents-approved moratorium.

Each of our six school districts continues to demonstrate marked improvement in student achievement yet we recognize more progress is needed. Additional funding is essential in

order for our schools to provide at-risk pupils with necessary programs and services. Furthermore, our teachers and administrators need additional professional development opportunities.

We were pleased by last year's appropriation of \$75 million in funding for Transformation Grants for persistently struggling schools. However, we urge you to earmark comparable funding for struggling schools that are also in desperate need of additional resources as they move aggressively toward improving outcomes for all pupils. Our schools have staggering rates of student mobility, homelessness and students living in temporary shelters. We applaud the Governor's inclusion of \$100 million in support for Community Schools in Receivership and other high need school districts. The plethora of services provided to students and their families

under the Community Schools model are critical in our State's urban centers. The State must commit to sustained funding for all struggling and persistently struggling schools and the Receivership statute must be amended to provide a more reasonable timeline for these schools to demonstrate progress and for communities to be fully engaged.

We also urge you to address impediments to successful community school model implementation as they relate to the transportation issues in the State's urban areas. City school districts should be afforded flexibility with regard to capturing Transportation Aid for expenses related to transporting students under the current mileage limitations in order to ensure their safety to and from school. Child safety zones, as currently authorized under Education Law, do not apply to the unique transportation safety issues posed to pupils in the State's urban

school districts. We are currently working with the Rochester City School District to support a legislative initiative which would establish a pilot program to provide additional transportation services and all of our member districts have raised serious concerns with regard to these issues.

Our six member districts enroll approximately 44% of the State's public school students and continue to experience enrollment growth. A significant portion of this pupil growth can be attributed to newly arrived immigrants, many of which speak little or no English and are in need of expanded services and interventions. In fact, 72% of all English Language Learners are educated in the Big 5. The Board of Regents recently adopted new regulatory requirements for English Language Learners, which will be exceptionally costly for school districts to implement. Additional funding is needed to

support these students and efforts must be undertaken to recruit and retain bilingual educators.

Many of our pupils have limited access to health and mental health services outside of the regular school day. Each of our districts provide 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 and to expand aid to New York City and Utica to assist them with increased demands for school health services.

Nearly 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: Buffalo 89%; NYC 76%; Rochester 89%; Syracuse 80%; Yonkers 71%; and Utica 87%. We applaud the Governor's proposal to provide mandate relief to school districts from unnecessary special education mandates through a new waiver system.

Despite limited resources, all of our school districts have implemented a number of academic reforms and successful instructional strategies to raise student achievement and enhance district accountability. Our school districts are particularly interested in expanding some of their extraordinarily successful Career and Technical Education programs. The Regents recently-adopted Multiple Pathways to graduation has the potential to improve graduation rates thereby ensuring more students college and career readiness. We urge you to invest in

Career and Technical Education programs by increasing Special Services Aid and expanding it to students beginning in grade 9.

We also recognize school choice includes giving parents the option to send their children to charter schools but we have serious concerns with regard to the existing charter school tuition formula. We urge you to consider adding a fourth tier of transition aid for school districts that have extremely high percentages of their students attending charter schools.

Lastly, on behalf of the New York City Department of Education, we are pleased to see the Governor's inclusion of an extension to mayoral control in New York City. However, we would ask that the provision be made permanent or, at a minimum, renewed for the seven year time period originally authorized.

Thank you, once again, for this opportunity and for your commitment to public education in our urban centers. We look forward to working with you in the coming months and stand ready to answer your questions or provide any additional information you may require.

