



SYRACUSE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Office of the Superintendent

Testimony Before
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Assembly Education Committee
Senate Finance Committee
Senate Education Committee

GOVERNOR'S EXECUTIVE BUDGET
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Good afternoon. I am Jaime Alicea and I have the privilege of serving the students and families of Syracuse as Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, where I have dedicated my 34-year career in education. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the proposed Executive Budget and the potential impact it will have on the students in Syracuse.

District Overview

The Syracuse City School District serves nearly 22,000 students. We have more than 1,900 Pre-Kindergarten students and nearly 4,000 English Language Learners (ELLs). Since 2014-15, we have enrolled an average of 1,000 new ELL students each year. Our ELLs speak 72 different languages and are from 62 different countries of origin. Over three-quarters of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Nearly one out of five students receives special education services.

Syracuse is the 13th poorest city out of the 599 biggest cities in the U.S.ⁱ, and is the second poorest of the Big 5 districts. Our combined property and income wealth is one third that of the average New York State school district. The District's pupil demographics, coupled with its wealth measures, highlight our reliance on the State for adequate funding. On average, school districts in New York State rely on State Aid for one-third of their revenues, with property taxes making up over half of all revenue sources. However Syracuse depends on State Aid for 80% of its operating support, with property taxes making up just 15% of available resources.

2018-19 Budget

In developing our budget for the 2018-19 school year, we have specifically linked resource allocation with student need and the expected impact on student achievement. In particular, the budget includes funding for the following priorities:

1. **Early Literacy Initiative** to ensure that by the end of second grade, all students are reading on- or above-grade level, placing them on the path to become active, literate learners.
2. **Culturally Responsive Education and Restorative Practices**, which help bridge the gap between what students are learning in the classroom and what they experience in the community.
3. **Continued Expansion of Career and Technical Education Programs**, which are helping our students graduate from high school ready for college and career. We now have over 25 cutting-edge pathways offered in our District and look forward to expanding these programs even further.

4. **Improved Personalized Learning Opportunities** to ensure that each student is able to achieve their own goals at their own pace. Every school has designed a more personalized approach to teaching and learning and now needs to spread from pockets of excellence to district-wide implementation.
5. **Increased Academic and Social-Emotional Supports** including additional Academic Intervention Teachers, Social Work Assistants and other staff to ensure that we are adequately able to address the issues that are hindering students from achieving academic success.

While we still have much to achieve, we are making good progress. Graduation rates are increasing with last June's graduation rate of 61% being the highest in over 10 years, and ELA and Math test scores are trending upward. However, we're afraid that we won't be able to continue this progress for the next generation of students without additional funding.

We are facing a number of funding challenges, including property tax support from the City of Syracuse that is stable but has not increased significantly since 2005, as well as declining sales tax, Federal and other revenues. Due to expansion at our three existing charter schools and a fourth charter school set to open in fall 2018, we are projecting that charter school tuition alone will increase by at least \$3.5 million (15%) in next year's budget. At this juncture, we are facing a budget gap of nearly \$12 million after factoring in the \$7.8 million state aid increase in the Executive Budget and using available fund balance. We are analyzing program and staff resources for further reduction, but we currently anticipate that without additional funding we will have to eliminate staff positions and scale back promising initiatives.

Foundation Aid (+\$8.5 million)

We are pleased to see more aid to school districts flow through the Foundation Aid formula, which is based on a combination of student need and a school district's ability to pay. The \$4.1 million Foundation Aid increase for Syracuse proposed in the Executive Budget includes a Community Schools Set-aside increase of \$1.5 million – with an unrestricted Foundation Aid increase of \$2.6 million (1.0%). While we appreciate this increase, it falls far short of even maintaining existing educational services in our district. We respectfully request a minimum Foundation Aid increase of \$12.6 million (\$8.5 million more than the Executive Budget) to avoid having to make devastating cuts to staffing and programs. \$8.5 million represents 19% of the

\$45.3 million in Full Phase-In Foundation Aid still owed to Syracuse based on the state's current Foundation Aid Formula.

I suggest:

- Increasing the phase-in percentage to allow more Foundation Aid to flow to high-need districts;
- Ensuring that the formula includes proper weighting of student need by revisiting the weighting for poverty, disability, enrollment growth, English language learners, and other factors; and
- Establishing a firm 3-year timeline for the Phase-In of Full Foundation Aid.

Career and Technical Education (+\$3.5 million)

Through our CTE programs, we are connecting our students to a world of exciting job opportunities – with the fundamentals, training, certification and hands-on experience for students to excel in their chosen career path. Over the last five years, SCSD has invested in more than 25 CTE pathways addressing career readiness in regional, state and national growth fields. We ask for an increase in Special Services Aid (the Big 5 equivalent of BOCES Aid) to continue expansion of these critical programs.

Specifically, we ask for your support to raise the per pupil cap on funding to \$4,200 from \$3,900, which would increase our Special Services Aid by \$500,000. We also request that Special Services Aid be expanded to cover 9th grade students enrolled in CTE courses, which would drive \$3 million in additional funding to our district. NYSED is already collecting data on 9th grade CTE enrollment at Big 5 districts, and the need to provide funding to cover these students is overwhelming.

Eliminate School Budget Reporting Requirement

The Executive Budget proposes a requirement for Big 5 school districts to submit school-based budgets to both the State Education Department and the Division of Budget for approval. Districts would have to respond to comments and suggested revisions to the allocations, and would be ineligible for any aid increases over the previous year without approval.

This requirement would add an unnecessary layer of reporting that undermines local decision-making on resource allocation. Big 5 districts such as Syracuse are already

subject to state reporting requirements for Foundation Aid set-asides such as Contract for Excellence (C4E) and Community Schools. In addition, it is duplicative of ESSA regulations that will require districts to begin reporting expenditures at the school level beginning next year. We are already working closely with NYSED and other state leaders to ensure that the new school-based reporting format is transparent and accurate.

Most importantly, the proposed school budget reporting requirement would impede planning for the following school year by stretching the budget decision-making timeline out even farther. If the City adopts our district budget in May but we must then put school-based staffing and hiring decisions on hold until we prepare, submit, and receive state approval on school spending plans, we will not be able to engage in a meaningful planning process for summer and school-year programming and hire the best talent for our buildings. Our students deserve better.

Reject 2% Cap on Expense-Driven Aids

Our ability to plan fiscally responsible budgets and multi-year financial projections would be crippled if the amount of expense-driven aid could not be predicted from year to year. Syracuse is anticipating a Building Aid increase of \$11.8 million beginning in 2019-20 for the first seven Phase II JSCB projects – without the full amount of this increase, Syracuse would not be able to afford the debt service on JSCB projects. In addition, the Syracuse community continues to advocate for reducing the student “walk zone” from 1.5 to 1.0 mile for K-8 students. I have asked the state to consider a phase-in pilot program that would provide increased Transportation Aid to help offset the district’s cost of transporting additional students. I urge you to reject the 2% cap proposal so that districts retain the ability to plan for capital and transportation-related aid and expenses from year to year.

Limit Number of Charter School Approvals

Charter school saturation in Syracuse has increased from 4.3% to 8.2% over the past 8 years. Students enrolling in charter schools are coming from every school and grade level in the District, making it impossible to offset additional charter school tuition costs with reductions in existing District programs and classrooms. I ask that you require a tighter interpretation of the existing statute so that new charters in districts with a charter school saturation above 5% are not approved unless the school district supports the proposal.

Continue Community Schools Grant Initiative (\$5 million)

Syracuse received a \$9.9 million Community School Grant in 2017-18, \$3.3 million of which was in capital funds. The operating portion of the grant funds has been deployed at 8 district schools to support a variety of community school approaches. If some portion of this operating grant funding is not continued in 2018-19, promising community schools initiatives such as before and after school programming, additional social worker support, community outreach, targeted interventions for attendance, and parent education classes are at risk of discontinuance due to lack of funding. I am requesting your support for a continued grant funding amount of \$5 million, which is the original grant amount of \$9.9 million, less the \$3.3 million in capital funds and the \$1.5 million increase in the Community Schools Set-aside of Foundation Aid included in the Executive Budget.

Closing

I ask for your continued support by helping us achieve the level of funding required for us to continue the important work of educating students in our high-need district. A minimum additional state aid increase of \$12.0 million over the Governor's Executive Budget as I have outlined this morning would result in a total year to year increase of \$19.8 million for Syracuse. I assure you that the Syracuse City School District is fully cognizant of our responsibility to our students and families -- as well as to the taxpayers of the City of Syracuse and the State of New York -- to increase student achievement. We are taking every measure to reduce costs, improve efficiency, and most importantly to prioritize our limited resources towards improving educational outcomes.

With that, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to take your questions.

ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey