

TESTIMONY OF LOCAL 372 PRESIDENT SANTOS CRESPO, JR.,

**BEFORE
JOINT LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON
PROPOSED 2013-2014 EXECUTIVE BUDGET**

TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2013

Good Morning.

I would like to thank Chairman John Flanagan and Chairwoman Cathy Nolan and the members of this joint committee for inviting me here today.

My name is Santos Crespo, Jr., I am president of Local 372, District Council 37. Our union represents the nearly 25,000 non-teaching employees of the New York City public school system. Our members are the Parent Coordinators, School Aides, Crossing Guards, and some 300 Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention Specialists (SAPIS) counselors.

Our members are the frontline between the Department of Education and the people and communities we serve. We are responsible for providing the safe, efficient and orderly environment for the proper education of New York City's 1.1 million students. The members of Local 372 represent an important foundation within the pyramid of education.

Yet, over the course of the past six years we have seen a steady reduction in our numbers through the loss of Parent Coordinators, School Aides and SAPIS counselors. Last year we faced the loss of hundreds more until an infusion of federal "Race to the Top" funds arrived to halt the layoffs. Sadly, it seems whenever budget cuts loom it is our members who find themselves fighting for their jobs and for the services our children so desperately need.

Now we once again take up the task of shaping a new budget that will affect the futures of more than one million families. As we begin this budget process, children and their families are caught in a tug-of-war. This tug-of-war is between the needs of the Public School System and the DOE and mayor's misguided efforts to balance a budget at any cost- even at the cost of cutting the vital services and dramatically worsening the working conditions of those who provide these services.

The most recent manifestation of this war is over introducing a system for evaluating teacher performance may have already cost the DOE \$450 million. Like the students and families, our members have had to watch in frustration as City Hall and Tweed keep changing the rules and moving the goal line with the UFT. With the loss of each of those dollars we grow increasingly concerned for the future of schools and our members.

Today I implore you on behalf of over a million school children and the over 25 thousand members of this local to make sure that there are no more cuts to school support services. Balancing the budget on the backs of children and workers makes no sense. There are only exponential negative effects to be had with this kind of approach. Our school children are left unprepared, unsafe, and without support. The teachers are given more work that they, in truth, have not time to perform. The parents and community become disconnected from the public school system. Drug abuse will soar. And possibly most immediately concerning- the safety of our schools is undermined

leaving children, entrances, and areas unattended. This is not a solution. This is a recipe for disaster. It is sentencing our children to underperform and victims to bullying and drug abuse. Cutting support services is not a solution. It is a sentence.

That being said I will now focus my remarks on our SAPIS counselors.

As I mentioned earlier, over the past several years we have seen a reduction in the number of SAPIS counselors throughout the NYC school system. At the same time we have witnessed an alarming increase in reports of bullying, violence and abuse of prescription drugs among students. Our numbers have been reduced to the point where some SAPIS counselors must cover three schools with a student population that can range anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500!

Now that we've been hit by Superstorm Sandy, nearly 80 schools across the city have been damaged or ruined by the storm. Worse than the damage to the schools is the impact to the staff and the thousands of students and families whose homes may have been lost or which have been unlivable since the storm. SAPIS counselors are dealing with an increase of PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). Students have a fear of the unexpected, having no homes, losing friends and belongings.

Based on what happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA this problem is only going to get worse. In fact, the first signs are starting to materialize on Staten Island, according to a story that appeared in the Staten Island Advance just two weeks ago on January 15.

Dr. Stephan Carlson, a psychiatrist with Staten Island University Hospital, who worked in New Orleans after Katrina, has stated that there is a clear link between superstorms and substance abuse. "The lessons from post-Katrina are confirmation of the direct links between trauma and substance abuse among teens."

According to the psychiatrist based on the aftermath of Katrina, we could anticipate twice the rate in trauma symptoms, depression, anxiety and substance abuse following a natural disaster. He went on to note that adolescents are particularly vulnerable. As part of the long-term recovery plan, we should take it upon ourselves to address the needs of adolescents and help them cope with stress without turning to drugs and alcohol which will affect the rest of their lives, the psychiatrist noted.

In Louisiana part of the way their officials addressed the issue was through the schools. "The lesson learned from New Orleans is to use the additional resources that were available... to deal with depression, suicide and substance abuse," he said.

Since the storm, the number of students in temporary housing and shelters in these areas has increased from 18% to 76%. Coupled with the severe cuts in afterschool programs many of our children are left to the streets in the hours between the end of the school day and 8 pm when families are allowed into the shelters.

Our SAPIS counselors have found services and programs for the students from 3pm-8pm. Guiding our students through crisis and providing family support is our charge. We welcome the challenge. But our ability to do our job is severely hampered when our numbers are cut. Cutting support services and SAPIS is the absolute wrong approach if the well being and safety of our children is our goal.

Today we ask each and every one of you to put the needs of our school children first. Too many times we are left wondering who our elected officials really serve. Too many times the obvious needs of our children and families are overlooked for the sake of budgets, legacies and politics. Put our children's needs first and everything else falls in to place. Take a lesson from those who have suffered a in a similar situation. This is the time to reinforce the services that support our children not rob them of those they depend on. For this reason, I respectfully ask that this joint committee work toward a full restoration of SAPIS funding for the State and ensure that the City of New York receive it's full \$5.5 million allocation and consideration for more funding considering the difficulties that our City's children are coping with post-Hurricane Sandy.

Today is the day to make the decisions our children depend on us to make. What would you do if these were your own children? You have each been charged by these families through their votes and trust to defend their interests and their needs within our government. Take that oath and do with it what is right. Protect our children, our schools and our future! Protect the SAPIS counselors who protect our children!

Thank you. I will be more than happy to answer any questions.